



Czech
Christmas Recipes
with a dash of
Traditional Customs & Superstitions

compliments of
Zora Pergl

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Vanocka Recipe

The Vanocka (a special bread made for Christmas) has a long history and is still popular today. The first reference to a vanocka was in the 16th century, and over the long years it has gone through many small transformations. In the past, it went under such names as huska or calta, and in some places in the Czech Republic today it can be found under a wide variety of names: pletenice, pletanka, stedrovice, stedrovecernice, stricka, strucla, zemle, and ceplik. At one time, a vánočka could only be made by a baker who was a guild craftsman.

In the 18th century, people began to bake them at home by themselves. The first of the home-baked vanocka had to be given to the master of the house, so that the grain would prosper in the following year. At the end of Christmas Eve dinner, a large vanocka was sliced up. In some areas, a slice was given to the livestock, so they'd be healthy and safe from evil spirits.

Preparing a vanocka wasn't, and isn't, simple and therefore a variety of customs are followed in preparing the dough, braiding and baking it to ensure success. The woman of the house had to mix the dough while wearing a white apron and kerchief, she shouldn't talk, and she was supposed to jump up and down while the dough was rising. Another old custom was to bake in a coin. The person who found it in their slice was assured of health and wealth for all of the following year. A burnt or ripped vanocka was a bad omen.

Today, the vanocka is an indispensable and necessary part of the Christmas holidays, whether made at home or bought in a store. Even today there are handy people capable of making the lower braid out of seven strands (it's most often made from four), or else they braid the whole vánočka together at once from six strands.

6 cups of medium flour
9 teaspoons of sugar
4 ounces of butter
1 tablespoon of yeast
1 cup of milk
1 yolk
a pinch of salt

vanilla sugar
a lemon rind
a nutmeg nut
star anise
3 tablespoons of raisins
3 tablespoons of almonds
an egg for the icing

Crumble the yeast into the room-temperature milk, add in 1 tablespoon of sugar, sprinkle evenly with flour, and then leave it in a warm place to rise. Put the rest of the flour, 8 tablespoons of sugar, the vanilla sugar, a pinch of salt, the lemon rind, the grated nut of nutmeg, one egg yolk, and the grated star anise into a bowl with the previous mixture when well-risen and mix well. After this, add in the softened butter

and continue to mix well. When the dough no longer sticks to the side of the bowl, stir in the washed raisins and the cleaned, sliced almonds. Shape the dough in the bowl into a smooth loaf, dust it with flour, and leave it covered in a warm place to rise (with a larger amount of dough even all night.)

When the dough has risen completely, divide it on a pastry board into 9 parts to make the vanoeka. The first layer is weaved from four strands, the second from three, and the third layer from two strands. Lay greased parchment paper on a baking sheet and gradually layer the strands of the vanoeka on it. Leave it for a while on the sheet to finish rising, and then, before putting it in the oven, baste it with the whipped egg and sprinkle it with chopped almonds. Finally, puncture the vanoeka at both ends and in the middle with skewers to prevent warping of the dough during baking. Bake slowly for about 45 minutes.





Czech Ginger Bread

1 c. sugar
1/2 c. butter
1 c. dark syrup
1 c. milk
3 eggs
3 c. flour
1/2 tsp. baking soda

2 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. ginger
1/2 tsp. cloves
1 c. raisins
1/2 c. nuts (optional)

Cream sugar and butter. Add eggs and syrup; beat well. Add the dry ingredients with milk to the creamed mixture. Beat about one more minute. Mix in raisins and nuts which have been floured with little flour. Bake in greased cake pan, 9x13 inch at 350 degrees for about 30-35 minutes.

Icing: 1 egg white, 1/2 tsp lemon juice, sifted sugar - to make the icing thick.

