

NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT / POST CHRISTMAS SEASON

der 31. Dezember: Silvesterabend / New Year's Eve

WHY ON EARTH DO GERMANS CALL NEW YEAR SILVESTER?



Why do Germans call New Year's Eve Silvester? And what's with all the mustard-filled doughnuts, firecrackers, and melted lead?

No your friend isn't planning to ring in the New Year with someone named Sylvester instead of you. *Silvester* is the German name for New Year's Eve – owing to the fourth century Pope Sylvester I. Eventually made a saint by the Catholic Church, his feast day is observed on December 31.

St. Sylvester's day became associated with New Year's Eve with the reform of the Gregorian calendar in 1582, when the last day of the year was fixed at December 31. But despite the holiday's Christian name, many German New Year's traditions can be traced back to the pagan *Rauhnächte* practices of heathen Germanic tribes, which took place at the end of December and beginning of January.

Instead of recognizing a single day as the winter solstice, the Germanic tribes observed twelve *Rauhnächte* – hairy nights, so called due to the furry forms of the deep winter demons – or *Rauchnächte* – smoky nights, due to the practice of smoking the spirits out of one's house on January 5. Bringing very little sun to the northern regions, the twelve *Rauhnächte* were considered days outside of time, when the solar and lunar years were allowed to re-synchronise. Silvester took place right in the middle of the twelve *Rauhnächte* and was the night of the god Wotan's wild hunt, a time of particular commotion and celebration.