

PROVENCE-ALPES-CÔTE D'AZUR

THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS

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ENJOY THE UNEXPECTED



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CHRISTMAS IN PROVENCE-ALPES-CÔTE D'AZUR

“
A little tour
of Christmas highlights
and spotlight
on our artisans
and producers

We all need warmth and friendship, but what we love most are dreams... And Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur's Nativity celebrations promise a plethora of magical moments to share! Christmas likes to play extra time here, with 60 days of fizzing festivities starting with Saint Barbara's Day on December 4th and ending with Candlemas on February 2nd. A genuine return to our roots blending myth and reality and the perfect occasion to delve into purest Provençal tradition and its many rituals and highlights - midnight mass, the *pastorale* procession, crib scenes and more. And of course, this is a time to savour our culinary delights, with no less than three festive meals. Customarily, the humble *gros souper* supper and its round of thirteen desserts on Christmas Eve is followed by the rich *réveillon* after midnight mass. The feast continues with a copious spread on the 25th. A privileged time for gastronomy buffs, Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to savour our flavourful local produce and discover our ancient local know-how.



Know-how Made in Région Sud

Hunt down a one-off piece or trad object with a twist

A world away from mass-produced glitter and bling, the artisans and producers of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur are committed to respecting the environment and love a job well done... *Santon* figurines, pottery, crockery, table linen, plaids, essential oils, regional wines, tasty olive oils, wooden toys and furniture are just some of the region's must-haves.

[CLICK](#) **Natural products** [CLICK](#) **Gift ideas**

Behind the scenes with local firms and artisans

Step into a world of expertise

These talented men and women have forged the reputation of the South of France. Discover their know-how combining tradition and creativity: *santon* figurine makers, ceramists, perfumers, confectioners, soap makers, winegrowers, olive growers and antiques dealers.

[CLICK](#) **Check out our top addresses and order online**



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SAINT BARBARA'S DAY

Not to be confused with Christmas Day... In Provence, Saint Barbara's Day (*La Sainte-Barbe*) heralds the start of the Christmas festivities. On December 4th, grains of wheat left over from the previous harvest and reserved for the following year's crop are sown in three dishes. The Provençal almanac tells that Saint Barbara lived in the 3rd century AD. She vowed to dedicate her life to God, rather than men, and was disowned then killed by her own father. Symbolizing the rebirth of nature, this true green martyr is celebrated as a symbol of future plentiful harvests. The people of Provence honour her by planting the "Wheat of Hope" on December 4th.

“
Quand lou blad vèn bèn,
Tout vèn bèn!”

*Wheat sprouted, prosperity all year long!

“The local streets, monuments and shop windows are festooned with illuminations and decorations, and Christmas markets set up home on village squares



Saint Barbara's Wheat How To

It's easy. All you have to do is sprinkle some grains of wheat on damp cotton wool in three white dishes, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. Simply water from time to time and watch your grains sprout into pretty green plants!

If the wheat is flourishing on December 25th it is said that the harvest will be plentiful, but if it rots, a gloomy harvest is to be expected! The finest dish is placed on the Christmas table as a sign of prosperity; the others are tucked inside the crib scene, among the rocks and bushes. Saint Barbara's Day heralds the start of the Christmas festivities.

Saint Barbara's Day Time to shop!

Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur boasts a lengthy legacy of ancient, but constantly-renewed know-how, ranging from glasswork to earthenware, pottery, santon figurines, Queyras wooden toys and furniture, sublime natural ochre pigments and sunny, subtly-scented perfumes.

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CRIB SCENE

Another ancient Christmas tradition, the Crèche (Crib Scene) is thought to have been invented by Saint Francis of Assisi in the 12th century, who created a scene in an abandoned stable using real people and animals. In the Middle Ages, the Franciscans spread the tradition throughout the western Christian world. After the French Revolution in the 18th century, it became customary to put up a crib scene in every home and this fine Provençal tradition soon extended to every region of France. Provence drew on its own myths and legends to create a traditional crib scene representing local village life and customs.

“
All the family takes part
in making the lifelike
crib scene - a fun ritual
symbolizing family
values and sharing



Imagine the birth of Jesus in a Provençal village... A novel idea indeed! The decor combines a pretty Provençal hilltop village and the nativity scene in Bethlehem – a quirky scenario paying homage to Provençal life and customs in days gone by. The scene plays with contrasts, depicting Provençal villagers gathered round the stable where Mary, Joseph draped in robes watch over Baby Jesus asleep on the hay. And of course, no crib scene would be complete without the Three Kings on their camels!