Moravian Christmas Cookies

8 oz Dark molasses
1/2 c Brown sugar
1/2 c Margarine
1 1/2 ts Cinnamon
1 1/2 ts Cloves

1 t Ginger
1 t Allspice
1/2 ts Nutmeg
1 tb Baking soda
4 c Flour

Mix flour, sugar, butter, and spices together. Heat molasses until lukewarm and add baking soda to it. Add molasses to rest of ingredients and mix well. If necessary, add a little water to the dough to get it to a soft enough consistency to roll it. Roll the dough on a well floured surface, making it as thin as humanly possible. (Paper thin, if you can!) Cut into desired shapes, and transfer to a non-stick cookie sheet. Bake at 350 degrees for 6 to 8 minutes. If you do it right, you'll end up with a delicately thin, not too sweet, yummy spicy cookie.





Czech Christmas Nut Roll

DOUGH:

1 c. scalded milk
1/2 c. butter
1/2 c. sugar
1 tsp. salt
2 pkgs. yeast dissolved in 1/4 c. warm water + 1
tsp. sugar
2 beaten eggs
4 1/2 c. flour

FILLING:

3 c. ground nuts
1 c. milk
1 c. sugar
4 tbsp. melted butter
2 tbsp. honey
2-3 eggs
Melted butter for brushing top of nut roll

To make the dough, combine hot milk with butter, sugar and salt. Cool. Add yeast mixture. Stir in eggs and flour and mix to a soft dough. Knead until smooth and elastic, adding more flour as necessary until you can't add any more flour. Turn into a well greased bowl, cover and let rise until double, about 1 1/2 to 2 hours in a warm place.

Punch dough down and divide into 2 portions. On lightly floured surface, roll out each portion into 15"x12" rectangle, 1/4" thick. Spread each rectangle with half the filling, leaving an inch margin all the way around the edges. Roll up jelly roll fashion and place seam side down on greased baking pan. Cover and let rolls rise again. Bake 35 minutes in oven preheated to 350 degrees.

Crust will be dark but soft, especially if you brush it with melted butter when you remove it from the oven.

FILLING: While the dough is rising the first time, make the filling. In a large, heavy saucepan, combine nuts, milk, sugar, butter and honey. Add a little of the hot mixture to the eggs and combine thoroughly. Whisk egg mixture into hot mixture and cook until thickened, stirring constantly. Cool. Makes 2 large long loaves. Traditional Czechoslovakian holiday treat.





Christmas Cookies

Bozi milosti (Beignets)

Prepare dough using 280 g of flour, 70 g sugar, 2 yolks and 1 whole egg, 3 Tbs wine, 3 Tbs milk. Knead dough until soft and shiny. Roll until 2 - 3 mm thick and using a knife cut squares, rectangles, triangles, strips and/or stars. Individual shapes can be joined. Heat oil in a deep pan and fry. Remove from pan. Dust with sugar and cinnamon (optional).

Vanilla Rolls

150 g flour, 20 g sugar, 100 g butter, 50 g almonds or walnuts, 1 egg yolk, vanilla, confectioner's sugar
Combine flour and sugar. Add butter, egg yolk and work into dough on a dusted surface. This should be done rather quickly to prevent the butter from softening. Should this happen, chill the dough before shaping. Shape dough into a long rope, cut into even parts and shape into rolls or crescent moons. Bake in a preheated oven. Dip hot rolls in confectioner's sugar.

Medvedi tlapy (Chocolate cookies)

200 g flour, 200 g chopped butter pieces, 200 g finely chopped walnuts, 100 g sugar, 60 g grated chocolate (or cocoa), 1/2 tsp ground cloves, 1 egg, confectioner's sugar, shortening.

Sift flour, sugar and ground cloves. Add chopped butter. Mix well, add walnuts, egg, chocolate (or cocoa) and work into dough. Roll dough and cut into equal pieces. Press individual pieces onto greased forms. Let cool for one hour. Bake on medium. Remove warm cookies from forms and dip in confectioner's sugar.

Linecka kolecka (Cookies with jam)

210 g flour, 140 g shortening, 70 g sugar, grated lemon peel, vanilla, 1 - 2 egg yolks.

