

## Christmas Food Traditions

Christmas is a fun time and part of what makes it fun is the traditions that come along with it. Some of the traditions I have enjoyed include decorating the Christmas Tree after Thanksgiving, attending Candlelight Church Services, enjoying Barbecue Sandwiches on Christmas Eve and opening gifts on Christmas Eve. Other favorites have included looking at Christmas Lights, Shopping and being with family and friends.

For many, we can't have Christmas without enjoying certain foods, here are a few traditional foods you may enjoy. It is interesting how these traditions began.

### **Christmas Candy**

Why are some candies associated with Christmas? Hundreds of years ago sugar was very expensive. It was a food of the wealthy. For other people, it was a special treat saved for holidays (Christmas, Easter) and other special occasions (weddings, christenings). Many of these traditions remain today.

Food historians tell us that hard candies (sticks, lozenges, etc.) were originally manufactured for medicinal purposes. This idea survives today in the form of cough drops. Confectioners were quick to recognize the popularity of hard candy, in its various forms. Before long, hard candies of all sorts of shapes, sizes, and flavors were produced for "recreational" purposes.

The origin of the candy cane is an interesting study of food lore and legend. It is easy to find information on this topic in books and on the Internet. The most popular story is the one about the German choirmaster who handed these out to his young singers in 1670 to keep them quiet during a long church service. There is also controversy as to the origin of the shape. Does it represent a shepherd's crook? Or the letter "J" for Jesus? Bear in mind, most of these stories are undocumented.

### **Christmas Cookies**

Cakes and cookies of all shapes and sizes have been part of Christmas rituals for hundreds of years. Ancient cooks prepared sweet baked goods to mark significant occasions. Many of these recipes were introduced to Europe during the Middle Ages. Christmas cookies, as we know them today, trace their roots to Medieval European recipes. Dutch and Germans introduced cookie cutters, decorative molds and festive holiday decorations to America. By the 1500s, Christmas cookies had caught on all over Europe.

### **Holiday Cheese Logs and Balls**

Food historians confirm the practice of sharing food with loved ones on special occasions. Ancient cultures typically shared cakes, meats, sweets, bread and wine during the special times. Some of these foods were symbolic of religious ceremonies. Hard cheeses have been valued and shared. In pre-industrial times, any food able to withstand the tests of temperature and time was precious, Soft cheeses did not, and were therefore valued even more when encrusted with expensive nuts.

### **Christmas Birds: Peacocks, swans, geese & turkeys.**

Food historians tell us the practice of serving large, stuffed fowl for Christmas was borrowed from earlier cultural practices. Peacocks, swans, geese and turkeys all fit this bill. The larger the bird, the more festive the presence. Turkeys were introduced to Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For many years they only graced the

tables of the wealthy. Working class people like the Cratchits in Charles Dickens, Christmas Carol belonged to the Goose Club. . Goose is still demanded as a traditional part of the Christmas table.

### **Egg Nog**

The rich and creamy eggnog reflects the English heritage in America. In England the hot drink was white and egg yolks whipped with ale, cider or wine. Americans adapted it to combine with rum, brandy or whisk and cream.

### **Fruitcake**

While the practice of making cakes with dried fruits, honey and nuts may be traced back to ancient times, food historians agree that the fruitcake began in the Middle ages. In those days imported dried fruits and nuts were expensive. What sets a fruit cake apart from their other cousins is being prepared long before they are meant to be enjoyed. Historically, alcohol provided both flavor and natural preservative.

### **Gingerbread**

Food historians confirm ginger has been flavoring foods and beverages from ancient times. Gingerbread as we know it today, descends from Medieval European culinary traditions. The cake like consistency of gingerbread bears little resemblance to bread. Most American gingerbread has assumed the form of a cookie made with honey. The gingerbread cookie is one of the most loved by early American Children.

According to some researchers, the first gingerbread houses may have appeared as a result of the popular Grimm's fairy tales. The tradition of baking the sweet decorated houses began in Germany after the Grimm brothers published the German fairy tales in the early 1800s that included the story of Hansel and Gretel. The hungry children feasted on the house made of bread and sugar decorations. Houses became popular during Christmas, a tradition that crossed the ocean with German immigrants.

Source: Food Timeline Library