

## POST- CHRISTMAS SEASON / NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT

New Year's Eve: Silvesterabend (der 31. Dezember)

New Year Eve belief: Silvesterabendglaube

lead-pouring: das Bleigießen

tious practice. According to an article published in wikipedia, the Dominican monk Thomas Aquinas (1225 to 1274), who always stressed the importance of reason in his theology, took a stand against the custom of Bleigiessen. His argument was that it presents a blasphemous form of prediction. Only God knows the future, humans shall not try to glimpse it with such means. However, the Catholic Church never formally banned the practice of Bleigiessen.

Current objections to the custom are not of a theological, but rather of an ecologic nature. Ecologically oriented people regard it as a senseless waste of valuable raw material, which contributes to soil contamination. As an alternative, they revert to wax, a custom known in Russia. Some also mind the dangers and prefer the less toxic tin, which also has a lower melting point of only 231°C instead of 327.5°C. True enough, carelessness can result in deep burns if the spoon is held too high and the melted lead splatters beyond the bowl when hitting the water. Of course, hands should be washed and utensils carefully discarded afterwards.

Nevertheless, Bleigiessen has firmly held its place among the other German

customs practiced at New Year's Eve: People gather to enjoy a simple communal meal, reminiscent of traditional fasting, often consisting of potato salad and "Wiener" (sausages), accompanied by punch or wine – or the elegant version of an elaborate dinner with formally dressed guests. The rooms and tables are decorated with colorful garlands and confetti (ticker tape), and no decoration is complete without those little marzipan or chocolate figures, pigs, chimney sweepers, holding a four-leafed clover, and red "Fliegenpilz" mushroom. Doughnuts filled with jam serve as desert or are eaten in-between. Before or after the meal, everyone gathers in front of the television set to watch the short, funny British black-and-white sketch "Dinner for One" in English (see *German Life*, December/January 2006), and with the first second of the New Year, church bells begin to chime and the fireworks start.

In many households, the guessing continues now: Some interpretations are rather obvious and traditional. Thus, the group can quickly agree on a clover-leaf, meaning great happiness, a ladder symbolizing a promotion at work, or moss foreseeing lots of money ("Moos" being a colloquial term for "money"). A fence may also signal difficulties to overcome, a dagger may threaten danger, or a pretzel tell of love complications ahead. But why would a hedgehog symbolize jealousy, a cow the healing of a disease, a frog promise a lottery win, a vase speak of an imminent love affair or a dish of a promising career? Obviously, only the wise and initi-



ONCE MELTED, THE LEAD IS DROPPED FROM THE SPOON INTO A BOWL OF COLD WATER WHERE THE LEAD SOLIDIFIES INTO A UNIQUE SHAPE.