More than just a story, the crib scene is a genuine plunge into the hustle and bustle of everyday life in Provence, shining the light on the customs, know-how and – as portrayed in our traditional nativity plays – fiery character of the local inhabitants! The strictly-traditional decor, steeped in larger-than-life nods to Provence's heritage, features an old church, a house, bread oven, mill, farm, bridges spanning wild and peaceful scenery and hills dotted with pines and olive trees... This magical little world comes to an end at Candlemas on February 2nd, when the *santons* are returned to their boxes and attics until next year.

MUST-SEE

Crèche de la Petite Provence, Paradou

400 m², 32 scale models and over 400 *santon* figurines - one of the world's largest crib scenes.

You can visit the crib scene all year round at the Musée de la Petite Provence in the little village of Paradou in the heart of Provence!

 **Miniature Provence *santon* village**



SANTON FIGURINES

You simply can't have a Provençal crib scene without *santon* figurines! Among the traditional characters you'll find Baby Jesus, Joseph, Mary and the Three Kings, plus a multitude of fun Provençal figures: the shepherd, the Ravi, the mayor, the drummer, the fisherman, the fishwife, the baker and the Arlesian lady in elegant traditional dress... Not forgetting of course the angels and a whole flock of animals: donkeys, oxen, sheep, camels and even cats! These little figurines are a joy to children and adults alike. You can pick them up at the Christmas markets held all over Provence.

“Genuine artists, each santon maker creates his own special characters, inspired by Provençal folklore and tradition



Clay is the *santon's* DNA.

Made entirely by hand, *santon* figurines are one of Provence's most reputed artisan feats. The *santon* maker first creates his clay model. He then makes a plaster mould into which fresh clay is pressed to reproduce the model. The resulting figurine is embossed, retouched, trimmed and fired before being minutely hand-painted. The first clay *santon* originated from Marseille and was created by Lagnel in the 6th century AD. Prior to that, figurines were produced using bread, plaster, wax or wood.

Santons come in various sizes, ranging from 1 to 20 cm. Some – generally the larger ones – are dressed in fabric clothing. Provence enjoys bringing its *santon* figurines to life too, and you'll see characters from Marcel Pagnol's famous trilogy parading on the local markets. The card game and boules scene are particularly popular...

NEWS

Maison Fouque

Our santon makers unveil one or several new models every year. Among the latest creations by Maison Fouque: the bearded doctor (apt!) and country nurse.



Step out to meet the local santon makers

Discover their workshops – mostly family-run – and the various stages of the meticulous figurine creation process.

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CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

The countdown to the long-awaited magical moment has begun... Christmas culinary customs are deeply anchored in Provence and bring a bounty of the tastiest Provencal fare, with many traditional local dishes and delicacies. Once the finishing touches to the crib scene have been made, it's time to prepare the humble Christmas Eve supper - another ancient family ritual. In keeping with tradition, the *gros souper* or *repas maigre* opens the festivities on the eve of the 24th, as a prelude to midnight mass, while the rich *repas gras* or *réveillon* is traditionally served after Midnight Mass. Christmas Dinner is served at lunchtime on December 25th and winds up the Nativity celebrations.

“
Christmas,
a magical moment
around the tree
savouring the flavours
of the South



A celebration of sharing

Christmas is paced by a succession of delightful culinary experiences to share. The gros souper is traditionally served on Christmas Eve before Midnight Mass. Also called the repas maigre, it is a simple supper comprising seven courses representing the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mary, featuring traditional vegetables served with local olive oil or white sauce and anchoïade. The table – the centrepiece of the room – is decorated with little sprigs of holly, roses of Jericho and, of course, Saint Barbara's wheat of hope. Special Christmas bread (*pain calendal*) is placed at the centre of the table.

The table is laid with three white tablecloths placed one on top of the other and three candles, evoking the Holy Trinity. The 13 rolls of bread served with the meal refer to the Last Supper of Jesus and the 12 apostles, as do the thirteen desserts, still very popular today. The rich *repas gras* or *réveillon* is traditionally served after Midnight Mass and consists of an abundance of game, roast meats, fish and Provençal wines.

A PROVENCAL CLASSIC

Anchoïade

For 4 people – Preparation 5 mins

Ingredients: 3 anchovies, 2 teaspoons vinegar, 6 tablespoons olive oil, 2 cloves garlic.

Crush the garlic. Heat the vinegar and stir in the anchovies. Add the olive oil. Anchoïade marries perfectly with chard, celeriac and raw vegetables.

[Click](#) More regional recipes



Ready for more family festivities?

