



DANISH SISTERHOOD of AMERICA

Connect with Your Danish Heritage

Danish Culture and Traditions

Many of Denmark's cultural traditions are born from the rich legacy of Nordic paganism which later blended with Christian ideologies. Today one sees many public holidays, traditions, and festivals based on the Christian calendar. Linking these celebrations together, no matter the origin of the celebration, is the focus on spending time with family and friends. Typically Scandinavian, there is less importance placed on the pomp and circumstance of an event in Denmark, and more on creating a special kind of atmosphere, uniquely known as Hygge. Hygge is the foundation upon which Danish traditions are built.

THE ART OF HYGGE

There is not a single language that contains an accurate translation of the Danish word Hygge. The concept is sometimes roughly translated into the English language; to some extent it means gathering with two or more people in a cozy atmospheric setting often embodied by elements of warmth, intimacy, joy, liveliness, and peacefulness, utter contentment, good food, and perhaps even candle lights or lanterns. Hygge is not simply one of these things, but it is the summation of these things and more. The meaning can change subtly depending on the context of how it is used. Hygge is transcendental and it can be used to describe an event, a person, a place, or even an object. Danish traditions usually have a hyggelig element at their core. We hope as you celebrate your Danish heritage and traditions, you will discover the art of hygge in your home!



FASTELAVN

Fastelavn is the name for Carnival in Denmark and originated with the Catholic celebrations just before Lent. Since the Protestant reform occurred in Denmark, the holiday is not as closely tied to religious connotations. The festivities begin in February, seven weeks before Easter Sunday. Traditionally, children will dress up in costumes akin to the American Halloween custom, and gather treats; it's a very special time for family fun and games, and some towns are noted for their Fastelavn festivities and parades.

The most notorious game is that of "slå katten af tønden" (hit the cat out of the barrel). Children take turns hitting a candy-filled barrel decorated with the image of a black cat, with a wooden club. The child who hits the barrel hard enough to make the candy spill out, is crowned "kattkong" (king) or "Kattedronning" (Queen) of cats. Many centuries ago, during medieval times, a live cat would be used, and the barrel would be beaten until the cat escaped, and it was then chased out of town. At the time, villagers believed the cat would take bad luck and evil spirits with it as it was driven away.

Though there are regional differences, another popular tradition amongst Danish children is to (gently) flog their parents until they wake up on the morning of Fastelavn. The children decorate bunches of twigs or branches and then decorate them with candy, figurines, feathers, egg shells and the like. This tradition is said to have roots in old fertility



rituals which were later absorbed into the Christian tradition, but it has also been said to symbolize the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. In either case, today the reward for a good flogging is a Fastelavnbolle.

Due to Fastelavn's association with Easter, it once signaled a period of fasting in preparation for Lent, hence the focus on sweets and food during this celebration. The food which is most associated with Fastelavn is the Fastelavn-bolle, a cream-filled sweet roll typically covered with icing. Danish children will sing songs, the most popular of which is "Fastelavn Er Mit Navn" an ode to the Fastelavnbolle and a warning akin to the trick or treat warning of American children on Halloween.

"Fastelavn Er Mit Navn" Lyrics

Fastelavn er mit navn
Boller vil jeg have
Hvis jeg ingen boller får
Så laver jeg ballade.

Boller op boller ned
Boller I min mave
Hvis jeg ingen boller får
Så laver jeg ballade.

DANMARKS BEFRIELSE

Known as Denmark's Liberation Day, May 5th commemorates the liberation of Denmark after five years of German occupation during World War II. When Danes heard the announcement of their freedom on the evening of May 4, 1945, many Danes placed lit candles in their windows. It was a moving sight for many Danes as windows of entire towns lit up in quiet celebration. The tradition of placing a lit candle in one's window is a custom that continues today on May 4th.



