**A French Christmas**

Christmas time in France is quite spectacular and is indeed the biggest celebration time of the year. When we lived in Canada, we would travel to France for the holidays to celebrate Christmas will my *belle-famille* (the in-laws).

**Christmas Mass** – On Christmas’ Eve, the midnight mass is part of the French traditions of Christmas as France is mainly a catholic country, however not everyone will be joining the church on that night. The religious service usually starts either at the stroke of midnight or a few hours before in all the cathedrals and parish churches all over France. Families get together in prayer and carol singing in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ which tradition believed to have occurred at night.

**Christmas Eve Dinner.** Traditionally eaten after attending Christmas Eve Mass, this feast is extraordinary and starts around midnight. The French gather for a huge meal called [Le Réveillon](http://www.completefrance.com/language-culture/food-and-drink/what-is-the-french-reveillon-1-4815055), which derives from the word ‘réveil’ meaning ‘awakening’.

The dinner is late therefore usually quite light, made up mostly of canapés and champagne or other sparkling wines. Friends are often invited for this dinner, while the Christmas day lunch is usually a family gathering. In the southern parts of France, along the Mediterranean, where we live, seafood and oysters are big on this light menu. Foie-gras is a must, and often smoked salmon or fish eggs canapés can nicely replace caviar. Of course, nothing says French Christmas celebrations like Champagne or mulled wine and there are usually lots of both on hand. Sweet wines and liqueurs are also popular during that period thanks to delicious pairings with *foie-gras* and cheeses for example.

**Christmas Day Breakfast**. Depending on the region the tradition changes somewhat. For our family, it was an Alsatian breakfast complete with Kougelhopf (or kouglof), and jams. Of course gifts were opened around the Sapin before breakfast. A family hand-embroidered Alsatian tablecloth was reserved for this yearly occasion. An interesting French Christmas tradition is that the French knot the ends of the tablecloth so the Devil can't get under the table.

**Christmas Day Lunch**. There is no national tradition for the big Christmas lunch, and often menus are based on local products and regional cuisine, each family also having its own tradition. The *Chapon* is often cooked. It is a castrated rooster smaller but tastier than a Turkey. Our family’s tradition is a *fondue bourguignonne*, which is basically a beef meat fondue served with various sauces.

**Le Sapin/l’Arbre de Noël** – these are sold at most every florist or floral shop in France. They are smaller by nature and are actually placed in log bases, unlike ones in North America. Strasbourg claims to be the origin of the traditional Christmas tree. In the middle ages the Alsatians played ‘Games of Paradise’, which depicted the history of creation and always featured a fir tree covered in apples in front of the churches. The custom of having a tree decorated with apples and biscuits in the home quickly became popular. One year, when apples were scarce, glass-blowers produced decorative versions and thus the Christmas ornament was born. The tradition quickly spread around the world in the late 19th century, as the Alsatians fled to escape war. Every year there is a giant Christmas tree in Place Kléber in Strasbourg. In Montpellier the Christmas tree this year is a giant *manège* (amusement park ride) for kids.

#### Crèche de Noël - Santons de Noël. The crèche is a nativity scene displayed in many French homes and in all churches. In Provence, there are little clay figures called santons (or little saints) of all sizes in the crèche, often dressed-up with cloth, which you can buy from Christmas markets or from local artisans. Even though the most famous ones are from Provence, other regions and countries have similar traditional figures. There are plenty of pieces available for sale so you can create a small or huge crèche at home. My *belle-famille* has about 100 characters and they are adorable. In Catalunya, the tradition of the live nativity scene called Pessebre is still strong, and involves singing by the participants. These are the nativity scene shows that are very popular. They are performed at various times during the Christmas season. An interesting point of note is that no schools hold Christmas Pageants, as religious traditions are not allowed within school zones. Although, some private Christian schools do perform them.

**The**[**Bûche de Noël**](http://www.completefrance.com/language-culture/food/recipe_buche_de_noel_1_4340884). During the period running up to Christmas, the windows of boulangeries and patisseries turn into beautiful displays of glistening cakes and colourful pastries. The centre of attention however are the bûches de Noël, or Christmas logs, made out of every type of chocolate there is or with fruit and cream. These decadent cakes consist of a light sponge coated in chocolate or cream, which is then rolled to make a log. It is then iced with more chocolate or cream and decorated to look like a log. It’s the usual dessert course during the Réveillon. I had the pleasure of learning how to make this with my *belle-mère*. During a Parisian Christmas eve dinner, we were once even presented with a sushi-looking bûche, from a very trendy Japanese pastry shop. Most families still prepare their own bûches, and often kids gather around to help with the baking.

#### Marché de Noel. Christmas markets are very popular in France, although perhaps originally a German and Central European Christmas tradition. There are a few towns and villages in France where artisans produce, gifts and local culinary delicacies, such as *foie-gras* and confit de canard, are sold. The oldest Christmas market in France is Strasbourg’s Christkindelsmärik and can be traced back to 1570. The market has more than 300 chalet stalls arranged across 11 areas of the city selling arts and crafts, food and Alsatian Christmas decorations. For any trip to Alsace at that period, visiting the market is a must.

#### The papillotes. Theses are the chocolates (or candied fruits) wrapped in golden sparking paper with fringed ends. Inside there is a little note written on it. The papillote was created in Lyon at the end of the 18th century. Nowadays they are a delicious French Christmas tradition, sold massively in shops at the end of each year. They usually decorate the Christmas table and are an essential element of Christmas traditions in France.

#### Christmas, a family and food feast. Of course, there is a commercial side to [Christmas in France](http://www.completefrance.com/language-culture/latest-news/5_french_christmas_traditions_1_4243408) but the celebrations are above all a time to get together. Families will often travel far to visit relatives from both sides of the in-laws who can sometimes live at the other side of the country. During the Christmas Eve dinner, they gather in large merry groups around the table to enjoy the Réveillon.

#### Epiphany. Christmas celebrations are brought to a close on 6 January at Epiphany. This celebrates when the three kings first saw baby Jesus. While in Britain this day passes almost unnoticed, in France it is celebrated by everyone with a [galette des rois (cake of the kings)](http://www.completefrance.com/language-culture/food/recipe_galette_des_rois_1_3894312). You will see these in every bakery and supermarket throughout the month of January. It is a flat cake of puff pastry filled with marzipan and traditionally it contains a *fève* (originally a dried bean, now more often a small toy). The southern tradition involves more of a brioche-type cake covered with dried fruits and sugar. The *tirage des rois* is loved by children. The youngest crawls under the table as the cake is cut and dictates who should receive each slice. The person who finds the *fève* in their slice becomes king/queen for the feast or the day, and gets to wear a crown and choose their queen/king.