The traditional Christmas Dinner is served at lunchtime on December 25th and consists of an abundance of simple dishes heralding a prosperous future, with a turkey main course, thirteen desserts and other Provençal specialities made with local produce: *poutargue* dried mullet eggs from Martigues, tasty Alpine cheeses and luscious liqueurs made with regional plants or fruit. And of course, no good meal would be complete without wine. Christmas is the perfect time to discover the finest regional rosés, reds and whites, grown on prestigious terroirs spanning Provence, the Rhone Valley and Southern Alps.



Served in the evening, *aigo boullido* (garlic soup) facilitates the digestion and promises to get you back up and running if you've over-indulged! The Christmas Log is served with the Thirteen Desserts. Other local specialities are honoured too: *Poutargue de Martigues* – the Caviar of Provence –, tasty Alpine cheeses such as Queyras cheese, liqueurs made with regional plants and fruit and the finest Provence and Rhone Valley wines...

Aïoli

A Provençal culinary classic. This typical mayonnaise pays tribute to two of our most essential ingredients: garlic and olive oil. Savoured in every season, it is served with fish, shellfish and vegetables – as well as with traditional Christmas fare.

[CLICK](#) **The recipe**

A land of wine and spirits...

Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur is the world's leading producer of rosé and other varied and flavourful wines. But that's not all: the region also prides in aniseed drinks and exquisite liqueurs.

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THIRTEEN DESSERTS

Thirteen, like Christ and the 12 apostles. Although this tradition is generally associated with Provence and the *Calèna* Christmas custom that originated in the ancient County of Nice, it is now found throughout Occitania and even in Catalonia. One of the highlights of the Christmas meal, the Christmas Log is a rolled cake symbolizing the ancient *Cacho Fio* ceremony, whereby a large fruit tree log is placed in the fire, as a rite of passage to the new year.

“
The Thirteen Desserts,
a concentrate
of Provencal
delicacies



There'd be no Christmas without them!

Inspired by religious orders, the "4 beggars" form the basis of the Thirteen Desserts: walnuts and hazelnuts for the Augustinians, dried figs for the Franciscans, almonds for the Carmelites and raisins for the Dominicans. According to the region, town or even individual family traditions, these 4 desserts are accompanied by *pompe à huile* (brioche made with olive oil), also called *fougasse* or *gibassier*, black and white nougat from Provence, *verdaù* (green melon), candied fruit, tangerines and pears.

A Christmas must, nougat was already produced in the Mediterranean way back in Roman times. The Romans referred to it as *nux gatum* (nut cake). The original nougat was quite unlike today's recipe, as it was mainly made with walnuts and honey. Later on, almonds were used instead of walnuts.

Sweet treats galore!

Candied fruit, jams, lavender honey, biscuits, nougat and chocolates... Not forgetting the region's famous *calisson* and *berlingot* candies. A voyage into traditions and know-how that promises to enchant foodies avid for new gourmet sensations.

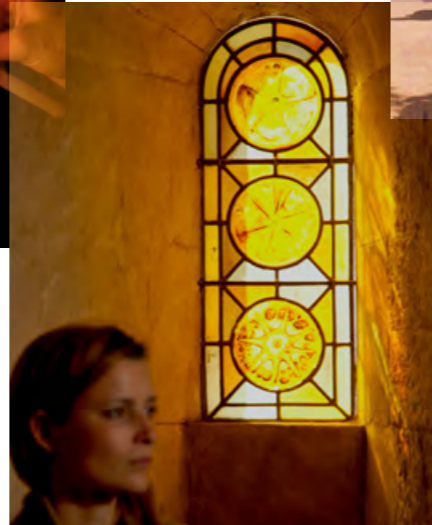
 **Top addresses**



MIDNIGHT MASS

More than just a religious celebration, midnight mass on December 24th is a moment of emotion and sharing. A genuine institution in Provence, one of its highlights is the *pastrage* ceremony, when a procession of shepherds, fishermen and farmers in traditional dress offer their finest produce. This ancient custom continues to live on in the region's small villages. *Les Noël's* - songs or hymns in Provençal dialect used by poets to express both religious fervour and local traditions - also have pride of place.

“
A colourful
procession steps
towards the altar
accompanied
by folk groups



Les Noël's are sung in the form of a dialogue.

They feature widely in the *Pastorale* nativity play, the most famous of which was written by Avignon-born Nicolas Saboly (17th century). The legendary 19th-century Provençal author and poet Frédéric Mistral said of Saboly's work "it would move a whole church to tears". Midnight Mass is also traditionally associated with the *Pastrage* offering ceremony (from the word *pâtre* meaning "shepherd").

