



Oaxaca Times®

Christmas in Oaxaca

From the Breaking of the Plates, to the Feast of the Radishes, Christmas time in Oaxaca is a vivid celebration that combine Christian religious traditions with the deeply-rooted sense of community that bind together the pueblos and colonias. You won't find last-minute shopping specials, or Salvation Army Santas on the street corners, what you will enjoy is a generosity of spirit that blossoms throughout the month of December culminating at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Festivities begin with a series of calendas, or parades, featuring processions of huge dancing puppets, decorated autos, carriages, and bicycles, and a strolling brass band. The first calenda begins on December 6, followed by one on the 10th celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe. On the 12th everyone ventures to the

Guadalupe church for a festive breakfast served in front of the church.



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The richest calenda takes place on December 16th and is dedicated to La Virgen de Soledad. This calenda is the most important in the entire state of Oaxaca and indigenous groups from all over descend upon the city to parade through the Zocalo to the Basílica de Soledad. There on the steps of the church dancers perform the spectacular Danza de la Pluma. December 16 also marks the start of the nine days of posadas that take place throughout the city in the days leading up to Christmas. The posada is traditionally a neighborhood celebration, in which children selected to portray Mary and Joseph, along with shepherds, and attending families, stop at various homes in their neighborhood looking for shelter. It is a musical event, with both visitors, and recipients singing out the call and response. Ritually turned down at many homes, the children finally reach the home of the padrinos (or godparents) for the event where they will be received with song and prayer.

Following the prayers a feast of tamales and coffee is served and a piñata, filled with fruits and nuts, is attacked and broken by the children.

Not all the breaking around Christmas gets done by children. From the 16th through the 31st of December everyone participates in the "breaking of the plates." If you've ever longed to throw a wineglass into a fireplace this festivity is for you. Outside of the Cathedral Restaurant stands are set up serving hot chocolate, better than grandma ever made, and plates filled with "Bunuelos," the traditional Christmas time pastry. Drink your chocolate, eat your dessert, then smash your plate afterwards. And you don't have to clean up. The tradition is said to have its roots in pre-Colombian tradition which warranted that all of one's personal belongings should be destroyed every 52 years.

The entire city is one big festival during Christmas, with an open air market in the already bustling zocalo, with food stands, carnival rides, and artisan crafts.

THE NIGHT OF THE RADISHES

If you aren't particularly all ho, ho, ho about

Christmas then Oaxaca won't let you down during the season. Instead of decking the halls with holly, think about using radishes as your holiday motif.

Legend has it that 350 years ago two Dominican monks came up with a marketing idea designed to help indigenous farmers market their produce. They came up with a plan to have the farmers carve their beets, radishes, and carrots into fantastic shape. Thus was born the "Night of the Radishes" a unique festival celebrating food as folk art.

Celebrated on December 23, the fiesta lasts only a few hours. But what a few hours those are. Since 1897 when the festival was taken over by the Oaxaca City Municipal Government thousands of visitors have ventured to the colonial capital for the unusual celebration.

Visitors who parade through the Zocalo will see radishes sculpted into everything



from busts of Maria Sabina, the famed curandera, to exquisitely detailed figures of Gueleguetza dancers. The radishes, which are specially grown for the occasion, are not consumable, but are heavily treated with additives so that they can reach their colossal size, which sometimes reaches 40 inches. These days the radishes are in addition to the displays of radishes, artisans will compete in two other categories - dried flowers and corn husks. But without question the radishes are the big draw at the festival. These days they are cultivated in a park by the airport. The harvest takes place on December 18th, and the artisans have five days in which to complete their artworks.

There is big money at stake in the contest. The grand prize is \$10,000 pesos. But merely for participating, and you have to be selected to participate, you will receive \$400 pesos.

But don't leave the Zocalo after viewing the radishes. The fiesta, one of Oaxaca's most spectacular will continue on until midnight with a fantastic display of fireworks, and this is a city that loves fireworks, at 11 p.m. Following the fiesta, meander back home and enjoy a rich cup of chocolate before going to sleep.



ENSALADA DE NOCHE BUENA

INGREDIENTS

- 1 head lettuce
- 1 pound small beets, cooked, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 jicama, cut into matchsticks
- 4 oranges, peeled and sliced into rounds
- 4 apples, sliced into thin wedges
- 3 limes, 1 juiced and 2 cut into wedges
- ½ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup white wine vinegar (pear infused white balsamic is good here)
- 1 cup chopped dry roasted peanuts
- Line a large platter with the lettuce, either torn or separated into leaves, as desired. Arrange the beets, jicama, oranges and apples on the lettuce. Sprinkle with the lime juice.

Bring the platter to the table, dress with a mixture of the olive oil and vinegar and toss lightly. Serve on salad dishes, topping each serving with a sprinkling of peanuts. Serves 8.



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Phone: 513 0688, 503 8673

Netzahualcoyotl 300, Esq. Eucaliptos,
Col. Reforma, Oaxaca, Oax. Mexico