



## Christmas in Oaxaca

By GAYLE HANSON

THE FIRST CALENDAS BEGINS ON DECEMBER 6, FOLLOWED BY ONE ON THE 11TH CELEBRATING THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE WITH A CHILDREN'S PARADE THAT STARTS AT 8 AM FROM THE ZOCCALO. ON THE 12TH EVERYONE VENTURES TO THE GUADALUPE CHURCH FOR A FESTIVE BREAKFAST SERVED IN FRONT OF THE CHURCH AND ALL DAY FAIR.

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 proces-

sions 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 11th celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe with a children's parade that starts at 8 am from The Zocalo.

On the 12th everyone ventures to the Guadalupe church for a festive breakfast served in front of the church and all day fair.

The richest calenda takes place on December 16th and is dedicated to La Virgen de Soledad.

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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.

December 24th is Calendas Night, all churches from the city parade from 7 until midnight through the principal streets.



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# Night of the Radishes: Playing with Food in Oaxaca

Article and pictures  
By W. Scott Koenig

In the 16th Century, the Spanish brought many new food staples to recently conquered Mexico. One of these staples was the radish, originally from China. battle.

In subsequent years, Mexican farmers grew and harvested the vegetable in the valley of Oaxaca.

When taking their food to market in the city, the farmers began making statuesque carvings from the root to help differentiate their produce stands from those of the competition.

Carvings were typically of a folkloric nature, depicting muertos, folk dancers, government figures, nativity scenes, saints and other delightful dioramas.

Eventually, the carvings became more intricate and the competition between the vendors to outdo each other more intense, especially on Christmas Eve, one of their busiest nights of the year.

Housewives began collecting the objets d'art and the craft grew in popularity.

In 1897, the mayor of Oaxaca started the first exhibition of radish art, and the Noche de rábanos, or Night of the Radishes took root.

Fast forward to present day. The Night of the Radishes occurs every December 23rd and has become a MAJOR event in Oaxaca.

Thousands of people bus or drive in from all over Oaxaca state, Mexico and other countries to check out the resplendent radish creations, which only last for a few hours due to the unrefrigerated shelf life of the medium.

Dozens of artisans create and then display their masterpieces on tables that circumnavigate the city's main zocola, the Plaza de Armas, as locals



and tourists alike line up for hours to view the varying scenes.

The winner of the competition receives approximately \$1,300 US and their photo is published on the front page of Oaxaca's main newspaper.

These are not your typical, round

grocery store variety radishes. Radishes for the event can measure up to 20 inches and are grown on a single farm just outside of Oaxaca's airport.

The radishes are treated with fertilizer and other chemicals to attain their great size.

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