Mix shortening with flour. Add sugar, egg yolks and mix. Knead and let cool. Roll the dough and cut into circles or stars. Half of them should have a round opening in the middle. Bake. Join two cookies with jam, placing the one with the round opening on top.





Moravian Sugar Cake

Mary Carlson (now deceased) the organist at Dillingham Moravian Church made this recipe for many years for Pastor Nicholson and his family. "Try it out! It's rich, but very tasty!"

**1 Pint milk
1 cup dry mashed potatoes
1 tsp salt
1 cake yeast dissolved in 1/2 cup lukewarm water
Mix all ingredients and add sufficient flour to make a stiff sponge.
Beat well and put in a warm place until very light.
After which add the following:
1 or 2 eggs, well beaten
1 cup white sugar
1/2 cup melted butter
1/2 cup melted lard mixed with butter**

Add a little more flour and work the sponge until blisters form and dough drops clean from the hand. Take some of the dough and put it into greased shallow pans and smooth out to 1/2 inch in thickness and set away to rise.

When the cake is light, make holes in equal distances, filling with a lump of butter and brown sugar.

**Dust over the entire cake plenty of brown sugar and a little cinnamon.
Bake in moderate oven for 15-20 minutes.**





Linzer Cookies

2 1/3 cups of finely-sifted flour
250 grams of butter
3/4 cup of powdered sugar
3 egg yolks
1 package of vanilla sugar
the juice and ground peel of a well-cleaned lemon
fine flour for sprinkling on the pastry board
tasty marmelade or jam
fat for greasing the baking sheet

Mix the flour, sugar, vanilla sugar and the lemon juice and peel together. Add the softened butter and egg yolks and work them into a dough, which should be soft and pliable. Wrap it all in plastic wrap and leave it for at least an hour in the refrigerator to settle. Then roll the dough out on a pastry board dusted with flour into a slab approximately 3 mm. (1/8 inch) and cut it out into various shapes, such as stars, wheels, bells and so on, which you carefully place on the greased baking sheet. Bake them slowly in an oven at medium heat to a golden brown. After the cookies cool, paste them together with the jam or marmelade - we recommend a tasty currant or strawberry.

Moravian White Christmas Cookies

Cream 1 cup butter, add 2 cups sugar gradually, and cream the mixture until it is light. Add 4 well-beaten eggs and beat the whole thoroughly. Sift 3 cups flour with 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon, and 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg, and add it alternately with 2 tablespoons sherry. Add sufficient flour, 1 to 2 cups, to stiffen the dough. Chill for several hours. Roll the chilled dough extremely thin and cut it out with cookie cutters in star, diamond, or heart shapes. Put them on a greased baking sheet and bake in a hot oven (450° F.) for about 7 minutes.

Czech Egnog

6 egg yolks, 300 g sugar, 1 condensed milk unsweetened, 2 packages of vanilla sugar, 1/4 l of whipping cream (or milk), 1/2 l rum. Mix sugar with yolks. Add remaining ingredients.

Wine punch (4 servings)

25 cl dry red wine, 25 cl water, 250 g sugar, 2 lemons, 15 cl brandy



Vanocni Polevka Z Kapra ~ (Christmas Carp Soup)

Yield: 4 servings

**Carp, head, tail and roe Parsley
6 c Water Pickling spices
Salt - to taste 1 ea Bread roll
5 tb Butter 1 oz Shortening
1/2 c Flour Parsley, chopped
3 oz Root vegetables, diced Croutons
1 ts Vinegar**

Remove gills and eyes from head and boil together with tail in salted water until tender. Cook rinsed hard and soft roe separately in salted water. Prepare light roux from butter and flour, dilute with cool fish stock, beat well and boil. Add diced vegetables and boil briefly till tender. Finally flavor with vinegar, pickling spices and, after removing bones, return fish and hard and soft roe to soup.

Serve with chopped parsley and croutons.

Instead of vinegar, soup may be flavored with one egg yolk mixed with a little sour cream.





