

Look around during the holidays and you may feel that the rich flavors of our ancestors' traditions have evaporated from our great melting pot. The result? Ho-ho-homogeneity. Here are some rituals from around the globe that you can use to add authentic spice—and meaning—to your season.

# how the world celebrates

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## India

**DIWALI, THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS,  
HINDU NEW YEAR, 13TH DAY OF THE MONTH  
OF ASVINA (OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER)**

During this five-day celebration, Hindus fill their houses and gardens nightly with clay oil lamps or candles. The lights celebrate the once banished mythic hero Rama and his wife, Sita, and welcome Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, into their homes. Families draw rangoli, decorative patterns made in rice flour, at the entrance to their houses or in front of their household shrines.

**THE ESSENCE:** To light candles is to give thanks for the blessings of the past year and shines the way for good fortune in the next.

## Poland ▶

### WIGILIA, CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

This meal, which features several types of fish, begins when the first star appears in the evening sky. (Children are sent outside to keep watch.) The host gives everyone a piece of the *oplatek*, a paper-thin wafer embossed with a Nativity scene, then guests break off pieces to give one another, offering a wish in the process. An empty seat is left to welcome a stranger who would otherwise be alone (and to symbolically invite Jesus, the birthday boy, to the table).

**THE ESSENCE:** *Oplatek* wishes are a chance to settle any misunderstandings that may have accumulated during the past year.

## Finland

### FORTUNE-TELLING RITUAL, NEW YEAR'S EVE

In this tradition, tin is melted, then poured into a bucket of snow or ice-cold water. When the metal hardens, it is held up to a light; the shape it casts on the wall is used to tell your fortune. (Does it look like a hill? That may mean obstacles ahead. Does it look like a coin? That may mean money.)

**THE ESSENCE:** The fortunes open a window into the New Year.

## Brazil

### NEW YEAR'S EVE ON THE BEACH

Brazilians dress in white and gather by the ocean to honor the passing year and welcome the next. In Rio de Janeiro, revelers light candles, watch a fireworks display, and throw flowers into the ocean as an offering to Yemanjá, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the seas, who represents abundance, safety, and fertility.

**THE ESSENCE:** White garments symbolize purity and prosperity. In this ultra-multicultural country, people gather to celebrate the communal spirit and the desire for social harmony.


## Morocco ▶

### EID AL-FITR, THE FEAST OF THE BREAKING OF THE FAST, FIRST THREE DAYS OF THE MONTH OF SHAWAL

This celebration, held after the month-long fasting of Ramadan, lasts for three days following the appearance of the crescent moon (this year it falls in late November). The holiday, the most popular in Islam, includes a feast featuring couscous with raisins and onions, and desserts such as dates, raisins, and round sesame or almond cookies called *ghoribas* (right; to find recipes for *ghoribas* and other foods in this story, access [www.realsimple.com/classicrecipes](http://www.realsimple.com/classicrecipes)).

**THE ESSENCE:** A joyous culmination after a month of self-reflection.



A young woman with long red hair is shown in profile, facing left. She is wearing a long, flowing white gown with long sleeves and a wide hem. On her head, she wears a crown made of dark green foliage with several lit white candles. She is holding a white tray with both hands, which contains several round, golden-brown saffron buns. The background is a softly lit room with light-colored walls and curtains. A window in the background shows a glimpse of another room with a bed and a chair. The overall atmosphere is warm and traditional.

## Sweden

FEAST DAY OF SANTA LUCIA, BEGINNING OF  
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON, DECEMBER 13

According to legend, Santa Lucia, a fourth-century Sicilian virgin, wore a wreath of candles to light her way as she brought food to Christians hiding in dark tunnels to escape persecution. (The story is particularly appealing to Swedes, whose country is dark during much of the winter.) Her generosity is reenacted every year on the morning of December 13, when the eldest daughter of each Swedish family, dressed in a white gown (usually with a red sash, representing the blood of the martyred saint) and an illuminated crown, brings a tray of saffron buns and hot coffee to her parents in bed.

