In Search of the Holiday Fruitcake

Gil Marks

“...his usher bearing a great cake, with a bean and a pease.”

—Ben Johnson’s directions in his play The Masque of Christmas (1616)

In the mid-fourth century, Christmas was for the first time set on December 25th, the date of the winter solstice in the Julian calendar. This, not coincidentally, was also the concluding date of the popular Roman week-long Saturnalia holiday and Greek equivalent Kronia as well as the celebration of the birthday of the sun-god Mithra, an Eastern religion widespread in the Roman Empire in the first century. Meanwhile, Scandinavian pagans celebrated their own winter solstice holiday, Jarlstag or Jul (Yule), in which on each of the twelve days (twelve being the number of months of the year) before the solstice, different noblemen presented gifts to the head god Odin, followed on the solstice by a feast (Jólablót) and then additional gifts to Odin on the twelve days afterwards, the last gift and feast being on the twelfth evening, a final festive fling before the onset of the remainder and usually worst of winter. In many cultures, massive bonfires were lit on and around the solstice to reinforce the fading sun.

The Catholic Church chose the twelfth day from December 25th as the Feast of the Epiphany (Greek for “appearance”), commemorating the magi — magi are actually Zoroastrian priests (also the source of the word magic), but in Christian tradition came to mean “wise men,” and sometimes mistakenly called “kings.” According to the Gospel of Matthew, who never actually related how many magi there were or many other details about them, the group arrived days after the Nativity bearing three gifts of great value in biblical times: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Consequently, January 6th marks Twelfth Day --- Le Jour des Rois (“The Day of the Kings” in French) — while the night before the Epiphany, January 5th, is Twelfth Night, or twelve nights after Christmas Eve. (The popular song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was written during the period of English persecution of Catholics from 1558 to 1829, when it was a crime to practice their religion and even teaching children the tenets of the faith could lead to execution. The song’s various gifts probably contain symbolic references to Catholic theology.)

Until relatively recently, Christmas, noted for solemnity, was actually much less important and popular in England and America than Twelfth Night. Twelfth Night was celebrated with a host of beloved customs, many dating back to the Saturnalia, including masquerades, clowning, social satires, and rowdy, frequently bawdy games. In addition, there were Nordic Yule practices, including Yule logs, Yule candles, wreaths, mistletoe, holiday ham, reindeer pulling sleighs through the sky (Freyr, god of fertility), and Santa (Old Man Winter).
The dozen days between the two holidays were traditionally ones of rejoicing. The celebratory season ended after Twelfth Night, the date when seasonal decorations were taken down — doing so beforehand or afterward considered bad luck — and the Yule log extinguished. Twelfth Night was also a day of gift giving, an important aspect of the Jarlstag which became a commemoration of the magi. Gifts were not then traditionally exchanged on Christmas.

The Church realized that they could not stop the pagan celebrations, as they were so widely popular, so it attempted to control them by adopting them into Twelfth Night and Carnival. As a result, Epiphany offered the rare and safe occasion when the community could openly poke fun at the established authorities and social norms. These revelries of ritualistic play took place in groups and processions, frequently singing and dancing in exchange for some gift. This is the source of Christmas caroling. Dancing, cross dressing, and tomfoolery were public and widespread. Actors called mummers dressed in drag and performed plays. Food and drink was the core of the celebrations, especially sweet breads and wassail. Abundant alcohol and masks provided cover for lowering inhibitions and acting in uncharacteristic ways. A common seasonal prank was to serve a surprise pie with holes cut in the bottom and small animals placed inside, hence the famous nursery rhyme, “Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.” Shakespeare penned his comedy Twelfth Night, or What you Will (1601) — containing many elements of Twelfth Night, including mind games, role reversals, cross-dressing, and sundry indulgences — to be performed on that occasion.

The most beloved and enduring Epiphany tradition in western Europe was a special sweet yeast bread, known as rosca de reyes in Spain, bolo rei in Portugal, Dreikönigskuchen in Germany, gâteau des Rois in France, and Three Kings Cake, Kings’ Cake, and Twelfth Night Cake in England. The origin of the “cake of the kings” lies in the sweet yeast breads of Moorish Spain and then the Italian Renaissance eventually adopted by the French and then English. Rich with butter, eggs, and sugar, all once quite expensive items, these cakes were reserved for the wealthy or, for others, enjoyed only on very special occasions. The dough was typically flavored with orange blossom water and cinnamon, nutmeg, or other eastern spices, the latter reminiscent of the gifts of the magi and common in prodigious quantities in late medieval upper class cookery. The breads were studded with raisins and candied citron and cherries, the pieces of fruit emulating jewels in a crown. Europeans commonly began to bake these rich doughs in an earthenware mold with a hole in the center, such as the Turk’s cap, so that the inside would not remain raw before the surface burned. The circular or ring-shaped (couronne) bread came to represent a crown.

The English ate Three Kings Cake on Twelfth Night (the evening of the 5th), while the Spanish and Germans historically enjoyed theirs as well as exchanged presents (from the Reyes Magos) on the morning of January 6th based on a tradition that the three magi arrived in Bethlehem at that time. Most French serve the cake in the afternoon of the 6th as the dessert of the feast of Epiphany. A longstanding French tradition was to cut an extra piece of cake than the number of diners, reserving it for the first poor person to come to the door.

