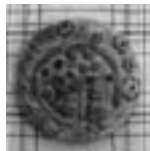


## Christmas dishes

Here are four easy to cook, delicious and traditional Bulgarian Christmas Eve recipes, beginning with the round loaf (don't forget the silver coin!)

### ROUND LOAF



#### Ingredients:

1 kg flour; 1 match-box sized yeast cube; ½ teaspoon sugar; 1 teaspoon salt; 1 vegetable oil

**Preparation:** Sift the flour twice, make a well in the centre then fill with the yeast (dissolved in a small amount of water) and sugar. Add the salt and make a dough, placing a scalded silver coin in the middle. Bake in a lightly buttered dish until it turns slightly golden, then spread with sugared water and bake for ten more minutes.

For your main dish on Christmas Eve you can prepare stuffed cabbage or vine leaves.

### STUFFED CABBAGE/ VINE LEAVES



#### Ingredients:

10-15 pickled cabbage/vine leaves; 4 onions; salt; pepper; 1 coffee cup rice; 2 red tomatoes - fresh or tinned; 1 coffee cup of chopped parsley; 2 fresh peppers (preferably red); 1 carrot; 1 ½ coffee cup vegetable oil

**Preparation:** Chop the onions, fresh peppers and carrot, salt to taste then brown in vegetable oil. When onion softens add the rice, cleaned, washed and dried, then the tomatoes (peeled and grated), pepper and chopped parsley. Mix well. Fill the cabbage leaves, wrap them tightly then cover the bottom of the cooking pot with sauerkraut and arrange the stuffed leaves on top. Cover with water and sau-

erkraut juice in equal proportions, or just warm water; stew on low heat until the leaves soften.

A delicious and very important part of the traditional Bulgarian Christmas Eve meal is boiled wheat, which represents the life cycle of nature and is a great dessert all year round.

### BOILED WHEAT



#### Ingredients:

2 teacups pounded (or unpounded) wheat; 3 coffee cups sugar; 2 coffee cups chopped walnut kernels

**Preparation:** Remove impurities from wheat and wash. Pour cold water over it and boil until soft, then cover the pot with a twice folded towel and allow to "swell". Drain the remaining water and mix the wheat with the sugar and walnuts. NB If you use soft sugar it will melt more easily.

Another easy to cook and delicious dish, served at the Christmas Eve table in many Bulgarian homes, is the Oshav or stewed dried fruit.

### STEWED DRIED FRUIT /OSHAV

**Ingredients:** 3 teacups dried fruit - apricots, apples, plums, quinces; 3 coffee cups granulated sugar

**Preparation:** Wash the dried fruit well, soak in cold water and leave overnight. Boil in the same water until it becomes soft. Add sugar or honey to taste.

For your Christmas Eve dinner you can also prepare the famous Bulgarian Banitsa, the recipe for which can be found in the May-June edition of the Black Sea Gazette.

## Christmas in Bulgaria

Christmas Eve is just as important as Christmas day in Bulgaria and, following tradition, the holiday begins on December 20, continuing until December 27. The most common explanation for this says that the Mother of God went into labour on December 20, gave birth to God's son on Christmas Eve, but didn't make it known until the following day. Another story tells of a time when the sun was newly born and too weak to conquer the darkness, causing mankind to take part in the duel with songs, blessings, magic and rituals.

According to an old Bulgarian custom, on Christmas Eve there should be more than seven (always an odd number) lenten meals, with each dish symbolizing the household's hopes for luck, health and happiness during the forthcoming year. The most common dishes on the Christmas Eve dinner table are the round loaf, cabbage or vine leaves stuffed with rice, beans in a pot, stuffed peppers, pickles, pumpkin pie, banitsa, boiled wheat, stewed dried fruit (oshav), garlic, onion, honey, dried fruit, walnuts, apples, wine and traditional Bulgarian brandy - rakia. Once the table is laid and the house is being incensed the feast may begin, along with numerous predictions for the year to come.

In the round loaf bread there is a hidden coin, part of an important Christmas ritual. The eldest member of the family takes three pieces of bread and sets them aside - one piece for the Christchild, one for Mary and one for the household. He then breaks up the bread and gives a piece to everyone at the table. The person who finds the coin in his piece is expected to have good fortune in the next year. In some parts of the country, unmarried girls take their first piece of bread from the Christmas Eve meal and place it under their pillows, believing that they will then

dream of their intended husband during the night.

There are walnuts for everyone in the family on the table; to predict what the year will bring everyone cracks one. If it is good and delicious, the year is going to be lucky; if the walnut is empty - you can expect a bad year!

Another spell for prosperity is made by the yule log (badnyak) - especially picked timber - being put into the fire and left to burn throughout the night on Christmas Eve. It is believed that this will bring luck and make people's hopes a reality.

When the meal is over the table is not cleared until the following morning. The reasons for this tradition vary; some say it is to insure that there will be plenty of food in the coming year, whilst others leave the food out for departed family members whose spirits may return, or for Joseph and Mary in case they stop at their home on their way to Bethlehem.

At midnight on Christmas Eve carollers start their rounds, visiting all the houses in the village. Carol-singers, known as 'kol-edari' (boys aged 8 to 12 or non-married men), dress in traditional costumes and sing songs for wealth and health for the hosts and the household, for which they are rewarded with money and foods, later given to charity.

A favorite Christmas custom for the children is that of Sooroo-vachka, or patting with a specially prepared patting stick of cornel decorated with wool, cotton balls, strings of popcorn, dried peppers, etc. With the patting stick children pat their relatives and family friends, wishing them health, wealth, happiness and all the best. The person patted should give the child some small coins, as a way of "buying" success and luck for the coming year.