Breaded Fried Carp

- For each serving you will need:

300g carp (uncleaned)
10g salt
20g flour
¼ egg

0.05 litre milk
40g breadcrumbs
100g vegetable oil

Debone, remove skin and clean fish, pat dry. Dip cleaned fish filets in salt/flour mixture, then egg/milk mixture, and finally breadcrumbs. Fry slowly in hot oil until golden brown.

Naturally Fried Carp

- For each serving you will need:

300g carp (uncleaned)
10g salt
1g white pepper

20g butter
5g garlic
100g vegetable oil

Debone, remove skin and clean fish, pat dry. Salt and pepper the filets, then brush with melted butter/mashed garlic. Fry slowly in hot oil until done.

Potato Salad

- For each serving you will need:

200g potatoes (peeled and diced)
20g carrots (peeled and diced)
20g celery (cleaned and diced)
20g parsley root (peeled and diced)
20g gherkins (diced)
10g onion (peeled, blanched, and diced)

1g salt
2g vinegar
2g sugar
1g pepper
20g mayonnaise
20g natural yogurt
10g lemon juice

Boil potatoes, carrot, celery and parsley root until tender. Drain liquid, add gherkins and onions. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix well. When complete, refrigerate.





Roast Goose

INGREDIENTS :		
1 7-lb goose	2 rashers of bacon, sliced	1 medium onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic	2 fresh rolls	1/3 cup milk
4 sharp apples	2 cups dry white wine	1/2 cup raisins
1/4 cup slivered almonds	2 Tbs fresh parsley, chopped	1/4 tsp ground allspice
1/4 tsp ground cloves	1/2 tsp thyme	2 eggs
2 Tbs flour		

Wash and dry the goose and cut off any excess fat. Season it well, inside and out, with salt and a good deal of freshly ground black pepper. Take the garlic cloves, cut them in half, and then rub the goose with them. Save the garlic for use in the stuffing. Prick the goose all over with a fork.

2 Preheat the oven to 400 F.

3 Fry the sliced bacon on medium in a pan till almost crisp. Add the chopped onion and fry, stirring occasionally, till almost golden. Chop up the garlic cloves with which you rubbed the goose. Add these to the onions, cook a couple of minutes, then take the pan off the heat.

4 In a medium-sized bowl, break up the rolls into 1/2-inch pieces. Pour the milk onto the bread and let it soak for a few minutes. Put the raisins into the wine and let these soak as well. Peel and core the apples, then cut them up into cubes. Add the apples to the bread. Chop up the almonds a little and add these to the stuffing. Mix in the onions and bacon. Take the raisins out of the wine, reserving the liquid. Add the raisins to the stuffing, then mix in the parsley, allspice, cloves, and thyme. Season well with salt and pepper. Break the eggs into the stuffing and mix them in well.

5 Put as much of the stuffing into the goose as you can, wrapping the remainder in silver foil to cook alongside. Put the goose, breast-side up, on a broiling pan, preferably the type which collects the cooking juice and fat below the surface on which the meat sits. Pour a little of the white wine on the goose, then place it in the oven. After 15 minutes, baste the goose with some more wine and turn the temperature down to 350 F. Continue roasting till the meat is tender, about 2-1/2 hours, basting occasionally.

6 When the goose is done, take it out of the oven and let sit on a platter for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, skim the fat off the cooking liquid, reserving it for other uses. Put the remaining juices on medium heat on top of the stove. Mix the flour with some water in a small cup, stir in some of the hot cooking liquid, then mix the thickener back into the sauce. Cook the gravy a couple of minutes, then season with salt and pepper.

7 Serve with dumplings or potatoes, and either green beans or carrots.



Leg of Pork with Cracklings



Joe & Janet Kuzma
Wisconsin

Not to be confused with ham, a fresh leg of pork is relatively uncommon today, despite its sumptuous layer of excess fat and accompanying flavor. This natural cushioning is rendered during roasting, enveloping the meat in goodness and allowing the skin above to crisp into the best cracklings you'll ever encounter. The traditional Cuban way with pork is to dress it with oregano and lemon, an approach that couldn't be easier -- or better.

