

SERBIAN CHRISTMAS

By the turn of the 20th century, there were two main groups of immigrants here in Amador County. One was the Italians, who came to ranch and farm, and the other was the Serbians, who came to work in the deep pit mines that dot our landscape. Did you know that St. Sava's, the little white Serbian Orthodox church on North Main in Jackson, built in 1894, is the oldest Serbian Orthodox church in the entire country?

And this Saturday, January 7, is Serbian Christmas. The Orthodox religion uses the Julian calendar, rather than the Gregorian one in modern use, so for them Christmas Day falls on January 7. Traditionally, Serbian Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were punctuated by gunfire, as the men fire off their guns to announce the birth of the Lord. Not too long ago, many of our prominent local citizens would fire off their shotguns and rifles after morning services from the steps of St. Sava's, then drive in a caravan through the streets of Jackson to city hall, firing off their guns along the way and shouting "*Hristocq se rod*" ("Christ is Born") and "*Vaistinu se rod*" ("Indeed He is Born"). Then it would be on to a day of feasting on barbecued goat, lamb, *sarma* (which are stuffed cabbage rolls), *kabasica* (Serbian sausage), *Cesnica* (Christmas Bread—baked with a silver coin in it), and other Serbian delicacies.

Here in Amador County, one of the great traditions, as in the old country, was that each Serbian household held an open house for Christmas. Lana Vukovich told me a few years ago that when her father was a boy, it took three days to attend all the open houses here in Amador County. In the days before telephones or email, the opening gunshots were to tell everyone that the homes were now open for visiting. And when the visitors arrived, in an echo of an old Serbian custom, the male visitors would fire off their guns to announce their arrival.

While the women prepared the food, the men would sit around and drink "*Vruka rakia*", or Shumadian tea. There's no tea in it, but here's how you make it, according to the late Ratko Doyich. Mix together 3 quarts of good whiskey, a quart of fresh water, half a pound of sugar, and a pound or more of honey. Heat almost to a boil, and add some powdered cloves, some freshly grated nutmeg to taste, and garnish with some rock sugar candy. And enjoy the warming drink.

There would always be a full crowd around the food tables, which were loaded with *presnjac*, (or cheesebread), a leg of roast pork, *sarma*, *kraut* (which is cabbage), and barbecued ribs. Then on to desserts, like apple strudel, *povitica* (a rolled nut bread), *baklava*, and all sorts of cookies, including *gnjezda* (little birds' nests), Serbian snowballs, (a sort of teacake), perhaps an apricot torte, and of course the light and crispy *rostule*, a sweet airy ball of deep fried dough.

Another fun tradition that Lana Vukovich told me about was based on St. Nikol, whom we all revere as St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas was actually an Orthodox bishop in the (now Turkish) port of Smyrna. Here in Amador County, Lana told me that St. Nicholas is the family or patron saint of many Serbian-American families.

By Serbian tradition, St. Nikol would throw bags of silver coins on the porches of poor people, so they wouldn't have to sell their children—daughters in particular. So on Serbian Christmas, Lana and her sisters would run to the front and back porches, to discover that St. Nikol had visited and had left silver coins on the porches. This tradition continues to this day among many of Amador County's Serbian-American families. So to all our Serbian-American neighbors here in Amador County, this is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook, wishing you all a Merry Christmas, or *Mir Bozic*.