

Christmas in Portugal is a time for celebration, the company of family and friends and good food. As a producer of Elvas Plums and a supplier of Portuguese foods and wines to Partridges, for the last ten years, I have great pleasure to have been asked to share with you how we celebrate Christmas in my home in Portugal.

Christmas is heralded in Portugal by the arrival of hanging baskets, wrapped in yellow cellophane, filled with gastronomic treats, hanging outside the “Charcutarias”, Delicatessens of Lisbon and Porto. One of my favourites is “Charcutaria Brasil” in the Largo do Rato in downtown Lisbon. As you approach the shop the hampers catch your eye, hanging above the door and from the ceilings. As you look into the shop window the display of dried fruits and nuts remind you of the wonderful foods that will be eaten over the Christmas period. Many of these cakes and desserts are made following convent recipes, Elvas plums as many of Partridge’s customers will already know, were first made by Clarist Nuns in the 16th Century. Other convent inspired tit-bits are desserts such as Almond tart from the Convent of Vidigueira or the Cake of Good taste from the Convent of Hope. Probably the most familiar, is the Cake of the Kings or Bolo de Rei as it is known in Portugal.

Bolo de Rei is the Portuguese Christmas cake and is a cross between a Panettone and a sponge decorated with crystallised fruits. Traditionally it is made to celebrate “the day of the Kings”, 6th January the day the Kings arrived to celebrate Jesus’s birth. However, the Bolo de Rei is now eaten throughout the entire Christmas period. A gift and a bean are hidden in the cake. Whoever finds the gift will have luck for the rest of the year and the bean finder or “bean king” will have to buy the cake for the next year. The nomination of the “Bean King” actually descends from a Pagan tradition whose origins and significance are now blurred with time. However the Portuguese celebration of Christmas incorporates several pagan celebrations although the influence of Christianity now has a greater presence in the festivities.

Port Wines and special reserve wines are particularly appreciated at this time of year and there is nothing better to accompany a fine wine than some fine cheese and air cured hams. Serra cheese from the Serra de Estrela mountain in the north of Portugal is a particularly popular choice. It is made from unpasteurised sheep’s milk and cardoons are used to coagulate the milk adding their characteristic flavour and ensuring that even vegetarians can enjoy Christmas. Other fine cheeses that Portugal has to offer are named after the town that they come from, demonstrating the pride and the characteristic individuality of each particular one, Azeitão cheese, Serpa Cheese, Nisa Cheese, Ilha de São Jorge Cheese and another favourite of mine Castelo Branco Cheese. The Black pig air-cured hams and chouriços from Barrancos and the Presunto from Chaves are wonderful choices of appetisers for the various meals over the Christmas period.

Christmas is a family time for most of us and for the Portuguese no less so. As a nation, the family ties are strong and it is not uncommon to find a whole family running a business with the mother looking after the accounts, the father out there in the public eye ruling the establishment with a rod of iron and the sons and daughters fulfilling their roles in various degrees of responsibility depending on their age. At home as they gather for Christmas they leave their troubles aside for a while and begin the build up by welcoming Christmas in, with the traditional salt-cod dishes of Christmas Eve.

As the family gathers and the nativity scene along with other traditions are prepared to remind us of what Christmas is all about. The Stable is placed in the church or at home with the star above. The “Three Kings”, the shepherds and their sheep surround it and inside Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus in a manger watched over by a few cows and a donkey. The Yule log is chosen and then set alight on Christmas morning, keeping the ashes to ward off the winter storms.

Food is prepared. The best fillets of thick salt cod, soaking for two days, changing the water regularly to get rid of the salt, are boiled. Accompanied with potatoes, rice with octopus, Galega cabbage, “tronchudas” and turnips are made ready for the Christmas Eve dinner. For Dessert, the eggs have been separated into whites and yolks and the basic ingredients of honey, preserves, flour, sugar and cinnamon are being combined by loving hands to make the most delicious cakes and sweets.

As the table is laid, with the best linen and crockery, the fire burns in the fireplace, and everybody comes to the table. There is a smell of pine resin burning from the fire mixed with the smells from the kitchen and everybody prepares to begin the Christmas celebrations. As dinner is served, a good wine is poured sometimes depending on the region this may be a red vinho verde or in others a quality red wine

from the “Adega”. Everything is served at once and there is plenty of everything. Stories are told, friends remembered.

As midnight approaches the mulled wine with sugar, honey and cinnamon arrives to the table and is quaffed with little cakes of jerimu and chila, os mexidos, as migas, as aletrias, rice pudding, golden slices, dreams and orelhas de abade.

The table is not cleared because the soles and angels eat what is left and an age old tradition lives on. The children leave the table to play for a while and midnight arrives. Each child takes off a shoe and leaves it by the fire in the expectation that tomorrow when they wake up it will have been filled with presents. Then off to bed while the grandparents babysit and the rest of the adults brace themselves against the cold and head out into it for midnight mass at the local church. A bonfire has been lit in front of the church and it lights the way and warms the arrivals. After church everybody gathers around the fire to wish each other a Happy Christmas before heading home to sleep and begin the festivities all over again the next day.

Early morning on the 25th, if there is not a “Missa do Galo” literal translation Mass of the Cockerel, named according to the legend that a cockerel announced the birth of Jesus with his crow, or Dawn Mass then we head off to the “Missa do Nascimento” “The Mass of the Birth”. Then quickly back to get the food ready for the big lunch. In some areas “Cozido a Portuguesa” is the traditional Christmas meal. “Cozido” is a dish of bacon, chourico, blood sausage, onion, underbelly pork and the traditional pig’s ear along with chicken, presunto – cured ham and beef. Accompanied with greens, beans and potatoes. In other areas of Portugal, roast turkey with chestnut stuffing, although this is a new habit in Portugal, having been adopted from the British, is the traditional Christmas dinner. Whilst in the Algarve, we eat roast chicken with slices of home-made bread and fried pork with clams and mussels and in the Alentejo in the East of Portugal roast pork with slices of orange or roast tenderloin of pork

Now everybody has returned to their home-town region, their “Terra”, a Portuguese term for their home. The “Terra” is the spiritual home of every Portuguese and on the religious or special occasions every effort is made to return to one’s “Terra”.

The cakes, preserved fruits, wines and cheeses contribute to make Christmas in Portugal a very special occasion and invariably the weather on Christmas day is sunny although not exactly hot.

Christmas in Portugal has been influenced by many cultures but none more so than the Anglo-Saxons. The British and Portuguese enjoy the oldest alliance first formed when Catherine of Braganza married Charles the first in the 1600’s. Bringing with her the recipe for “Marmalada”, Quince Fruit Cheese, the perfect accompaniment for Serra Cheese and Stilton on a Christmas Cheese board, and in return creating the opportunities for trade and cultural diversity. One thing that both countries have in common is that Christmas is a time for the family to come together and enjoy socialising, eating and telling stories of the year that has been.

I hope that you will enjoy some of the gastronomic delights that Portugal can offer to make Christmas a special occasion and I wish you all a very merry Christmas.

Tim Clements August 2003