

# Mass at 9pm



## Let's make a meal of it

CHRISTMAS Eve dinner is the most important festive meal in France. Here are some of the traditions:

■ Known as the *Réveillon de Noël*, from *réveiller*, to wake up, it is a serious drawn-out affair - the phrase *on ne va pas passer le réveillon là-dessus*, means "we are not going to spend the whole of Christmas Eve dinner over it," (ie. "let's not make a meal of it").

■ Often a place at table is kept empty, called *La Place du Pauvre* (the poor person's seat), said to be left in case a poor traveller should need it or, in other versions, in honour of the souls of deceased family members. Another tradition is for one of the children, on coming back from mass, to place the baby Jesus in the family crib to mark his birth.

■ *Bûche de Noël* (Yule log): Originally a big, specially-chosen, log would be left burning in the fire throughout the night of Christmas Eve as families sat up celebrating, or, if possible, throughout the whole 12 days of Christmas. These days it has been replaced with a cake or ice-cream log.



Ingredients include vanilla, hazelnut, Grand Marnier, coffee, chocolate and strawberry. Decorations can be a little *Père Noël*, an axe or saw or sugar. Plastic toadstools and pixies are de rigeur.

■ In Provence clay crib figures are *santons* (little saints) and include onlookers from the traditional shepherds to a hunter, a drunkard or *le fada* - the village idiot.

■ This is also the time to put out the stockings or shoes by the chimney or around the tree, for *Le Père Noël* to fill with presents.

■ The 13 desserts might include candied *cédrat* (a gnarly ancestor of the lemon, mainly grown in Corsica), quince jelly, nougat, *calissons d'Aix* (a sweet made from candied melon crushed with ground almond, topped with icing) and *pompe à huile* - a bread made with olive oil, egg, orange blossom water and *cassonade* (unrefined sugar), which should be broken, as Jesus broke the bread. Cutting it is said to bring a year of bad luck. There are four nuts and fruits, *les quatre mendiants* (four beggars), representing the colours of the robes of four orders of monks - raisins for the Dominicans, dried figs for the Franciscans, nuts for the Augustines, and almonds for the Carmelites. The desserts are often eaten after coming back from the mass and are washed down with *vin cuit* (mulled wine).

■ Many other regions have their own specialities, such as Alsace, with its *butterbredle* (buttery biscuits), *Nusshiffele* (walnut biscuits), *Himmelgestirn* (almond biscuits) and *spritzbredle* (sweet biscuits shaped by piping out the paste). On Christmas day there they eat *Christstolle*, a cake made with almonds, sultanas and lemon zest.

# Fuel your Christmas cheers with Noël beer

GIVEN the vast selection of wine in France's supermarkets, it would seem madness for anyone to contemplate French ale with Christmas dinner. But fine ales have been brewed in France for generations.

Prior to refrigeration, which reduces undesirable yeast activity, brewing could only take place during the cooler winter and spring. The beer was kept for consumption in summer and autumn.

These *bières de garde*, or keeping beers, originated in Nord Pas-de-Calais where they were brewed on farms for farmers and their farmhands.

Today, these flavoursome ales' increasing popularity has resulted in a French microbrewing revolution.

Most microbreweries and independent craft brewers now brew Christmas ale, a tradition that began in northern Europe, including France, in the 11th Century.

After the last harvesting of the barley in October, master brewers would brew secret-

France's brewing traditions are often eclipsed by the wine industry. December is the time to buy the *grands crus* of the beer world says former professional brewer *Simon Watkinson*

recipe beers enriched with spices like cinnamon, coriander, ginger and cloves, for villagers, workers and favoured customers. These ales were then cellared to reach maturity by Christmas.

Supermarket shelves are now bedecked with a host of brightly-labelled *bières de Noël*, only available from mid-November to late December.

With prices varying between €2 and €4.50 for a 75 cl bottle, *bières de garde* may seem expensive but these niche products are the *grand crus* of the beer world. They are brewed with top-fermenting brewer's yeasts, which speed the fermentation process and also give the beer a fruity, full-

bodied taste.

Some *bières de Noël* are sold in champagne bottles sealed with wired corks and these have undergone a secondary fermentation, which develops rich maltoof flavours from the roasted barley. Try the following beers this Christmas:

**Brasserie Artisanale Savoyarde's Bière de Noël** is a lively 6.5% winey, brownish ale, brewed with English barley malted in Warminster, Wiltshire, and a mix of English and German hops. This Christmas ale from a micro brewery in Chambéry has a sublime gingerbread nose, with notes of blackcurrant on the back palate.

While the generous hop-bite and liquorice flavours leave a warm glow, its rich maltiness will complement Christmas pudding perfectly and the sweet

burnt sugar flavours will sit happily with a fresh cream or brandy butter accompaniment. Serve between 6 and 8°C. It is available in Chambéry, Annecy, and by mail order from [www.b-a-s.fr](http://www.b-a-s.fr)

**Amadeus**, a 4.5% alcohol straw-coloured ale from the independent family-run Brasseurs de Gayant in Douai, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, is brewed with 50% malted barley and 50% malted wheat. Though not marketed as a *bière de Noël*, this unfiltered wheat beer's clean, crisp palate makes it an ideal apéritif. The complex nose of coriander, liquorice, vanilla and orange peel balances its long, slightly acidic finish. The subtle hoppiness and dryness will arouse the appetite for a memorable meal. Serve chilled.

**Météor Bière de Noël** is a 5.8% ale from the independent family-run Météor Brewery in the hop-growing area of Hochfelden in Alsace, the region which produces half of France's beer.

With plenty of malt fruitiness and hop bite, the beer's toffee characteristic will cut through the turkey's dryness and enhance its subtle sweetness. The hoppiness also creates a richness that lifts the turkey, and its malty blend complements flavoursome gravy. Best served between 6 and 12°C.

**Jenlain Noël** is the 6.8% Christmas ale from Brasserie Duyck in the French Flanders village of Jenlain. Brewed with aromatic Alsace hops, this ruby red ale has a slightly sweet citrus palate, dried fig nose and a cream-coloured head. The sweetness and dried fruit flavours will complement cheese and balance the blandness of biscuit. Best served between 6 and 8°C.

However, the French general public remain to be convinced. When I asked shoppers whether they would substitute *bières de Noël* for wine at Christmas dinner, some declared such an act was *un sacrilège* whilst others had never heard of *bière de Noël*.



## Serving suggestions

### STARTER

Foie gras on toast/smoked salmon blinis and Amadeus  
**MAIN COURSE**  
 Roast turkey and Météor de Noël

### DESSERT

Christmas pudding, mince pies, brandy butter and BAS Bière de Noël  
**CHEESEBOARD**  
 Cheese and biscuits and Jenlain Noël

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