- 3 heads garlic, minced, plus 5 cloves halved
- 1/4 cup grated lemon zest
- 1/4 cup fresh lemon juice
- 3 bunches fresh oregano, chopped
- Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper
- 1 1/2 cups extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 leg of pork (20 pounds), bone-in, skin-on
- 2 cups dry white wine

1. Mix minced garlic, lemon zest and juice, oregano, 2 teaspoons salt, and the oil in a medium bowl.

2. Using a sharp knife, make parallel cuts all over pork leg, cutting through skin and fat (but not meat), spacing cuts 1/2 inch apart. Using a paring knife, cut ten 1/2-inch slits into meat (between parallel cuts). Stuff each slit with a halved garlic clove.

3. Pat garlic mixture all over pork, pushing paste between each parallel line and covering pork. Season generously with salt and pepper. Transfer to a large plastic bag set in a pan (such as a turkey roasting bag), leaving top open to let skin dry. Refrigerate overnight (or up to 2 days).



4. Preheat oven to 475 degrees. Position rack in lower third of oven. Remove pork from bag, and place in a large roasting pan, skin side up.

Let stand 1 hour at room temperature. Season again with salt and pepper, and pour wine in pan. Roast for 45 minutes, reduce heat to 350, and continue roasting until thickest part of pork registers 145 degrees on a meat thermometer, about 3 hours. (Check temperature every 15 minutes during final hour of roasting.) Let rest at least 1 hour before serving.





FALSE SNAILS

This recipe comes from a 1920s notebook of family recipes.

½ pound kidneys, veal or pork

1 small onion, divided

3 large garlic cloves, divided

6 slices white bread with crust

1 cup milk

**½ cup (1 stick) butter, cubed, plus more for
ramekins**

**4 tinned anchovies, chopped, or a 4-inch squeeze
from a tube of anchovy paste**

1 egg yolk

Salt to taste

Dash white pepper

Bread crumbs, as much as needed

Snail shells, to cook (optional)

Clean the kidneys, cutting away the fat and pelvis (which is in the middle of the kidney). Cook in cold salted water to cover with half the onion and 1 garlic clove. (If you'd like to use the broth for a soup later, add some cut-up vegetables as well.) Bring to a boil for about 20 minutes. Strain. Cool the kidneys.

Soak bread slices in milk.

In a meat grinder, grind the kidneys coarsely. Put 2 garlic cloves and the remaining onion through the grinder. Squeeze the milk-soaked bread lightly, discarding the extra milk. Press the bread through the grinder. Add the butter, anchovies, yolk, salt and pepper to the meat mixture. Mix well. The mixture should be thick, about like pâté. If it's not, add bread crumbs to correct the consistency.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Form the meat mixture into balls the size of small meatballs. Gently stuff each inside a snail shell. Bake for 10 to 15 minutes. Alternatively, butter 10 ovenproof ramekins generously, and sprinkle with bread crumbs. Divide the kidney mixture among the ramekins. Bake 10 to 15 minutes until warmed thoroughly. Serve with warm rolls or croissants.

Makes 30 to 40 "snails"





Christmas Dinner Customs

Czech Christmas dinner (December 24) is connected with a great number of different customs, rules and superstitions. Very few of them are still observed today, and for good reason. It must have been quite a challenge to put the dinner together and go through with it without a mistake if all the customs were to be followed! Here are some of them:

- No lights should be lit in the house before the first star comes out. After it does, dinner is served.
- The table should be set for an even number of guests. An odd number brings bad luck or death.
- An extra plate can be used to even out the number of guests. An extra plate should also be prepared in case an unexpected guest or a person in need comes by the house at dinner time.
- The legs of the table can be tied with a rope to protect the house from thieves and burglars in the coming year.
- No one should sit with their back to the door.
- Christmas dinner should consist of nine courses including soup, bread with honey, carp, potato salad, fruit (dried, fresh or canned), dessert (apple strudel or vánočka - Christmas bread), and other foods.
- No alcohol should be served on Christmas Eve.
- No one should ever get up from the Christmas table before dinner is finished. Doing so brings bad luck and death in the family.
- Everyone should finish their dinner and leave nothing on the plate.
- The first person to leave the table after dinner will be the first one to die in the coming year - that is why everyone should get up from the table at the same time.
- Any leftovers from dinner (crumbs, fishbones, etc.) should be buried around the trees to ensure they will bear lots of fruit.
- All household animals should be fed after dinner so that no one goes hungry on Christmas Eve.