**THE ESSENCE:** The ritual evokes Lucia's spirit of compassion and hope in bleak times.



## Spain ▲

### THE 12 GRAPES OF NOCHE VIEJA, NEW YEAR'S EVE

At the stroke of midnight, Spaniards eat one grape for each toll of the clock. They observe this century-old ritual (which began after a spectacular harvest) whether they're at home, in a packed restaurant in Barcelona, or in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, where the grape-eating countdown, like the ball drop in Times Square, is televised.

**THE ESSENCE:** The good harvest is celebrated in the hope of attracting luck and riches in the coming year.

## Jamaica

### JONKONNU FESTIVAL, CHRISTMAS SEASON

First celebrated in West Africa in the early 1700s, the Jonkonnu Festival (or Johnkankus) was brought to the United States and the Caribbean by slaves. In costumes made from found objects and rags, men and women paraded through town, chanting, singing, and dancing to the beat of drums and other instruments. Today the rite lives on in Jamaica.

**THE ESSENCE:** A show of strength and pride amid adversity.

## Ireland

### AN OPEN DOOR, A LOAF OF BREAD, AND A DARK-HAIRED MAN, NEW YEAR'S EVE

The Irish light a candle and, at the last stroke of midnight, throw open their front doors to welcome the New Year, and they hope that a dark-haired man will be the first person to cross the threshold, a good-luck omen. In some places, women beat the door with loaves of bread while yelling, "A Happy New Year!"

**THE ESSENCE:** The bread ritual ensures ample food in the coming year (and that dark-haired man doesn't sound so bad, either).

## Israel

### TU B'SHEVAT, A TREE-PLANTING RITUAL, 15TH DAY OF SHVAT

On the 15th day of the month of Shvat (mid-January to mid-February), many Jews throughout the world celebrate the end of the rainy season by planting trees, eating fruit, and sometimes having a Seder. Originally a nature festival, Tu B'Shevat evolved into a day for emphasizing people's responsibility to the earth.

**THE ESSENCE:** New beginnings and connection to the land.

## Greece ▶

### SAINT BASIL'S DAY, NEW YEAR'S DAY

On this day, inspired by Saint Basil—a fourth-century bishop and father of the Greek Orthodox Church, known for his generosity to the poor and the needy—families visit, exchange gifts, and celebrate with a feast. The meal includes Vassilopita (Saint Basil's cake), a bread or cake inside which is baked a foil-wrapped gold or silver coin that the diners then search for. To acknowledge the saint's kindness, the first piece of Vassilopita is set aside for him.

**THE ESSENCE:** Whoever finds the coin, a symbol of good fortune, can look forward to a happy New Year.

## Puerto Rico

### ASALTO, A TRAVELING CAROLING PARTY, CHRISTMAS SEASON

In this slowly growing party, a version of Christmas caroling, friends show up unannounced at one another's front doors, singing and playing instruments. They're invited in to sing, dance, drink, and eat (a typical dish is the traditional *asopao de pollo*, or chicken-and-rice stew) until it's time to bring their host to the next house. The revelry moves from house to house until dawn, when everyone heads home.

**THE ESSENCE:** An invocation of the spirit of friendship and fun.

## Ecuador

### LA QUEMA DE LOS AÑOS VIEJOS, THE BURNING OF EFFIGIES IN A MIDNIGHT BONFIRE, NEW YEAR'S EVE

In late December, Ecuadorans make life-size dolls resembling unpopular public figures (such as local politicians or Osama bin Laden) and display them on balconies or in windows. On New Year's Eve, the dolls are piled in the street and torched, creating a bonfire. Some people believe that jumping over the burning dolls brings good luck.

**THE ESSENCE:** The fires wipe away evil and bring good fortune for the coming year.

## Philippines ▶

### POLKA DOTS AND COINS, NEW YEAR'S EVE

On New Year's Eve, men and women in the Philippines wear polka dots, keep coins in their pockets, and adorn their tables with round foods, such as grapes.

**THE ESSENCE:** According to Filipino folklore, circles symbolize future good luck and riches.

