

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

Czech Christmas Customs and Superstitions

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Christmas Market with view of Tyn Church, Old Town Square (Staré Město), Prague.

Czech folklore is rich in customs and superstitions and there are hundreds of those related to Christmas. The purpose of many of them is to find out what the coming year has in store for the family.

Christmas Dinner Customs

Czech Christmas dinner (December 24) is connected with a great number of different customs, rules and superstitions. Very few of them are still observed today, and for good reason. It must have been quite a challenge to put the dinner together and go through with it without a mistake if all the customs were to be followed! Here are some of them:

- No lights should be lit in the house before the first star comes out. After it does, dinner is served.
- The table should be set for an even number of guests. An odd number brings bad luck or death.
An extra plate can be used to even out the number of guests. An extra plate should also be prepared in case an unexpected guest or a person in need comes by the house at dinner time.
- The legs of the table can be tied with a rope to protect the house from thieves and burglars in the coming year.
- No one should sit with their back to the door.

- Christmas dinner should consist of nine courses including soup, bread with honey, carp, potato salad, fruit (dried, fresh or canned), dessert (apple strudel or *vánočka* - Christmas bread), and other foods.
- No alcohol should be served on Christmas Eve.
- No one should ever get up from the Christmas table before dinner is finished. Doing so brings bad luck and death in the family.
- Everyone should finish their dinner and leave nothing on the plate.
- The first person to leave the table after dinner will be the first one to die in the coming year - that is why everyone should get up from the table at the same time.
- Any leftovers from dinner (crumbs, fishbones, etc.) should be buried around the trees to ensure they will bear lots of fruit.
- All household animals should be fed after dinner so that no one goes hungry on Christmas Eve.

The Magical Powers of Foods and Plants

Certain plants, spices and foods are said to have special qualities and have been an important part of Czech Christmas celebrations throughout history.

Garlic

An essential part of Christmas that should not be missing at any Christmas dinner. It is believed to provide strength and protection. A bowl of garlic can be placed under the dinner table.

Honey

Honey is believed to guard against evil. A pot of honey can be placed on the dinner table.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms give health and strength. A traditional meal called **kuba**, prepared from dried mushrooms, barley, garlic, onions, and spices, used to be served as the main meal in the past. Mushroom soup can be served before dinner.

Sheaf of Grain

A bundle of grain dipped in holy water can be used to sprinkle the house to prevent it from burning down in the next year.

Poppyseed, peas, wheat, barley

If given to the hens on Christmas Eve, lots of eggs will be laid in the coming year.

Vánočka (Christmas bread)

Feeding a piece of **vánočka** to the cows on Christmas Eve will ensure that there will be lots of milk all year. Putting a few **vánočka** crumbs in front of the bee hive will make sure that the bees will produce enough honey next year. Throwing a piece of **vánočka** into the well will ensure good quality of the water.

Apple

If the goats are given apples on Christmas Eve, their milk will be sweet.

Foretelling the Future

The foretelling of the future and predicting the well-being of the family in the coming year is connected with many popular Christmas customs some of which are still practiced today.

The Floating of Walnut Shells

Little boats are made out of empty walnut shells and each family member places a little burning candle into a shell. Everyone's shells are then floated on a bowl of water. If the shell makes it across the bowl, its owner will live a long and healthy life. A shell that sinks brings bad luck to its owner.

The Cutting of the Apple

After Christmas dinner, every person present at the table cuts an apple in half (crosswise, from the stem down). Both halves are shown to everyone around the table. If the core is shaped as a star, it means that everyone will get together next year in happiness and health. A four-pointed cross is a bad omen and means that someone at the table will fall ill or die within a year.

The Pouring of Lead

A piece of lead is melted over fire and then poured into a container of water. The resulting shape will tell the pourer's destiny.

Foretelling Marriage

There are lots of Christmas customs that help young girls in the family find out if they will get married in the year to come.

Cherry Tree Twigs (Barborky)

On December 4, St. Barbora's Day, an unmarried girl is supposed to cut a twig off of a cherry tree and put it in water. If the twig blooms by Christmas Eve, the girl will marry within a year.

The Throwing of the Shoe

An unmarried girl is supposed to throw a shoe over her shoulder and towards the door. If the shoe lands with the toe pointing towards the door, the girl will marry within a year.

The Shaking of the Elder Tree

An unmarried girl is supposed to shake an elder tree and if a dog barks, she will marry a man who lives in the direction from which the dog bark came.

Money and Wealth

Although Czech Christmas has traditionally been focused on spirituality and family rather than on material possessions, there are a few customs relating to money and wealth.

Fish Scales

Fish scales should be placed under Christmas dinner plates or under the tablecloth to bring wealth to the house. Carrying a fish scale in a wallet all year will ensure that money will not run out.

Other Christmas Customs and Superstitions

- He who fasts all day until dinner will see the golden piglet on the wall.
- After Christmas dinner, no field is to be crossed until the midnight mass. He who does so will die within a year.
- He who fails to give a present on Christmas Eve will be met with poverty.
- A pregnant woman will know whether she is carrying a boy or a girl once the first Christmas Eve visitor enters the house. If the visitor is male, she will have a son.

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: 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 Děkuji! Tony Kadlec