SANKT HANS AFTEN

This holiday is easily one of the most popular Danish traditions besides Jul. Falling on June 23rd, and celebrated on the Friday or Saturday evening falling between June 20th and June 25th, Sankt Hans Aften closely intertwines Nordic pagan customs with Christian elements. Simply put, it is the celebration of midsummer or summer solstice, a time of great bounty and fertility. Many Scandinavian countries celebrate midsummer, but in Denmark, it is known as Sankt Hans Aften (St. John's Eve) and the traditions surrounding the celebration are unique to Danish people. The feast of Saint John the Baptist fell on June 23rd, so when Christianity was introduced to Denmark, the two celebrations were intertwined to make Christian conversion more palatable. Sankt Hans is a very hyggelig event, where Danish people gather before sunset on the coastline or lakeside and stay up into the wee hours of morning beside bonfires.

Today, the celebration begins in the late afternoon. People arrive at the coastline or by the lakeside to set up a picnic site and prepare the bonfire. Of course, Danes will bring their best picnic fare. This includes smørrebrød (Danish open-faced sandwiches) either made in advance or people opt to bring the sandwich ingredients and make them on the spot. Chilled seafood such as shrimp that you can peel is also very popular. Other traditional picnic food could include real Danish sausages to cook over the fire. Fresh vegetable salads and a Danish potato salad are obligatory and fresh fruit and berries are a must. An essential element to the affair is called snøbrød. Snøbrød is a dough batter prepared from home earlier in the day or the night before. Children (and adults) twist the dough around a long branch and cook the dough over the fire for a tasty warm treat. Beer and elderflower drinks (cocktails or non-alcoholic spritzers) are essential as well as aqvavit (Danish Schnapps) for toasting.



Before sunset, the bonfire is prepared. An effigy of a witch is assembled and placed in the middle of the bonfire. The witch does not

have the same connotations as it does in the United States pertaining to witch burnings such as the Salem witch trial, but rather it symbolizes the threat of bad luck and evil. During the 19th century when tension with Germany started to rise, the Danes would say they were sending the witch back to Bloksberg, located in Germany. As the sun sets, Danes gather around to light the bonfire, sending the witch to Bloksberg. Historically, regional folk songs were sung around the bonfire, but again, as tensions with Germany rose, the songs turned more patriotic in nature. Today, Danes sing "Vi Elsker Vort Land" (We Love Our Country). Penned in 1885, it remains the most patriotic of Danish songs and it is sung nationwide on this holiday.

"Vi Elsker Skort Land" Lyrics

Vi elsker vort land,
hår den signede jul
tænder stjerned I træet med glans i hvert øje,
når om våren hver fugl
over mark under strand
lader stemmen til hilsende triller sig bøje:

vi synger din lov over vej, over gade,
vi kranser dit navn, når vor høst er i lade,
men den skønneste krans
bli'r dog din, sankte Hans,
den er bunden af sommerens hjerter så varme, så glade,
men den skønneste krans
bli'r dog din, sankte Hans,
den er bunden af sommerens hjerter så varme, så glade.

Vi elsker vort land,
men ved midsummer mest,
når hver sky over marken velsignelsen sender,
når af blomster er flest,
og når kvæget i spand
giver rigeligst gave til glittige hænder;
når ikke vi pløjer og harver og tromler,
når koen sin middag i kløveren gumler:
da går ungdom til dans
på dit bud sankte Hans!
ret som føllet og lammet, der frit over engen sig tumler,
da går ungdom til dans
på dit bud sankte Hans!
ret som føllet og lammet, der frit over engen sig tumler.

Vi elsker vort land,
og med sværdet i hand
skal hver udenvælts fjende beredte os kende,
men mod ufredens ånd
over mark, under strand
vil vi bålet på fædrene's gravhøje tænde:
hver by har sin heks, og hvert sogn sine trolde,
dem vil vi fra livet med glædesblus holde,
vi vil fred her til lands,
sankte Hans, sankte Hans!
den kan vindes, hvor hjerterne aldrig bli'r tvivlende kolde,
vi vil fred her til lands,
sankte Hans, sankte Hans!
den kan vindes, hvor hjerterne aldrig bli'r tvivlende kolde.

Vi elsker vort land,
og vi hilser den drot,
som har prøvet og valgt sig den rette fyrstinde:
på hans eventyr-slot
kan hver kvinde, hver mand
et eksempel for livet i kærlighed finde!
Lad tiderne ældes, lad garverne blegne,
et minde vi vil dog i hjertet os tegne:
fra sagnrige nord
gaar en glans over jord –
Det er genskær af vidunderlandets fortryllende enge,
fra sagnrige nord
gaar en glans over jord –
Det er genskær af vidunderlandets fortryllende enge!

