

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

Czech Christmas (Vánoce)

(From: [http://www.myczechrepublic.com/czech\\_culture/czech\\_holidays/christmas.html](http://www.myczechrepublic.com/czech_culture/czech_holidays/christmas.html))



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**December 24 (Christmas Eve)**

For many, December 24 (*Štědrý den*) is the most enjoyable day of Christmas holidays. Its Czech name literally means "Generous Day", probably for the wealth of food that has traditionally been served for Christmas dinner. Even poor families would make sure that their plates were full on this one day of the year.

December 24 is Adam and Eva's name day. The Christmas tree is decorated with traditional Czech Christmas ornaments in many households and preparations are made for the most festive dinner of the year. Christmas Eve is associated with many superstitions that usually relate to life, love, and destiny that awaits one in the year to come. According to one Czech Christmas custom, one is supposed to fast all day to see the "golden piglet" (*zlaté prasátko*) in the evening.

**Christmas Dinner**

Dinner is served after sunset (traditionally, it should not be served until after the first star has come out) and consists of carp and potato salad, sometimes preceded by mushroom, sauerkraut or fish soup. Did you know that carp can supposedly be prepared a hundred different ways? Christmas carp is specially raised in manmade ponds and then sold from large tubs placed on the streets and town squares a few days before Christmas. You will not see this sight at any other time of the year. Some families keep their carp in the bathtub for several days as a temporary pet for their children... Dinner can be finished with dessert, such as apple strudel. A traditional Christmas bread called *vánočka* (similar to the Jewish challa) used to be a part of the Christmas dinner in the past but today it has largely lost its Christmas connotation and is available year-round.

**Christmas Presents**

After dinner, everyone around the table may sing Christmas carols before moving to the Christmas tree, which is all lit up and beautiful. By then, presents have been placed under the tree. Czech children believe that Christmas gifts are brought by Baby Jesus (*Ježíšek*) who comes into the room through the window to leave the presents. Unlike Santa Claus, Baby Jesus is a rather abstract figure with no particular physical image attached to him, and no one knows where he lives. Just like Santa though, he receives wish-list letters from Czech children a few weeks before Christmas.

**Midnight Mass**

Some people end Christmas Eve by attending the midnight mass (*půlnoční mše*) at a local church.

**December 25 – 26**

Czech Republic Christmas stretches over December 25 and 26, which are also referred to as the First and Second Christmas Holidays, or the Christmas Feast (*Boží hod vánoční*) and St. Stephen's Day (*Sv. Štěpán*). On St. Stephen's Day, children, students, teachers, and the poor used to go around people's homes singing Christmas carols. Nowadays, families stay at home and relax or visit relatives and friends to share the special time and a loaf of tasty *vánočka*:

**VANOČKA [VAH-notch-ka], braided Czech Christmas Bread Recipe**

Ingredients:

5 to 6 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup lukewarm milk, plus a tiny bit for glaze

1 ½ package (not more) active dry yeast

½ lb raisins (or less or more, depending on your taste; I use a mixture of dark and golden raisins)  
dark rum  
½ lb blanched slivered almonds  
1 cup butter  
½ cup granulated sugar  
3 eggs plus 1 yolk  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon grated lemon rind  
Confectioner's sugar for serving  
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Dissolve the yeast in the milk and let stand for 5 minutes. Add 1 cup flour and 2 tablespoons of the sugar; cover and let rest until light and foamy.

Meanwhile, cover the raisins in dark rum and let stand (can be done a day ahead).

In a large bowl, beat the butter with all the remaining sugar until soft and fluffy; gradually beat in two eggs and one yolk. Add the salt and the lemon rind. To this add the sponge and enough flour to make an elastic dough (it will be a little sticky). Gather dough in a ball, cover the bowl and put in a warm place to rise, about 45 minutes. It should be soft and no longer very elastic when it's ready.

Preheat oven to 350°. Strain the raisins and toss them in a shallow bowl of flour until coated. Take out the dough from its rising bowl (it will deflate some, don't worry about that), knead in the raisins and more flour to make it un-sticky; knead a few times. Divide into nine equal parts. Put some parchment paper on a baking sheet and place it with the short side in front of you. Roll out each chunk of dough into a 'snake' about 12 inches long; start with just four. Now take the four snakes and lay them lengthwise on the sheet. Pinch their top ends together and start braiding. (If you know how to make a four-strand braid, great; if not, it's really easy--try it with some strings first if you're not sure. What you do is this: Take the leftmost snake and lay it over the one to the right, then under the next one and again over the one at the end. Repeat with the snake that is now the leftmost strand: over, under, and over the rightmost strand. Repeat until you are at the end.) Pinch the ends together and tuck under. Don't worry if it's not perfectly even, and make sure to push back any raisins that might pop out.

With a French pastry pin or the side of your palm make a deep depression (a sort of 'ditch') along the middle of the finished braid--that's where the next braid will go.

Take the next three snakes, pinch their ends together and tuck under the top of the four-strand braid. Now braid the three strands, pinch their bottom ends together again and tuck under. Again, make a 'ditch' along the middle for the top braid. Make a two-strand braid of the final two snakes and place them on top of the other two braids, again tucking the ends under. You can secure the braids in place by a few toothpicks, which can be easily removed after baking. (The top braid sometimes likes to slide off to one side.)

Beat the remaining egg with a bit of milk to make a glaze. Brush the entire surface of the vanocka with the glaze and dot with the slivered almonds (personally I not so much "dot" as cover the vanocka with the almonds, they are delicious as they toast); make them stick by pressing on them a little bit.

Bake in the middle of the oven at 350° for about 50-60 minutes. Caution! The vanocka will rise in the oven and expand by roughly half of its original volume. When done, the surface should be golden-brown; if you are getting the feeling that the almonds are too toasted while the center isn't done yet

(test with a skewer), cover the surface with aluminum foil towards the end of baking.

Cool on a wire rack. When cool, serve fairly thin slices (about half an inch) sprinkled with confectioner's sugar. It's traditionally eaten for breakfast with tea or coffee, as well as with afternoon tea (source: <http://chowhound.chow.com/topics/291219>)

***Mluvíte Česky? Do You Speak Czech?***

**Veselé Vánoce!** (Merry Christmas!)

**Hezké svátky!** or **Krásné svátky!** or **Příjemné svátky!** (Happy Holidays!)

**Šťastný nový rok!** (Happy New Year!)

**Veselé Vánoce a šťastný nový rok!** (Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!)

***Píšete Česky? Do You Write Czech? Write a holiday card:***

**Veselé Vánoce a šťastný nový rok přeje [Andy]!** (Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from [Andy]!)

**Příjemné svátky a hodně štěstí v novém roce přeje [Andy]!** (Happy Holidays and good fortune in the New Year from [Andy]!)

**Remember:**

- If your card is coming from more than one person, just change "přeje" to "přejí" - like this: ...přejí [Andy a Sigrun]! (...from [Andy and Sigrun]!)
- Czech Christmas cards often include wishes for a happy and successful new year
- "**N**ový rok" with a capital "N" means New Year's Day (January 1st), while "nový rok" with a lower-case "n" refers to the whole upcoming year

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: [tkadlec@gmail.com](mailto:tkadlec@gmail.com) or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online at: [www.kadlecovi.com](http://www.kadlecovi.com) Děkuji! Merry Christmas!  
Tony Kadlec