

**Topic:** Celebrating New Years With My Family

**Abstract:** Many holiday celebrations are filled with mixed traditions. My family has older ones from our German heritage and also new ones brought from the younger generations. They all mix together and make up our own unique way of celebrating with our family. Food and festivities are a big part in ringing in the New Year in our family. The most important food tradition we have is the preparation of Sour Kraut and Dumplings. Storytelling is also a tradition in our family each New Year. Sharing experiences in our lives and reflecting on past achievements is the way we catch each other up on our busy lives and get ready for the New Year.

**Keywords:** German-American family, traditions, decorations, story time, New Years Eve, Oma, mother, generations, accomplishments, dessert

**Ethnic Designation:** German

**Cultural Category:** Holidays: Practices and Traditions

### *Our German New Years Eve Traditions*

All cultures have a unique way of celebrating holidays. Many times we have old traditions passed down from our cultural backgrounds mixed with new ones from young new generations. While growing up in a German-American family, we have many traditions that have been passed down through my Oma and then through my mother. One big holiday we celebrate is New Years Eve. Traditionally New Years Eve is an important holiday in Germany celebrated with many fireworks and different festivities. Even advanced preparations are an important part of beginning to get ready for a New Year. Drinking is also a large part of the celebration in Germany. There is a traditional drink called gluehwein, which is a glass of warm wine. Because

it is heated much of the alcohol is gone and can be enjoyed at a younger age. Gluehwein is also used in toasting similar to how champagne is. My mother and Oma still enjoy this tradition in ringing in the New Year with a glass of gluehwein.

The day is started in the morning by waking up and calling my relatives in Germany. We make sure to do it in the morning because it is nine hours ahead there and we wouldn't want to be calling them too late and disturbing their own New Years Eve dinner. My uncle (mother's brother), his wife, my two cousins, and some second cousins currently live in Germany. We hardly ever get to visit them so our phone conversations are always looked forward to with much anticipation. We exchange the usual greeting and they catch us up on the local happenings in my Oma's birth town. My cousins and I are around the same age so we get to chat about various things as well.

About a week before New Years Eve we start getting ready for the dinner. We get our traditional tablecloth out of storage that my Oma brought over from Germany. We lay out the tablecloth and get out decorations, some we have added to along the years. Our dinner is usually on the fancier side as we try to ring in the New Year with positive attitudes. Instead of making New Years resolutions we think back on the year and tell everyone our accomplishments and good things that have happened to us in the past twelve months. My oma passed this tradition down from her mother and their New Years Eve traditions. She says that this helps us get into a positive mind set rather than worrying about what we should change.

For dinner we have sour kraut and dumplings. This consists of pork, sour kraut, and a puffy German dumpling, called Matzoballs. We also have this meal a couple times throughout the year (because the whole family enjoys it too much for it to only be a yearly occurrence), but for New Years we make German dumplings with it as opposed to a Bisquik dumpling we make

at other times. Sour kraut is a pickled cabbage that Germans eat with many different meals, not just this one. We have to start the pork early in the day and season it. The sour kraut will also add flavor because the whole meal is all cooked in the same pot. It is not a complicated meal to make, but it takes time so it needs to be started early and checked on occasionally. The whole family takes part in the last part of making the dumplings and forming them into a circular shape that sit on the top of the pork and sour kraut to cook and steam.

The dinner is definitely an important part of the festivities, but after dinner is my favorite part. Before dessert, while our food is settling, we have geschichten stunde, which literally translates to story hour, but it refers to anytime that a group of people recount past history or share stories together. My younger sister and I have learned many things throughout the years about German culture and history that my Oma has experienced first hand. My younger sister is now twelve years old so we can all stay up till midnight. When she was younger we would only stay up as long as she could keep her eyes open. Now she wants to participate in the fun with the grown ups so we are able to have more time as a family. Everyone is so busy nowadays that we don't get a lot of time to celebrate as a whole family and this is one of those occasions that we are all together. My oma, usually after much prompting, will tell us about her experiences during WWII. Before WWII when Hitler was starting to come into power he starting giving everyone jobs and everyone was expected to help out especially once the war started. She was still a young girl when the war started and was sent out to help on a farm (as many young girls were sent to do during war). She retells her life on the farm and the many difficulties as the war progressed. She remembers the hardships as the war was waging such as less and less food for the common people and shortages of many other common household products that were near impossible to get.

After all the old memories have been recounted and my younger sister and I have a new bit of information to add to our knowledge of Germany and our heritage it is time for the best part of the day: dessert time! My mom is the one that normally cooks this and it is one of the things I look forward to the most. It is a sweet bread that my mom makes completely from scratch. The sweet bread is separated into three long logs before being baked and each one is sprinkled with chocolate powder and nuts. We usually use finely chopped hazelnuts but you could use others that you would prefer the most (it is important to have them chopped finely). Afterwards you braid them onto each other to form the final product that you will bake. My mom always has a way of timing it perfectly so it comes out of the oven right when we are ready so we can enjoy it while its still warm. I wouldn't pass up a room temperature piece, but a warm one is definitely preferable. We don't have many parts of our daily life that are involved with our heritage but New Years Eve is one we all look forward to.