JUL

Advent

Denmark's most popular holiday is Jul (Christmas) and it is a hygge time of year. For Danes, Jul activities generally begin four Sundays before Juleaften (Christmas Eve) with the Advent wreath. Heavily decorated with fresh evergreen sprigs, berries, and cones, the advent wreath and has four tapered candles. In Christian terms, the candles symbolize the light of Christ. Prior to Christianity, it was common for Danes to keep their candle lights burning in the darkest months of the year. On the first Sunday one candle is lit, with one additional candle lit each subsequent Sunday leading up to Jul. In

many Danish homes, the Advent wreath is hung from the ceiling by red ribbon, but it is now also common for them to be placed on the dining table. As an alternative to the Advent wreath, the four Advent candles and greenery might be attractively arranged and placed on a fireplace mantle or window sill. Calendar candles and present calendars can also be found in many Danish homes. From the beginning of Advent up until Christmas day, Danes spend time with family and friends making their homes hyggelig, decorating, baking, and preparing for Jul.



Luciadag

December 13th marks Luciadag (Santa Lucia Day). Originally a Christian custom in Sweden, Luciadag has been a widely celebrated tradition in Denmark since the 1940s. The Santa Lucia tradition in Denmark usually takes place in church and has close ties to Christianity with Danes attending church on the Sunday closest to December 13th. It's a special day for girls who are chosen to take part in the Santa Lucia procession. One girl is elected to portray the Lucia Bride who leads a procession of girls in white gowns each carrying a single candle. The Lucia Bride wears a white gown with a red sash and is adorned by a crown of candles. This event is accompanied by the Danish version of the Neapolitan song, Sankta Lucia.

Juletræ

In Denmark, the Juletræ (Christmas tree) is typically a freshly cut live tree, retrieved only a few days or so before Jul. It is not uncommon to see a Dane bringing their tree home by bicycle! Faux plastic trees are a rare site in Denmark and generally considered in poor taste. In the weeks leading up to the holiday, the Danish family will make Julehjerter (woven Danish hearts), Danish folded paper stars, and paper cones filled with candy, fruits, and cookies, for tree trimming. The Danes are very patriotic, and will also decorate the Juletræ with garlands of the Dannebrog (Danish Flag), a tradition which gained popularity after the war with Germany in the 1860s. After topping with a silver or gold star, the traditional Danish Juletræ will be trimmed with real candles.



Juleaften

Juleaften (Christmas Eve) is when the main festivities of Jul take place. On December 24th, the Christmas meal will be served and it the time when the family comes together. This is the day that the traditional Danish Christmas meal is served and it consists of roasted pork loin with cracklings, or alternatively roast duck or goose, boiled or caramelized potatoes with gravy, red cabbage, and ris à la mande. Ris à la mande is a custard dessert with a hidden almond. Whoever finds the hidden almond in their serving wins a prize.

After Christmas dinner, the presents are put under the tree and the candles on the tree are lit. Danish families will dance around the Christmas tree joined together and sing Christmas carols. After the singing and dancing has occurred, and the anticipation and excitement has built for the children, the family will open presents. Juleaften festivities close with coffee and an assortment of Christmas candies and baked goods. Before going to bed, Danish children will leave a bowl of rice porridge called risengrød out for Nisse. According to Danish folklore, Nissen are tiny mythical anthropomorphic creatures. They were thought to have cared for and protected a farmer's home and family from misfortunes during the night so it was important to keep them fed and happy. If one neglected to feed the Nisse, he might play unpleasant tricks on you. Today, Nissen are still an important part of Jul and you see them practically everywhere during Jul in Denmark as decorative features on Christmas items for good luck.

OTHER DANISH HOLIDAYS

Other Danish holidays include: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, April Fools Day, Great Prayer Day, Mother's Day, Labor Day/May Day, Ascension Day, Whit Sunday, Constitution Day, Valdemar's Day, All Saint's Day, and Martinmas Eve.