

# FELIZ NAVIDAD: A Mexican-American Christmas

By Jules Zipp

Staff Writer ■ reporter@pscinet

Nochebuena (Poinsettia), Rosca de Reyes (Three Kings Cake) and La Candelaria (the Candles) can be found throughout Mexico this Christmas season. Jasper resident Ashley Altum-Ortega acquired many Mexican-American holiday traditions after marrying husband, Torivio. He was born in Los Angeles, California, and both of his parents were born in Mexico. Ashley is originally from Dunnellon, Florida. Now living in Jasper, they still practice an important Mexican custom of making tamales as a family.

"I learned how to make tamales with my in-laws when we started dating almost 14 years ago," Altum-Ortega said.



The children of Torivio and Ashley Altum-Ortega, Eliana, Josefina, Amayah and Torivio Lee (Toby), pose with their live Christmas tree after cutting it down. Combining holiday traditions, the children celebrate their father's Mexican heritage by helping their parents make tamales on Christmas.

"When we moved to Indiana away from our families in 2014, we started making our own Christmas tamales."

She says the whole family takes part in the Mexican tradition, including their four children: Eliana, Josefina, Amayah, and Torivio Lee (Toby).

"We soak corn husks in warm water, and then mix the masa with pork fat from the cooked pork to the right consistency. The pork gets mixed with a red or green chile sauce that's made from dried peppers, tomatoes and/or tomatillos, and seasonings," Altum-Ortega explains. "The kids use the back of a spoon to spread the prepared masa into the softened corn husks."

"Once they are spread just right, I spoon in some of the pork filling and fold the husk over on the sides and the

bottom to create the shape. I put them in a pot, open side up, and add a little bit of water to the bottom. We cover the pot and place over a heat source. Traditionally, you use an open fire, but it's cold in Indiana so we use the stovetop. They steam cook for several hours."

As a predominately Christian country, Mexico celebrates Christmas from December 12 to January 6. From December 16 to Christmas Eve, children often perform the 'Posada' processions

or Posadas (Inn or Lodging) honoring the story of Joseph and Mary's pilgrimage to find lodging. The outside of houses are often decorated with evergreens, moss and paper lanterns. Nacimiento (nativity scenes) are also very popular in Mexico. Christmas Trees, while not traditional, are gaining popularity.

The Ortega family also celebrate the holidays by getting a freshly cut Christmas tree to decorate. And they make Abuelita, a Mexican brand of hot chocolate at Christmastime.

Other Mexican holiday traditions include Noche Buena (Christmas Eve). People often take part in the final Posada and then in the evening have the main Christmas meal. Other popular dishes for the main Christmas meal include Pozole (a thick soup made with hominy, chicken or pork and chilies), roast turkey, roast pork, bacalao (salt cod), romeritos (a green vegetable that's cooked in a mole sauce with potatoes and shrimp) and there are normally salads served as side dishes such as Ensalada Nochebuena. Bunuelos, fried pastries, are very popular for dessert. Popular Christmas beverages include Ponche (a warm Christmas punch made with fruit) and Rompope (like egg nog).

In some states in Mexico children expect Santo Clós (Santa Claus) or El Niñito Dios (Baby Jesus) to come on December 24. That evening, many Mexicans go to a Misa de Gallo (Midnight Mass service). In the south of Mexico, children receive presents on January 6 at Epiphany, which is known as *el Día de los Reyes*. Often lots of fireworks ignite to celebrate Christmas Day. Indigenous people in Mexico wish each other a Merry Christmas with "Cualli netlācatilizpan" by the Nahuatl (central Mexico) and "Ki'imak navidad" in the Yucatec Maya language (Yucatán Peninsula).



## Home for the holidays

Christmas carols and festive songs help make the holidays complete by setting the mood for the festivities to come. Songs resonate differently with people during the holiday season. For example, some celebrants find certain holiday tunes or lyrics especially

poignant. Those who might be missing home or planning on visiting friends and relatives who live far away during the holiday season often find the words to "(There's No Place Like) Home for the Holidays," are an accurate portrayal of the sentiments of holiday

traveling. Composed by Robert Allen, with lyrics by Al Stillman, "(There's No Place Like) Home for the Holidays" was published in 1954. The best-known recordings of the song are by Perry Como, who recorded it twice — once in 1954 and then again in 1959 with a different musical arrangement. The first version reached #8 on the Billboard magazine chart in the United States. The Carpenters recorded another popular version of the song for their 1984 album, "An Old-Fashioned Christmas." Nora Jones and Cyndi Lauper also recorded a duet version of the song in 2011.

Happy Holidays

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