

Christmas tree's roots go back into antiquity

One legend credits Martin Luther with having set up the very first Christmas tree. According to this legend, Luther conceived of a tree alight with countless candles as a way of representing to his children the glory of the starlit heaven.

However, historical sources indicate that the first Christmas tree can be traced to the early 17th century, when fir trees, decorated with colored paper, gold foil, apples, toys and candies, were reported in the German city of Strasbourg.

Though the Christmas tree was a relatively familiar sight in 18th century Germany, certain localities continued to favor the "Pyramid," a wooden structure adorned with colored paper and lights and (in Berlin) green twigs as well.

Nineteenth century England knew the "Pyramid" as a decorative formation consisting of gilt evergreen, apples and nuts. The Christmas tree owes its popularity, in England, to Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria, who imported the custom from his homeland Germany.

Perhaps the first Christmas trees in America were erected by Germans, the Hessian mercenary soldiers who fought for the British during the American revolt.

What are the antique origins of the Christmas tree? In what ancient rituals, observances and beliefs is the favorite Christmas custom of trimming the tree in fact rooted?

Historians point to a multitude of sources, among them the Poman custom of decking residences with evergreens during the festival of the Kalends which occurred in the early part of January.

Parallels between the Roman observation of Kalends and the festivities traditional at Christmas are many, and include those of decorating the home with lights, extending lavish hospitality to friends and family, and extravagant gift-giving.

A Druidic custom which historians cite, is that of worshipping the spirit of vegetation by worshipping the sacred tree, and the spirit that resided within it. Generally, Druids would adorn oak trees with candles and golden apples, in conjunction with the Winter Solstice, as seasonal observances were of central importance to Druidic religion.

Many early Christian beliefs stand behind the tradition of trimming a tree at Christmas. For instance, it was customary for people to bring indoors during the autumn, such flowering trees as hawthorn or cherry, that they might bloom and bring forth fruit on Christmas Eve.

This tradition may derive from the belief that St. Joseph of Arimathea, settling at Glasbury in western England, planted his staff in earth, whereupon it became a thorn tree and sprouted leaves. Furthermore, every Christmas eve, it miraculously blossomed.

Another legend relates the Tree of Knowledge which grew in the Garden of Eden with the Holy Cross. According to this legend, when Adam was expelled from



Eden, he carried away with him a piece of the Tree of Knowledge. From this grew the tree from which the Cross was made.

December 24, according to the old Church calendar, was the Feast of Adam and Eve, on which day it was traditional to hang a fir tree with red apples. This Paradise Tree, as it was called, is certainly a forerunner of the Christmas tree as we know it.

There are some pretty stories associated with both pine and fir trees, among the most popular choices for Christmas trees. According to one legend, the pine tree provided a hiding place for the Holy Family when they were fleeing from the soldiers of Herod.

For this, Christ blessed the pine, whose cones, when split lengthwise, reveal the handprint of the baby Jesus.

The fir tree, according to another legend, boasted both flowers and fruits till Eve discovered the tree and plucked its treasures. From that time on, the legend continues, only needles grew on the fir tree until, on the evening of the Nativity, it suddenly blossomed once again.

A Scandinavian tale relates that, at the time the Christian faith was taking hold in Northern Europe, Faith, Hope and Charity descended from Heaven to discover a tree that fulfilled the following requirements. It was to be "as high as Hope, as great as Love and as sweet as Charity," and it was required to display the sign of the Cross on each branch.

The tree which fit the description was the fir, which they lighted with the radiance of the stars, a radiance which continues, centuries later, to shine on such timeless manifestations of the Christmas spirit as the ever-beautiful, ever-enchanting Christmas tree.

Ensure party guests go home safe, sober

One key to a successful party is in the planning. An important part of the plan in the holiday season should be to ensure guests go home safe and sober.

That doesn't mean your party should be "dry". All it entails is careful planning of food and drinks and how to serve them.

Mira Ananicz, Winemaker for Chateau-Gai Wines, points out food should be the first priority:

"It's a hectic time of year, when we often go from one activity—business, shopping, or social—to another without eating anything. So food should be offered to guests from the start."

She recommends high protein foods and, not surprisingly, light wines or low alcohol coolers. Ananicz created light wines in Canada.

She suggests a plentiful assortment of appetizers, such as stuffed eggs, crudites (raw vegetable pieces) with cheese dips; cheese spreads, shrimp, meatballs, pates and cheese trays. These should be offered to guests and at all times be within their reach.

Self-serve food and drink stations are ideal, because they can be set up a several points in the function area. Platters of appetizers that are easily accessible to guests encourage them to eat if they drink.

BYOB (bring-your-own-bottle) parties are a no-no. They deprive the host of any control over the amount of alcohol that's brought into the home and consumed.

Providing four-ounce size wine glasses

instead of larger ones means servings are smaller. Wine-based punches are enjoyed and when they're made with light wine, the alcohol content is again reduced.

Light wines are popular nowadays and they significantly reduce the amount of alcohol consumed per serving. Ananicz points out that light wines contain about 40 per cent less alcohol than comparable regular table wine.

Finally, says Ananicz, be sure to have a selection of non-alcoholic drinks on hand. Don't wait until the party's winding down to serve coffee. Have it available from the start, she advises.

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