The Magical Powers of Foods and Plants

Certain plants, spices and foods are said to have special qualities and have been an important part of Czech Christmas celebrations throughout history.

Garlic

An essential part of Christmas that should not be missing at any Christmas dinner. It is believed to provide strength and protection. A bowl of garlic can be placed under the dinner table.

Honey

Honey is believed to guard against evil. A pot of honey can be placed on the dinner table.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms give health and strength. A traditional meal called kuba, prepared from dried mushrooms, barley, garlic, onions, and spices, used to be served as the main meal in the past. Mushroom soup can be served before dinner.

Sheaf of Grain

A bundle of grain dipped in holy water can be used to sprinkle the house to prevent it from burning down in the next year.

Poppyseed, peas, wheat, barley

If given to the hens on Christmas Eve, lots of eggs will be laid in the coming year.

Vánočka (Christmas bread)

Feeding a piece of vánočka to the cows on Christmas Eve will ensure that there will be lots of milk all year.

Putting a few vánočka crumbs in front of the bee hive will make sure that the bees will produce enough honey next year.

Throwing a piece of vánočka into the well will ensure good quality of the water.

Apple

If the goats are given apples on Christmas Eve, their milk will be sweet.



Foretelling the Future

The foretelling of the future and predicting the well-being of the family in the coming year is connected with many popular Christmas customs some of which are still practiced today.

The Floating of Walnut Shells

Little boats are made out of empty walnut shells and each family member places a little burning candle into a shell. Everyone's shells are then floated on a bowl of water. If the shell makes it across the bowl, its owner will live a long and healthy life. A shell that sinks brings bad luck to its owner.

The Cutting of the Apple

After Christmas dinner, every person present at the table cuts an apple in half (crosswise, from the stem down). Both halves are shown to everyone around the table. If the core is shaped as a star, it means that everyone will get together next year in happiness and health. A four-pointed cross is a bad omen and means that someone at the table will fall ill or die within a year.

The Pouring of Lead

A piece of lead is melted over fire and then poured into a container of water. The resulting shape will tell the pourer's destiny.

Foretelling Marriage

There are lots of Christmas customs that help young girls in the family find out if they will get married in the year to come.

Cherry Tree Twigs (Barborky)

On December 4, St. Barbora's Day, an unmarried girl is supposed to cut a twig off of a cherry tree and put it in water. If the twig blooms by Christmas Eve, the girl will marry within a year.

The Throwing of the Shoe

An unmarried girl is supposed to throw a shoe over her shoulder and towards the door. If the shoe lands with the toe pointing towards the door, the girl will marry within a year.





The Shaking of the Elder Tree

An unmarried girl is supposed to shake an elder tree and if a dog barks, she will marry a man who lives in the direction from which the dog bark came.

Money and Wealth

Although Czech Christmas has traditionally been focused on spirituality and family rather than on material possessions, there are a few customs relating to money and wealth.

Fish Scales

Fish scales should be placed under Christmas dinner plates or under the tablecloth to bring wealth to the house. Carrying a fish scale in a wallet all year will ensure that money will not run out.

Other Christmas Customs and Superstitions

- He who fasts all day until dinner will see the golden piglet on the wall.**
- After Christmas dinner, no field is to be crossed until the midnight mass. He who does so will die - within a year.**
- He who fails to give a present on Christmas Eve will be met with poverty.**
- A pregnant woman will know whether she is carrying a boy or a girl once the first Christmas Eve - visitor enters the house. If the visitor is male, she will have a son.**

