

Paskong Pinoy

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Philippine Christmas Art & Form

Just what is the Philippine Christmas or, as we fondly call it, “*Paskong Pinoy*”? What sets it apart from other yuletide celebrations the world over?

Pasko, a corruption of the Spanish *pasqua*, is the most-awaited and the best loved *fiesta* amongst a thousand others in the 7,107 islands of the Philippine archipelago. And as it spans five months, it also boasts of being the longest Christmas season in the world!

But what makes Pasko so “*Pinoy*”? Well, think about it.

Who wakes up at the crack of dawn, braving the morning chill, to hurry to church for the Misa de Gallo (Mass at Cock’s Crow) for nine consecutive mornings before Christmas Day? Who hangs candle-lit parols, star lanterns fashioned from bamboo and Japanese paper, at open windows? Who savors the aroma of native *bibingka* (rice cakes) baking above and beneath glowing coals, to be served with steaming *salabat* (ginger tea) right after the dawn Mass? Who bakes the meters-long native cake, *sinabalu* in *bancas* (canoes) outdoors?



For the celebration of the Misa de Gallo (Mass at Cock’s Crow), a dark December dawn serves as backdrop to cathedrals and churches outlined in strings of lights. In the churchyards, lanterns in the trees illuminate stalls baking *bibingka* (rice cakes) over native coal-stoves. Churchgoers with sleep still lingering in their eyes look forward to savoring the tasty morsels with steaming *salabat* (ginger tea).

Who joins processions like the *Panunuluyan*, re-enacting the plight of Mary and Joseph searching for a room at the inn? Who kisses the back of elders’ hands, greeting them with the lovely salutation, “*Mano po, Ninong*” and “*Mano po, Ninang*”? Who places in the heart of the home of the *belen* (crèche) with the Holy Family surrounded by adoring shepherds, kings, and animals?

Who prepares holiday tables laden with favorite dishes and sweets for an endless stream of visiting relatives and friends? Who stuffs gift baskets to overflowing with goodies such as fruitcakes, cheeses, cookies, bottled salted fish, pasta noodles and sauces, gourmet vinegars, olive oils, wines, and champagnes? Who draws up the gift list with such enthusiasm and good cheer that it included the postman, the security guard, the manicurist, the newspaper boy, the fruit vendor, the fishmonger, the teacher, the parish priest, and even the bill collector?



When food turns into gustatory decor, the ubiquitous crispy lechon (roasted pig) is the ultimate in Filipino fiesta fare, savored with gusto especially during Pasko and the New Year.

These unique traditions are, in themselves, forms of “art” that shape the way we mark our Christmas season – Pinoy style.

The story of Christmas in the Philippines began centuries ago, when Spanish *conquistadors* landed on our shores

in 1521. soon enough, the friars who came with them, full of missionary zeal, christianized the natives. But it was only in 1525, during the rule of *conquistador* Miguel Lopez de Legaspi that the Feast of the Nativity was officially celebrated. A historical account narrates that, sometime in the early 14th century, the Franciscan

priest Odoric from Italy celebrated the first Christmas Mass along the shores of Lingayen, Pangasinan. The feast of Christmas was easily assimilated by the newly-converted natives, as the yuletide season coincided with their annual harvest time when thanksgiving was offered to their gods and ancestors. The result was a melding of Catholic beliefs with indigenous rituals.

Today, as *Paskong Pinoy* tradition has it, Christmas is in the air the minute the first “ber” month (September) arrives. Displays of Christmas Cards, tree ornaments, and lights suddenly spring up in retail outlets in record bars, shopping malls, restaurants, and even jeepneys careening along the streets. Christmas bazaars offering every kind of merchandise imaginable become standard weekend destinations. This goes on, with increasing fervor and insistence, through October and November.

Finally, December arrives! Old community rituals come alive, such as the singing of *vilancicos* (hymns), the visits of carolers going from house to house, and street plays depicting scenes from the Nativity story. In both rural and urban areas, Christmas *parols* (lanterns) adorn windows of houses, shop displays, and lampposts along major thoroughfares; and appear in an explosion of blinking, pulsating, and revolving colors in street side stalls.



A provincial Pasko, like this one in Cagayan de Oro's Eco-Town Village, operated by the Department of Tourism, has carolers serenading the townsfolk from nipa hut entrances decorated by miniature star lanterns. Throughout the country, troupes of carolers on foot like these lend a folksy, festive air to small towns and barrios during the Christmas season.

