

## Christmas in Spain: *Turrões and Belenes*

Ham, pastelles, sorrel and parang: elements of a true Christmas! Well, this may be the case in Trinidad and Tobago but not in Spain, where turkey and other meats reign supreme at this time of year, pastelles and parang are unknown and sorrel is sold as a decorative plant in huge department stores, so no one would ever think of boiling it to drink. However, these are only a few of the differences between a 'trini' Christmas and a Spanish Christmas.

Firstly, here in Trinidad and Tobago Christmas decorations and music normally appear in malls and homes sometime in October. However, it is only in December when every town and city in Spain adorns its streets and plazas with Christmas lights and the bigger cities like Madrid erect a huge Christmas tree in the city centre. In addition, Christmas markets are also set up and stalls sell all sorts of decorations, costumes, sweets, and crèches.

Speaking of decorations, whereas in the Western world, Christmas trees seem to abound, in Spain, decorations tend to reflect the true meaning of the season and the crèche takes centre stage. These nativity scenes are rightly referred to as *Belenes*, the Spanish for Bethlehems, as they depict not just the manger where Jesus Christ was born but the entire town of Bethlehem. As a result, elaborate displays are normally set up in public squares, while children take great pride in putting out the family's *Belén* on a table in a strategic location in the home. In the days leading up to Christmas, some towns even go so far as to have animated nativity scenes, with live animals and human actors. Another difference in the Spanish crèche is that it always includes the Three Kings or Wise Men, Balthazar, Gaspar and Melchior. In Catalonia, there is a special addition to the nativity scene, a character called the *caganer*, which is roughly translated as 'defecator' as this is exactly what the character is doing. Although the exact origin of this unusual addition has been lost, the tradition has been in existence since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The Three Wise Men have another important role to play in the Spanish Christmas and can be likened to our Santa Claus, who the Spaniards refer to as *Papá Noel*. Spanish children do not receive their gifts on Christmas Day from *Papá Noel* but rather on the feast of the Epiphany on January 06 from *Los Reyes Magos*, the Three Wise Men. It is customary for children to place their shoes in a visible location in their homes on the night of January 05, so that the *Magos* can fill them with gifts. This day is often marked by parades in various cities and cakes and sweets are given out to scores of joyful children. On the morning of January 06, the scene in most homes resembles that of December 25 locally with children eagerly ripping open the presents they have received from Balthazar, the King who rides a donkey and who is believed to be the bearer of the gifts.

On the topic of sweets, Christmas food in Spain is all about sweets! On the same feast of the Epiphany, a special cake called the *Rosca / Roscón de Reyes* is made and sold throughout the country. Shaped like a large ring and covered in a sugar glaze and fruit jellies, it tastes almost like a hot-cross bun. However, it is normally filled with plastic toys and it is believed that anyone who finds one of these hidden treats will have good luck in the coming year. Another characteristic of a Spanish Christmas is *turrón*, a type of almond and honey nougat, now with many varieties, which can be found in supermarkets months before Christmas. Some other popular Christmas favourites made from almonds include *polvorones*, crumbly, almost powdery cinnamon-flavoured cakes and *mazapán*, a sugar and almond paste that is shaped into figurines. *Mantecados* are another traditional holiday sweet which are made mainly from lard, come in a variety of flavours and have a crumbly, light consistency.

It could be said that official Christmas celebrations begin in Spain with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 08. It is a public holiday throughout the country but the biggest festivities occur in Seville, where a ritual ceremony of song and dance called *Los Seises*, is performed by ten, not six, beautifully costumed boys in front of the Gothic cathedral. The next big event in the Spanish Christmas calendar is on December 22, when the national lottery *El Gordo* or 'The Fat One', is drawn. This is one of the biggest and most popular lotteries in the world and thousands of people share in the prizes each year, which are estimated at more than 2 billion euros this year. Tickets normally go on sale a few months before.

Then, Christmas Eve or *Nochebuena* ('Good Night') arrives, a day that is all about family and which is celebrated more than Christmas Day itself. Families gather to share the biggest and most important meal of the entire season. The star of the meal would normally be a roasted lamb, stuffed turkey, suckling pig or an array of exquisite shellfish, depending on the region of the country and the family's taste. This would all be topped off by a glass of fine Spanish wine or champagne, *cava*, and *turrones*. The day culminates with a midnight mass called the *Misa de Gallo*, which literally means 'Mass of the Rooster', as it is believed that a rooster crowed the night that Jesus was born. The biggest *Misa* occurs close to Barcelona at the Benedictine monastery in Montserrat.

Christmas Day is a much more modest affair that is also centred on the family. Children normally receive small gifts from *Papá Noel* and a big lunch is shared with relatives. On December 28, the Spaniards celebrate a day of practical jokes called the *Día de los Inocentes* or *Día de los Santos Inocentes*, their version of April Fools' Day, which commemorates all children below the age of three (3) who were murdered following the decree by King Herod.

The New Year is ushered in with grand street parties throughout the country and the celebrations in Madrid resemble that of Times Square New York. It is customary for Spaniards to eat twelve (12) grapes as the clock strikes twelve, to bring luck for each month of the year.

Christmas carols are sung throughout the season and one of the more popular ones is called *Los Peces en el Río*, 'the Fish in the River'.

So, as you savour your ham and black cake this year and you drink your ginger beer, remember that in Spain, Christmas is celebrated just as grandly but differently. The Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (SIS) takes this opportunity to wish the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago a wonderful Christmas, or as they say in Spanish, *¡Felices Fiestas!*

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