

Oui, oui, let's party! How the French do Christmas

BY CASEY UEBELHOR

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The French adhere (pretty profoundly) to the motto 'quality over quantity.' During the Christmas season, however, it may be said that this prevalent ideal undergoes a slight



alteration and becomes 'quality and quantity.' Two wonderful representations of the latter are found in the traditional French *réveillon* and Christmas *crèche*.

French Christians, like most in Europe and many in America, attend midnight Christmas Eve masses. But unlike their American counterparts, the French return home from midnight mass and celebrate right away. That celebration is called the *réveillon*, which literally means 'awakening.'

Basically, we're talking a 15 course meal (truly) — roasted fowl and chestnut dressing, oysters, caviar, escargot, foie gras, the best cheeses, wine and of course champagne! The French serve 13 traditional desserts at *réveillon*, including the *bûche de Noël*, sometimes referred to as the 'chocolate log.' The long, rich chocolate cake is decorated to look like

a yule log, and making one is a common assignment of Jasper High School French teacher, Devin Rottet.

Just like in France, "some look realistic," tells Rottet of his students' yule log cakes, "and others look really cartoony, depending on what the kids design." Rottet describes toasted marshmallows shaped to look like mushrooms and cakes with gummy worms squiggling around candy branches.

"I haven't met a kid that hasn't enjoyed it yet," Rottet laughs, "and they're all really good."

While French adults over-indulge, children open gifts. The *réveillon* lasts well into wee morning hours, but the French rise early anyway. Christmas Day is spent relaxing with family — children play with their gifts, "while mom and dad

try to recover," jokes Rottet.

Unlike Americans, who love their Christmas trees, the most important Christmas decoration in France is the *crèche*, which literally means 'crib' and refers to the nativity scene. In fact, the majority of French households don't even have a Christmas tree. The *crèche*, however, will be given prominence in the household, usually on a mantel, according to Rottet, or sometimes on its own special table.

The French *crèche* is much more elaborate than an American nativity scene. "It even includes thieves and pick pockets and gypsies," Rottet

explains. "Some of them even have Satan coming up out of hell. It's supposed to be like a cross section for the whole village and everybody's welcome." To that end, French *crèches* contain figures from every profession. Most are traditional — butchers, bakers, candlestick makers. The figures in a French *crèche* are known as *santons*, "little saints," and entire markets are dedicated to them during the holidays.

"They're all usually carrying something to give to Jesus," Rottet says of the *santons*. (Rottet explains an odd, old-fashioned aspect of the *crèche*: representations of the blind man and the "dim-witted villager" traditionally do not carry a gift for the Holy Baby.)

Crèches also include animals, flora and set pieces of walls, ceiling and doorway. French children make trips into the woods to collect moss, twigs, leaves and other natural materials for *crèche* decoration.

The Christmas season begins in France on December 4, with the Feast of St. Barbara. At that time, some families will place a small shaft of wheat in their windows and grow the plant throughout December. During the holiday month, the Baby Jesus will be absent from the *crèche*. But after Christmas Eve mass, the window wheat is harvested,

placed in the manger, and the Baby Jesus is situated on top — another common *crèche* tradition.

French children send letters to Santa, and there is even a law in France that any letter addressed to Santa must be answered. In the French tradition, Père Noel (Father Christmas) is accompanied by Père Fouettard, "whipping father." He is the brown-cloak-wearing, black-bearded counterpart to Père Noel and is ready to punish those who have been too naughty!

Of course, Paris is known as the City of Lights — and the city certainly shows off the nickname at Christmas time. (Yes, even the Eiffel Tower is especially aglow.) Dubois County native, Devin Rottet, who is celebrating his 20th year as a teacher and 15th year teaching at Jasper High School, has one Parisian Christmas ritual he looks forward to participating in. The legendary first department store, *Printemps* (meaning springtime), famously goes all-out decorating their incredible showcase windows for Christmas.

"It's an event just to go see their windows," tells Rottet. "Really elaborate nativity scenes, train scenes — people line up. So yeah, I'd like to take my wife one day. That's on my bucket list."



Our staff writer, Jules Zipp, strolled through the Christmas markets of Strasbourg, France. Zipp spent a semester abroad during her junior year of college. Photo from December 2006.



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