

# Christmas Traditions in Provence

Provençal Christmas traditions are rooted in both charming local customs and historical religious rituals. During this festive season, called *Calendale*, villages throughout Provence host Christmas Markets, Santons Fairs, Lighting Festivals and Tours of Nativity Scenes leading up to *Le Gros Souper* on Christmas Eve and *Les Treize desserts* following Midnight Mass. Rent a luxury villa the south of France with family and friends for the holidays and delight in the regional mores.

The season officially kicks off on December 4, Saint Barbara's, or *St. Barbe's*, Day, when wheat and lentil seeds are planted into small dishes. Once the shoots grow, symbolizing a good harvest and prosperity for the new year, they are decorated with ribbon and are used as part of the Christmas Eve table decorations.



The Christmas crib, or *crèche*, is an important part of the

nativity scene in Provence, dating back to the 17th century. *Santons*, or little saints, are small, handmade figurines sculpted from wood and clay. The santons are painted and decorated to represent various traditional professions, such as a baker, fishmonger or butcher, farm animals, and biblical characters to populate the nativity scene. Santons Fairs and Christmas Markets are a wonderful opportunity to add to one's ever expanding santons collection.

On Christmas Eve, the dining table is covered with three white tablecloths of decreasing size, so that each layer is seen, and three white candles, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The sprouted lentils and wheat planted on *St Barbe's* are adorned with ribbon and sprigs of myrtle or holly to decorate the table.

Christmas Eve Dinner, or *Le Gros Souper*, is a meat-free meal featuring seven dishes of vegetables and regional fish specialties, such as *l'argo bouido*, a garlic and herb soup, and *brandade de morue*, made with cod and potato. The seven dishes represent the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mary.

Traditionally, the table remains set for three days of celebration, from the 24th to the 26th. As the family leaves for Midnight Mass, the leftovers remain on the table so that the angels and ancestors may also enjoy the feast.

Perhaps the most popular of the Christmas festivities is *les treize desserts*, or the thirteen desserts, to be enjoyed after Midnight Mass. These ritual deserts represent Jesus and the twelve apostles at the last supper and thus always number thirteen. Though the exact desserts may vary by local or family tradition, in essence they remain similar and fall into

four basic categories – dried fruits and nuts, candied fruit, fresh fruit and pastry.

Dried figs, raisins, almonds and hazelnuts symbolize “the four beggars,” the Religious Orders of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites and Augustin monks.

Candied fruits include quince paste, white nougat, made of hazelnuts, pine nuts and pistachio, and black nougat, made of honey and almonds. Near Aix-en-Provence you’re likely to see Calisson d’Aix, a specialty of the region made from candied melon and ground almonds.

Fresh fruits are likely to be oranges, tangerines, apples, pears and grapes.

The star of the thirteen desserts is *pompe à l’huile*, sometimes called *fougasse*, a sweet, light, openwork bread made with olive oil and flavored with orange blossom water or lemon peel. To insure good fortune for the coming year, *pompe à l’huile* must be broken by hand, and never cut with a knife, the way Christ broke bread with the apostles.

Traditionally the thirteen desserts stay on the table for three days to share with visiting guests.

*Calendale* is a wonderful, celebratory time in the south of France and a fantastic time to visit. Travel to Provence for the holidays when you’ll find great options for villa rentals and lots of activities in which to partake throughout the region. Aix-en-Provence hosts celebrations throughout December, from lighting ceremonies to markets to an acclaimed santons festival. Enjoy the Festival of Nativity Scenes in Bonnieux, get in some last minute shopping at the Gordes Christmas Market, and try not to miss the famed Christmas

Market in Saint Rémy de Provence.

*Joyeuses Fêtes!*

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