

Our Jewish Christmas Traditions

My family never observed Christmas, but we did mark the holiday every year, with our own recipes

BY JOAN NATHAN DECEMBER 17, 2012



There is something I must confess: I have always been a closet Christmas lover. I love to sing carols, I love admiring Christmas trees, and I have always envied what I imagine as a storybook day filled with gifts and stockings.

When I was very young, my family lived in Larchmont, N.Y. I realize now that my mother enabled, in her own Jewish way, the fascination with Christmas that my brothers and I had. In our house, we had a separate staircase off the kitchen leading up to where our beloved housekeeper, Susie Marbry, lived. Next to her bedroom was a sitting room where every Christmas she had a tree, probably procured by my mother, that we helped decorate year after year. Underneath were gifts from our father's business associates who happened to be Christian. Downstairs, with the rest of the house decorated in blue and yellow, we celebrated Hanukkah.

During the so-called holiday season, my parents always had a party with eggnog served in a big glass punch bowl, as well as my father's champagne punch—the one recipe he brought from Germany before the Second World War, and the only recipe he ever prepared himself. My parents invited Jews and gentiles—including our teachers and policemen like Johnny Caputo, who walked us home across the street from the Murray Avenue School every day.

As my 99-year-old mother Pearl still remembers, at those parties she generally served roast turkey with cranberries. And she also served her signature casserole containing sauerkraut, tiny hot dogs, tomatoes, and brown sugar. We adored, and still adore, that simple, sweet and sour, one-pot dish. (To this day, my mother claims that putting it together is not cooking. Tongue in cheek, she has always teased that she signed a prenuptial agreement with my father never to cook.) Later, when we moved to Providence, R.I., we also celebrated Christmas ... in a way. With the city's larger Jewish population, my mother switched her party entrée to glazed corned beef once the *Thoughts for Buffets* cookbook came out in 1958, produced by Chicago housewives as a fundraiser for their local JCC.

Since my grandmother Lina's birthday was Dec. 25, on Christmas day we always went to my Aunt Lisl's home in Cranston, where my grandparents lived, after emigrating from Germany in 1931 at the urging of my father. Lisl would make roast goose with spaetzle, roast beef, and sometimes stuffed cabbage—dishes she remembered from growing up in Germany. One of my fondest memories, though, of this early time was going to my aunt's home weeks ahead of Christmas and making butter cookies with her. Instead of decorating them with Christmas-themed red and green glaze, though, hers were pink and blue. In her breezeway, she stacked tins filled with various shapes of these delicious cookies. In retrospect, I think some of the tins upon tins of cookies were made with pareve margarine since, unlike my parents, my aunt kept a kosher home.

When I married into a family that had no Christmas envy, I stopped thinking about the Christian holiday so much—although I could not give up going to cookie swaps where I baked lots of Christmas cookies, and occasionally sang my heart out at *Messiah* sing-alongs. When our children were young, my husband Allan was the legal counsel for the late ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick. Each year, she invited our children into her home to trim her Christmas tree. It was Daniela, Merissa, and David's job to unwrap the handed-down ornaments, including the angel that they put atop the tree. Afterward, I served the cookies I brought and admired the children's handiwork. The late ambassador called our participation "her attempt at encouraging ecumenicalism for the Nathan Gerson family."

These days, if we are home on Christmas, we mark the day in a different way: by doing community service. But we still have a special Christmas tradition about food. If we don't dine at home, we do what most every Jewish family does: We go out for Chinese food.

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