

New Year's Eve Traditions and Celebrations

My Swiss ancestors who immigrated to Minnesota in 1866 loved to celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve abiding by their heritage of the homeland. My 2nd great grandfather, called Papa by everyone, was a talented musician, so it was only natural for him to put on a German play. He built the first concert hall and played, acted and sang to his hearts content. The residents of their Minnesotan town were eager to partake in one of many balls of the season. Women fashioning themselves in yards and yards of hand-sewn gowns, and men who were proud to have their beautiful wives or girlfriends on their arms. A festive occasion indeed. Another tradition of the Swiss is to drop a dollop of cream on the floor, which is believed to bring luck, wealth, and peace in the coming year. So, the next time someone catches you dropping whipped cream on the floor, you can claim it was all part of a clever strategy!

At some point in our lives, we've all likely participated in at least one tradition. Whether it be singing Auld Lang Syne, giving a kiss, or making a sincere (seemingly) resolution, most people partake in their own cultural version of welcoming in the new year.

Have you ever wondered why or how these traditions exist? Did you know that the practice of making resolutions for the new year is said to have begun with the Babylonians as early as 2600 B.C. as a way to reflect on the past and plan ahead? That's right, whether you realized it or not, you were tapping into an ancient longing for a fresh beginning. There are many celebratory traditions during the final moments of the year. How did they originate? And why?

Contrary to popular belief kissing at midnight carries no real truth or meaning as a way to ward off a year of loneliness and misery. The practice has been traced back thousands of years to the Roman Festival of Saturnalia which included a lot of kissing and debauchery because, well, those Romans apparently knew how to party. Interestingly, Saturnalia is also at the root of the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe. Ancient Greeks would kiss underneath the parasitic plant, considered to be associated with fertility, and Romans would reconcile differences with enemies under mistletoe because it was thought to symbolize peace.

During the Renaissance masquerade balls were all the rage across Europe, and kisses were purported to be a way of purifying each other from evil. Thus, it came to be considered a way of starting the new year with a clean slate. English and German folklore then built upon this idea, and the superstition "that a midnight kiss strengthens a budding romance and that avoiding it could mean a loveless year ahead," spread like wildfire. If, however, you are worried about being kissless as the new year begins, you may want to take a trip to Scotland for Hogmanay, the Scottish new year celebration. There, it is to kiss everyone in the room as a way of connecting friends and strangers.

Auld Lang Syne was written in the 18th century by poet, Robert Burns, and it translates to 'old long ago.' It has endured the ages, spreading from Scotland throughout the English-speaking

world. According to Scotland.org, it is about the love and kindness of days gone by, but also gives us a sense of belonging and fellowship to take into the future.

The first New Year's Eve, held in Times Square, NYC occurred in 1904. Fireworks were used, until, two years later, fireworks were banned. According to TimesSquareNYC.org, even organizers decided to have a 700-pound iron and wood ball lowered down a pole. Since then, it's become a tradition for Americans to watch the ball begin its decent at 11:59, and then count down the final ten seconds to midnight as the ball reaches the bottom.

Popping the cork of a bottle of champagne at midnight and offering a toast is considered the universal signal of the arrival of a new year. There are also other celebratory beverages that continue to be practiced today. Wassail, a hot punch-like drink named after the Gaelic term for "Good Health", is still served in some parts of England and the USA. Scotland has its own version on Wassail—a spiced "hot pint," which the Scots drink to each other's prosperity. This was also offered to neighbors along with a small gift. And, in Holland, toasts are made with a hot, spiced wine.

Welcoming the new year with a lot of noise—whether fireworks, gun shots, church bells, loud singing, cheering, or toy noisemakers – is a favorite activity all round the world. In China, firecrackers blasted away the forces of darkness and in ancient Thailand, guns were fired to frighten off the demons. In the early American colonies, pistol shots rang through the air. Today, these have, for the most part, been replaced with sirens, fireworks, party horns, and other less dangerous noise makers.

Most traditions of welcoming in the New Year involve food. In the US, many eat some form of black-eyed peas, originally domesticated in West Africa, and missed with pork and rice which is thought to have originated in the low country of South Carolina in the 1800's. It's commonly believed to bring luck and peace in the coming year. But according to History.com, the true origin is anything but peaceful and is a byproduct of the slave trade, most likely by traders who saw the domesticated black-eyed pea crops in Africa as an economical way to feed their human cargo and then brought the crop to America.

On a more joyful note, some US citizens today celebrate by including dark leafy greens in their NYE meal. In addition to being the most nutritious of food choices, the meaning behind it is that leafy greens symbolize prosperity as it said to represent paper currency.

In Spain, there is a tradition of eating twelve grapes at midnight—one for each chime of the clock. In Dutch homes, fritters called 'olie bollen' are served because it's believed that eating any ring-shaped treat symbolizes "coming full circle" which leads to good fortune. The Irish celebrate with pastries called Bannocks—a tasty traditional loaf similar to a scone. In India and Pakistan rice is thought to promise prosperity. In the Jewish faith, it's tradition to eat apples dipped in honey as part of the Rosh Hashanah celebration.

No matter how you choose to celebrate the New Year, you could always decide to start your own tradition, too. The above traditions worldwide are unique and fun ways to celebrate, from toasts to noises to delectable dishes. I wish everyone a prosperous and healthy 2023.