

Imagine a snowy evening, the air thick with the scent of fresh kutia (traditional Ukrainian Christmas porridge), honey, and pine needles, as the sound of carols drifts from the windows. Christmas is a special time when homes fill with warmth, hearts fill with hope, and people find a deep sense of unity and peace.

The celebration is preceded by the Nativity Fast – a forty-day period of spiritual reflection and purification. During this time, Ukrainians offer thanks for the year gone by, honor their ancestors, and pray for peace and prosperity. In the final days before the holiday, a unique atmosphere takes hold: families tidy their homes, prepare festive meals, and create a cozy atmosphere where the approach of a miracle feels almost tangible.

As the first star appears in the sky on 24 December – the symbol of the Star of Bethlehem that heralded the birth of Christ – Christmas Eve (called Sviaty Vechir in Ukrainian) begins, marking the very heart of Christmas celebrations. The family gathers around a table adorned with a didukh – traditional sheaves of grain symbolizing peace in the home and the bright renewal of life. The Christmas Eve dinner traditionally features twelve meatless dishes in honor of the twelve apostles: fragrant kutia (made from wheat, honey, poppy seeds, and nuts), uzvar (a dried fruit compote), varenyky (dumplings) with potato or cabbage, meatless holubtsi (cabbage rolls), marinated mushrooms, savory fish, and borshch served with vushka (small dumplings made to look

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## THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS




like ears) and fluffy pampushky (doughnuts). By custom, an extra plate is left on the table for an unexpected traveler or the soul of a departed relative – a gesture of hospitality and remembrance of the eternal.

*As night falls over the land, the air fills with the sound of carols that are the very soul of the Ukrainian Christmas. Groups of carolers, both children and adults, go from house to house singing "Good Evening to You, Master of the House" (Dobryi Vechir Tobi, Pane Hospodariu), "A New Joy Has Come" (Nova Radist Stala), and other traditional songs, offering heartfelt wishes for a bountiful harvest, peace, and prosperity. Dressed in the vibrant costumes of the Goat, the Bear, and Malanka, they perform Nativity plays filled with laughter and merriment.*

Christmas serves as a reminder of eternal values: boundless love, forgiveness, and an unbreakable unity that can prevail over the most difficult times. May the spirit of Christmas fill your homes with cozy warmth and your hearts with peace and hope. We wish all Ukrainians a bountiful year, robust health, and victory over every challenge. Merry Christmas!

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