In a practice dating back to the Roman Saturnalia and readopted in medieval France and then spreading to Spain and Germany, a small token of luck (une fève) — originally a fava bean (an ancient symbol of fertility), but later also a whole
almond (or, in nineteenth century Louisiana, a pecan half typically substituted), coin, ring, little horseshoe, china charm, or small porcelain doll — was commonly baked inside the circular loaf. Whoever found the token in their portion was supposedly assured of good luck for the coming year. A widespread custom, based on the “mock kings” of the Saturnalia, and readopted in fifteenth century France and later England, was that the man who found the bean was appointed king of the Twelfth Night festivities and able to direct the others in merriment, although not sacrificed at the end as by the Romans. The loaf was typically adorned with a paper crown and the person finding the fève hidden in their piece of cake wore the crown for the evening. In England, whoever found the token in their piece of cake was called “Lord of Misrule,” and led the Twelfth Night entertainment, his rule ending upon the stroke of midnight.

During the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the church banned Le Jour des Rois along with its special cakes due to their pagan origins and the overindulgences of the celebrations. Afterwards, the epiphany revelries in France never regained their previous degree of intensity, but the “cakes of the king” returned, sometimes under different guises. After this period, the galette des Rois emerged in northern France and Paris, layering two rounds of the newly popularized puff pastry with an almond frangipane filling, actually a pastry known as Pithiviers. Meanwhile, the classic sweet bread gâteau de Rois predominated in Provence and much of the south. Today, from right after New Year until the onset of Lent, galette des Rois and less commonly gâteau des Rois abound in bakeries and pastry shops throughout France.

There are no records of the first English Christmas or Twelfth Night in America in Roanoke in 1585 or celebrated by the thirty eight surviving colonists in Jamestown in 1607. That Christmas of 1607 was spent by John Smith along with a small group of men on a food-gathering expedition in the wilderness of Virginia attempting to evade a party of Algonquians. In the following year Smith, in The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia, recounted his second Christmas in America: “The next night being lodged at Kecoughtan [Hampton, Virginia]; six or seaven dayes the extreame winde, rayne, frost and snow caused us to keep Christmas among the Salvages, where we were never more merry, nor fed on more plentie of good Oysters, Fish, Flesh, Wild-foule, and good bread; nor never had better fires in England, then in the dry smoaky houses of Kecoughtan.”

Virginians soon began to replicate Elizabethan Christmas and Twelfth Night practices in the New World. An eighteenth century American Christmas in the Southern and Mid-Atlantic colonies was low-key and rather drab, while in contrast New Year and Twelfth Night were high-spirited occasions with feasting, drinking, and merry making, including plays, hunting, gambling, cock fighting, and fruitcake. Martha and George Washington, married in Williamsburg in 1759, celebrated their wedding anniversary on Twelfth Night and subsequently entertained family and friends on that day. Martha’s Great Cake for Twelfth Night contained forty eggs, five pounds of ‘flower’ four pounds of sugar, four pounds of butter, and five pounds of dried fruit. On the other hand, seventeenth century Puritans rejected such frivolity as well as the holiday customs adopted from pagans and, after Oliver Cromwell seized power in 1653, Parliament attempted to suppress all Christmas and many Twelfth Night festivities. Christmas and Twelfth Night celebrations returned in 1660, but without many of the more riotous rituals. Following the lead of English Puritans, New Englanders officially banned
Christmas in 1659, a prohibition that lasted until 1681, with anyone found celebrating the day fined five shillings.

The calendar that Julius Caesar established in 45 BC was eleven minutes and fourteen seconds longer than the solar year. Consequently, over the course of time, this discrepancy built up to the point that in 1582 the vernal equinox fell ten days early. In order to correct the astronomical errors so that Church holidays would fall in the proper seasons, Pope Gregory XIII dropped ten days from the calendar and, while he was at it, moved the New Year from its longstanding position at the beginning of April to the first of January to be closer to Christmas. (Whence the origin of April Fool's Day.) Protestant England, however, refused to accept this development until 1752, which by then the discrepancy had increased to eleven days. Thus the day after September 2, 1752 became September 14. (This is why George Washington’s birthday is variously listed as either February 22 or 11, 1732.) The implementation of this change was accompanied with confusion and controversy, particularly as it disrupted traditional festivals. As a result, some Englishmen, particularly in the west of the country, and Americans insisted on observing Twelfth Night and serving their fruitcake on what was its original day, which became January 17. Eventually, everyone came around to the Gregorian calendar and Twelfth Night and the serving of Twelfth Night Cake shifted to the new January 5th.

After Victoria assumed the British throne in 1837, the Queen attempted to impose her image of family values onto the Christmas season. It was her husband, Albert, who imported the custom from his native Germany of decorating a pine tree. Shortly thereafter in 1843, Charles Dickens published A Christmas Carol, forever romanticizing the idealized Victorian image of the holiday. Then in the 1870s, favoring Christmas, the queen banned Twelfth Night festivities altogether. Gift giving as well as fruitcake shifted from Twelfth Night to Christmas, the latter sometimes replaced with the newer steamed plum pudding. America followed suit and Twelfth Night festivities generally disappeared in the mid-nineteenth century. The works of Dickens, Washington Irving, and Clement Moore helped transform the American perception of Christmas into the Victorian mode. In America, fruit-laden pound cakes supplanted the venerable Great Cakes.

Gil Marks is a food writer and historian, and was a founding editor of Kosher Gourmet magazine.