



THE MEANING OF ST MARTIN'S DAY

ORIGIN

Also known as the **Feast of St. Martin**, **Martinstag** or **Martinmas**, the Feast of St Martin of Tours or Martin le Miséricordieux, is celebrated on November 11 each year. This is the time when autumn wheat seeding was completed, and the annual slaughter of fattened cattle produced "Martinmas beef". Historically, 'recruitment' fairs were held where farm labourers would seek new posts.

St. Martin of Tours started out as a Roman soldier then was baptized as an adult and became a monk. It is understood that he was a kind man who led a quiet and simple life. The best known legend of his life is that he once cut his cloak in half to share it with a beggar during a snowstorm, to save the beggar from dying in the cold. That night he dreamed that Jesus was wearing the half-cloak. Martin heard Jesus say to the angels, "Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not baptised; he has clothed me."

CUSTOMS

St. Martin was known as a friend of the children and patron of the poor. This holiday originated in France, but then spread to England, Germany, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe. It celebrates the end of the agrarian year and the beginning of harvesting. Bishop Perpetuus of Tours, who died in 490, ordered fasting three days a week from the day after Saint Martin's Day (11 November). In the 6th century, local councils required fasting on all days except Saturdays and Sundays from Saint Martin's Day to Epiphany (the feast of baptism on January 6), a period of 56 days, but only 40 days fasting, like for Lent. It was therefore called Quadragesima Sancti Martini (Saint Martin's Lent). This consumption of 'The goose' became a symbol of St. Martin of Tours because of a legend that when trying to avoid being an ordained bishop he had hidden in a goose pen, where he was betrayed by the cackling of the geese. Hence, St. Martin's day falls into November, when geese are ready for slaughter. St. Martin's Day was an important medieval autumn feast, and the custom of eating goose spread from France to Sweden. It was primarily observed by the craftsmen and noblemen of the towns. In the peasant community, not everyone could afford to eat goose, so many ate duck or hen instead.

St Martin's Day is celebrated in many European countries and around the world. However, Germany is particularly known for celebrating St Martin and a widespread custom are [bonfires](#) on St. Martin's eve, called "Martinsfeuer."

The nights before and on the night of Nov. 11, children walk in processions carrying lanterns, which they made in school, and sing Martin songs. Usually, the walk starts at a church and goes to a public square. A man on horseback dressed like St. Martin accompanies the children. When they reach the square, Martin's bonfire is lit and Martin's pretzels are distributed. In some regions of Germany (e.g. [Rhineland](#) or [Bergisches Land](#)) in a separate procession the children also go from house to house with their lanterns, sing songs and get candy in return.

The origin of the procession of lanterns is unclear. To some, it is a substitute for the St. Martin bonfire, which is still lit in a few cities and villages throughout Europe. It formerly symbolized the light that holiness brings to the darkness, just as St. Martin brought hope to the poor through his good deeds. Even though the tradition of the large, crackling fire is gradually being lost, the procession of lanterns is still practiced.

The tradition of the [St. Martin's goose](#) or "Martinsgans", which is typically served on the evening of St. Martin's feast day following the procession of lanterns, most likely evolved from the well-known legend of St. Martin and the geese. "Martinsgans" is usually served in restaurants, roasted, with red cabbage and dumplings.

In some regions of Germany, the traditional sweet of Martinmas is "Martinshörnchen", a pastry shaped in the form of a [croissant](#), which recalls both the hooves of St. Martin's horse and, by being the half of a [pretzel](#), the parting of his mantle. In parts of western Germany these pastries are instead shaped like men ([Stutenkerl](#) or Weckmänner).

(For further info see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Martin%27s_Day)