

Wigilia

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Wigilia, the Christmas Eve supper



The traditional Wigilia dinner table

Wigilia (Polish pronunciation: [\[vʲiˈɡʲilja\]](#)) is the traditional Christmas Eve vigil supper in Poland, held on December 24. The term is often applied to the whole of Christmas Eve, extending further to Pasterka – Midnight Mass, held in Roman Catholic churches all over Poland and in Polish communities worldwide at or before midnight. The custom is sometimes referred to as "wieczerza" or "wieczerza wigilijna", in Old Polish meaning evening repast, linked to the late church service, Vespers from the *Latin*.

The word *Wigilia* derives from the Latin Vigil. The associated feasting follows a day of abstinence and traditionally begins once the First Star has been sighted. Christmas is also sometimes called "*Gwiazdka*", "little star."

Children usually decorate the Christmas tree. Sometimes a handful of hay is placed under the tablecloth of the dining table to symbolize Jesus's birth in a manger. One old tradition states that when children playfully remove a piece of straw from under the tablecloth, its color has meaning: Green indicates wealth or possibly a marriage, while black foretells bad luck for the year

Another tradition is to make an extra place-setting for the "unexpected guest", to celebrate hospitality. The feast begins with saying grace, breaking the *oplatek* Christmas wafer to symbolize the gift of daily bread, and wishing each other blessings for the coming year. In the country, it was customary to share a special (pink) wafer with livestock and dogs and cats as the animals of the household were to be treated with special reverence on that day, in honor of the animals in the Bethlehem stable. There was a belief that at midnight they were granted the power of human speech

The Wigilia supper

The bread used throughout Wigilia has been borrowed from Shabbat, especially the challah (Polish: *chalka*)

A Christmas Eve dinner excludes meat, as abstinence is required, and should comprise twelve distinct dishes in memory of the twelve Apostles. It begins with a soup, either borscht with uszka (tortellini), or wild mushroom consommé (grzybowa), followed by herring in different forms. Fish provides the main dish of the Christmas Eve feast across Poland. There are variations of carp fillet, carp in aspic, gefilte fish (Jewish-style carp), sweet with onions, carrots, almonds and raisins. Accompaniments consist of cabbage, cooked red or sauerkraut with apple salad. The bread served at the meal is often challah, doubtless borrowed from Poland's centuries-long Jewish fellow countrymen. Then there is an array of desserts, including dried fruit compote, followed by cake: poppy seed cakes, babka, makowiecz, and other sweets including edible Christmas ornaments. Regional variants include Zurek sour rye soup, siemienotka (in Silesia), pierogi filled with cheese and potatoes as well mushrooms and cabbage, stuffed cabbage with mushrooms and rice, golabki (cabbage rolls), kluski with poppyseed, and *makówki* (in Silesia). There is in places a belief that whatever happens on Wigilia affects the incoming year; if a quarrel should arise, it foretells a quarrelsome and troublesome year.

The Shepherd's mass

Some families as well as individual worshippers attend the traditional midnight mass/Shepherd's Mass pasterka, where Christmas Carols are also sung.

A major part of the Wigilia festivities is the opening of gifts. After everyone has finished supper the children often open their gifts and hand out the gifts for the adults from under the tree. The gift-givers in Polish tradition are "Święty Mikołaj" (Saint Nicolas), "Aniołek", an angel, "Gwiazdka", a star – Saint Nicholas' feminine counterpart – or the Gwiazdor (masculine), which is either a pagan tradition or represents the little Star of Bethlehem. Saint Nicholas traditionally used to bring gifts on December 6. This varies and in some families Saint Nicholas brings presents both on the 6th and at Christmas.