

# Busy holiday season commences with grand meal



**LIVING ABROAD**  
**KAREN MARTINEK**  
hills way. The skinny store decorations, with a Christmas bulb hanging haphazardly in the display, or some garland strung carelessly around a window, seem more like they're in the process of being taken down rather than decoration for the holidays.

City sidewalks are busy sidewalks, but they're not dressed in a holiday style. And although it will soon be Christmas Day, one could walk through the streets of Ales and not really know Santa is on his way.

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There are no lights on the houses to drive by at night and admire. No Santas at the stores to hear children's last wishes. No carolers on street corners, no Christmas

music on the radio, no late store hours to accommodate holiday shopping, and no one counting down the shopping days left until Christmas.

Nothing. At least by my standards, there are hardly any signs of holiday spirit and with only our tiny Christmas tree to decorate the house, it is sometimes hard to remain festive.

Yet, although there are no outward signs of it, the French are caught in the spirit of the season. For them, that doesn't mean stringing lights on the overhangs of the house or monotonous Christmas trees from which economists can predict the financial outlook of next year.

Rather, like any French celebration, the festive attention will focus on the table and the holiday meal. The Christmas tree may be small and simply decorated, but the "Gros Souper" or Christmas dinner is sure to be an elaborate meal served to guests seated at a

table decorated elegantly in a holiday theme. Rich in a variety of Christmas traditions like the United States, the holiday customs in France change with regions. While the people of Bretagne celebrate with crepes and those of Berry with the saumon fume, the Provencal Christmas dinner is famous for its tradition of 13 desserts which follow a lengthy, multicourse meal.

Starting with the appetizers of "saumon fume" (smoked salmon) and "foie gras d'oie ou de canard" (goose and duck liver pate), guests of the traditional Provencal holiday dinner will enjoy a meal that is carefully divided into courses, separating flavors so that each may be justly savored. The Gros Souper can take anywhere from four to seven hours, depending on the number of courses and the length of the necessary breaks in between each holiday specialty.

The appetizers are followed by "taïeul morue," which is a plate of assorted cooked vegetables, hard-boiled eggs, steamed snails and salted, dried cod. The cornerstone of this hot dish are the cod and the garlic which, combined with egg yolks, makes the French mayonnaise. The assortment of vegetables, eggs, snails and fish are eaten with the mayonnaise as a sauce.

The Christmas turkey or "la dinde aux marrons" follows. Although some people are breaking from tradition and serving other entrees, this turkey with chestnut dressing is still customary, and Christmas is the only time when whole turkeys are available at the butcher or supermarket.

Then, just when you think you can't eat anymore, comes the traditional 13 desserts — the triumphal point of the Provencal

holiday meal. Served usually with "le vin cuit" which is wine that is heated, sugared and flavored such as with an orange, the 13 include les mendiantes, les fruits confits, les confiseries, les fruits frais and le pain.

Les mendiantes is a mix of dried fruits and nuts with walnuts, dried figs, almonds and raisins. Les fruits frais are the seasonal fresh fruits including apples, pears, grapes, winter melons and tangerines. Le pain is the French word for bread. In this case, however, it is a holiday bread that is more of a cake with a thick pastry dough filled with fruit jelly or sweet cheese.

Started around 1870 by French patissiers, the "buche de Noel" or Christmas cake log has also become traditional. Christmas Day and the Gros Souper seem to mark the beginning of the true festivities, unlike in the States where Christmas Day seems to be the culmination of a long season of preparation. The week between Christmas and New Year's Day is when the French go visiting friends and relatives to celebrate the season.

Above all, Christmas for the French seems to be a time to celebrate family, and as a family to celebrate the foods of the season. Thus you won't find the French spirit of Christmas reflected in the stores or in the decorations, but rather, in the people and the aromas that sweeten the air.

Born and raised in Southfield, Karen Martinek graduated from Marian High School and then attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she studied English and education.



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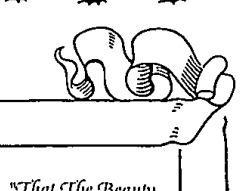

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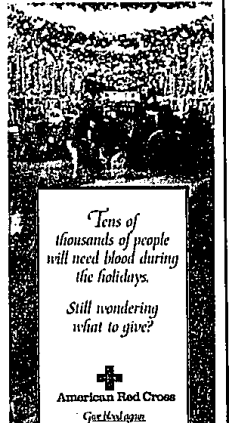
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