Only then does the Church-prescribed Christmas liturgical season begin. It lasts 22 days, beginning on December 16 with the first dawn Mass – also called *Simbang Gabi* – and ending of the “Feast of the Three Kings” in January.

Within this month-long period, the Filipino penchant for fiesta comes to the fore. Rural barrios come alive with processions and parades, perfect excuses for decking the whole town in lights and Christmas trimming, and dressing up in one's finery. One favorite procession, called the *Panunuluyan*, reenacts the search of Mary and Joseph for lodging in Bethlehem. This, like most Philippine folk traditions, thinks nothing of combining the religious with the patriotic, and exercising poetic license with Biblical stories and characters for the mere spectacle and enjoyment of it.

Music and dance, too, are art forms that play key roles in this Christmas revelry. Children's choirs mimic angels angelic hosts; rondalla ensembles provide a decidedly Pinoy sound; while brass bands, marching bands, and drum-and-lyre bands set towns all over the country a-marching to jazzed-up yuletide tunes. In addition, the Philippines has a variety of Christmas dances such as the Pandanggo, Rinconada, Las Panderetas, Sakuting, and Tulu Kahadi which dance troupes perform to express the gaiety of the season. Then, of course, there is the annual performance of the well-loved, albeit “imported” Nutcracker ballet.



For Filipinos, it was originally the Three Wise Men from the East - and not Santa Claus - who were the bearers of gifts, leaving treats in children's shoes perched on window-sills. At the annual “Three Kings Pageant” at the Caspino Español in Manila, this tradition is honored with the donation of gift packages for indigent children by children from affluent families.

On Christmas Eve, everyone awaits the midnight *Misa de Aguinaldo* (“Gift Mass”) followed by the most important repast of the year, the *Noche Buena*. At this feast, family members savor yuletide favorites like *hamon* (ham), *queso de bola* (ripened ball cheese), *relleno* (stuffed chicken), *castañas* (roasted chestnuts), fruitcake, and fresh fruits. On this night, the Andalucian couplet holds true, “*Esta noche es noche Buena, y no es noche para dormir.*” (“This night is a good night, and not a night for sleeping.”)

December 25th is also known as *Pasko ng Mga Bata* (“Children’s Christmas”) for obvious reasons. It is also the day the little ones visit their godparents (*Ninong* and *Ninang*) and kiss the back of their hands in greeting, expecting gifts and other treats in return.

January 1st is oddly called *Pasko ng Mga Binata’t Dalaga* (“Christmas of Unmarried Men and Women”) besides ushering in the New Year. In accordance with Chinese custom, firecrackers are exploded to ward off evil spirits at the crucial transition from one year to the next.

Immediately afterwards, another feast called *Media Noche* (“Midnight”) tempts with *lechon* (roasted suckling pig), *pancit* (noodles, for goodluck), grapes (for more luck), and oranges (for prosperity). The color red is worn for luck as well, while polka dots on one’s clothes are considered auspicious.

The “Feast of the Three Kings” or *Tres Reyes* on the first Sunday of January officially draws the Christmas season to a close. This feast is also known as the *Pasko ng mga Matatanda* (“Christmas of the Elderly). It is a happy extension of more gift-giving for, in the old tradition, it was not Santa Claus but the Three Kings from the East who came bearing gifts for the children, dropping candies, apples, and coins in the polished shoes they would leave overnight on their windowsills. And if one had forgotten a gift or two at Christmastime, the Chinese New Year in late January or early February gives one the chance to make up for the oversight.

The Christmas spirit, though, does not quite end yet. Yuletide decorations stay up just a little longer. The *belen* stays ensconced a while more in its choice place in the home. Strains of Christmas carols still hang in the air, and get-togethers go on until the last out-of-town relative or friend has left.

Ahhh... Christmas without end! That’s the way Pinoys like it.

It is only when the Lenten season begins in march that the Filipino finally tucks Christmas away. To storage boxes at last go the wreaths, the angels, and the lights. But the memory of Christmas – the family togetherness, the feasting, the gift-giving, the birth of the Christ Child that gives it all meaning – lingers until (you guessed it!) It’s time for *Paskong Pinoy* all over again.

ref.: http://filipinoheritage.zxq.net/customs_traditions/christmas/paskong_pinoy.htm

Look more here: www.Christmas.FilipinoTraditions.ph