

NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT / POST CHRISTMAS SEASON

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

WHY ON EARTH DO GERMANS CALL NEW YEAR SILVESTER?

As in many other countries, the Germans celebrate *Silvester* with fireworks, champagne, and boisterous social gatherings. Making noise is key: the ruckus of fireworks, firecrackers, drums, whip-cracking and banging kitchen utensils has been driving away evil winter spirits since the days of the Germanic Teutons. One of the most famous German firework displays takes place at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Private celebrations with *Böllern* (firecrackers) are also common.

Besides being a fun spectacle, the light of pyrotechnic displays also provides a surrogate sun during the dark *Silvester* night. Suffering the winter bleakness in their northern regions more than anyone, the Teutons feared that the sun, which they thought of as a wheel that rolled around the earth, was slowing to a stop during the darkest days of winter. Perhaps as a sign of protest, they lit wooden wheels on fire and sent them rolling down mountains and clubbed trees with flaming cudgels. These practices are likely forerunners to the *Silvester* firework tradition.

The belief that the sun was slowing to a stop also led to the German tradition of doing no work on New Year's Eve: everything should stand just as still on earth. Above all no one should do any laundry, because the god Wotan made his rounds with his army of devils for a wild hunt during *Silvester* and would be terribly angry if he got caught in any clotheslines.

Because the twelve *Rauhnächte* – now associated with the twelve days of Christmas made famous by the partridge in a pear tree – were days outside of time, all manner of supernatural events were possible. Spirits of all sorts charged through the night, either embodying the horror of winter or chasing it away. These figures still emerge in the *Perchtenläufen* of the Alpine areas of Germany, when troll-like forms cavort about with bells to drive away winter. *Perchtenläufen* take place in different Alpine cities between Advent and January 5, the last of the *Rauhnächte*.

The *Rauhnächte* were also a time when the future for the New Year could be divined. *Silvester* in Germany still calls for oracle traditions, which often take the form of party games. *Bleigießen* (lead pouring) is the most popular *Silvester* fortune-telling tradition. Party-goers melt small lead forms with a candle in an old spoon and pour them into cold water. The lead hardens into a shape that supposedly bears a certain meaning for the New Year. An eagle, for example, indicates career success, while a flower foretells that new friendships will develop.

Other oracle traditions on *Silvester* include swinging a pendulous object, such as a necklace or watch, and asking it a yes-or-no question. If the pendulum swings in a circle, the answer is "yes," if it swings vertically, the answer is "no," and if it swings horizontally, the answer is uncertain. *Bibelstechen* involves opening the Bible to a random page, closing one's eyes and pointing to a random verse. The verse should provide some information or advice for the coming year.

Those who stay home on *Silvester* in Germany are likely to be watching the 1963 TV recording of the British comedy sketch "[Dinner for one](#)". The programme is an indispensable German New Year's tradition since 1972 and holds the Guinness record for being the most frequently repeated TV show in history.

Anyone in front of the telly will probably be wolfing down jelly doughnuts too. But watch out! At some point some Teutonic jokester thought it would be funny to put mustard in one or two of the *Pfannkuchen* as a funny surprise for his New Year's party guests.

For those who go out on *Silvester*, good luck charms and New Year's greetings are often exchanged. Acquaintances may give good luck charms to each other in the form of ladybugs, four-leaf clovers, horseshoes and pigs. The phrase *Guten Rutsch!* is another common *Silvester* greeting. While many Germans now use it to wish someone a good "slide" into the new year, the word *Rutsch* more likely comes from the Yiddish word *Rosch* – which means beginning or head.

So to have a *Guten Rutsch!* is simply to have a good start to the New Year!