Shepherds in long robes bearing a candle walk slowly to the altar, preceded by pipe and tabor (Provençal musical instrument) players. One of the shepherds carries a little lamb, which is offered to the prior. The shepherd then relates the voyage he and his companions have just completed across hills and valleys. The villagers also bring offerings, such as delicious fruit, vegetables, fish or *fougasse* brioche.

Allauch and Les Baux-de-Provence, cradles of the pastrage ceremony

Celebrating in style. Every year, the villagers of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur gather to celebrate midnight mass in purest tradition. Not-to-be-missed!

[CLICK](#) **Most beautiful villages**

GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

Pompe à Huile brioche

Flavoured with delicious orange flower water, pompe à huile or gibassier is a must-have Christmas dessert unique to Provence.

[CLICK](#) **The recipe**



NATIVITY PLAYS

The *Pastorale* is a highly-theatrical and still very-popular nativity play evoking the voyage to the stable and pious celebration of Baby Jesus. Bethlehem is exceptionally situated in Provence for the purpose of the story! The subject matter varies little: it is the story of Saint Joseph going from house to house seeking lodgings for the night. Revisited by the people of Provence, the birth of the Baby Jesus is announced to a shepherd or *pastre*. The text, both naïve and satirical, is, of course, read in Provençal dialect.

“
The Provençal
nativity play portrays
the birth of the Baby Jesus
in a little
Provençal village



A purely religious play, the *Pastorale* is spoken and sung in Provençal dialect by amateur troupes – often the villagers themselves. This improvised pilgrimage is, in fact, a race to discover the miracle of the birth. The *pastorale* comprises five acts in Provençal dialect, with the exception of the 4th act, which is rarely played (Herod and the Three Kings), written in French. The storyline is usually well-oiled, but novel additions and improvisations are always applauded!

The first act of the *Pastorale* tells of the awakening of the shepherds by the archangel Gabriel, come to bring good tidings. Act II describes the descent of the shepherds and awakening of the villagers. Act III includes two scenes: one in front of the farm where people gather to depart for Bethlehem and the other around the well, with the surprising appearance of the Bohemian.... The last act is dedicated to the Three Kings and shepherds come to the stable to worship the Baby Jesus.

A blast from the past

The most famous *Pastorale* nativity play was written by Antoine Maurel in Marseille in 1884. A genuine classic, it is still acted out every year throughout Provence and portrays the march of the Three Kings, guided by the Star of Bethlehem. The actors proudly sport traditional Provençal costume.

 **Grand Théâtre de Provence**



EPIPHANY

Another good reason to prolong the party, the Epiphany marks a new chapter in Provence's Christmas celebrations. Its name means "apparition" and refers to the arrival of the Three Kings, placed in the crib scene on January 6th. This delightful highlight is celebrated with all the family with the traditional *Brioche des Rois* (Kings' Cake) decorated with candied fruit – a speciality found only in Provence because here, we like to do things differently!

“
Served at Christmas,
candied fruit is also
the star of the delicious
Brioche des Rois
cake celebrating
the Epiphany



The story of Christmas isn't over yet! After the procession of shepherds to the stable bearing offerings, it's the turn of the Three Kings to make an entrance on the scene with their precious gifts. The people of Provence celebrate this event on January 6th with a very special dessert – a brioche in the shape of a crown, decorated with candied fruit.

The brioche is served with muscatel wine, *calisson* candies from Aix, almonds and candied chestnuts. According to tradition, the person who finds the lucky charm (*la fève*) hidden inside the brioche wears the crown... But can also recite or poem or sing a song instead!

Candied fruit: the crowning jewel of the Christmas brioche

Candied fruit first made its appearance in the early 16th century AD. Fruit was grown in abundance at the time, but as preservation techniques had yet to be invented, part of the harvest was wasted. This ancient know-how is now perpetuated by passionate local confectioners from Apt. Push open the door to their workshops – a genuine feast for the eyes and tastebuds!

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CANDLEMAS

Candlemas (*Fête de la Chandeleur*) on February 2nd marks the end of the Christmas celebrations. Also known as the *fête des chandelles*, it commemorates the presentation of Baby Jesus at the Temple of Jerusalem and the purification of his mother, the Virgin Mary. This is the time to put your *santon* figurines back in their boxes and savour traditional pancakes and *navette* biscuits. Plunge into an age-old story with a Provençal twist!

“Round and golden, the pancake symbolizes the sun, a source of light

A tradition reminiscent of an ancient fertility rite.

Processions were held every year from late 5 AD onwards, during which blessed candles were lit. Provence's Candlemas pancake day tradition stems from one of these ancient processions and pancake-making is still redolent with ancient symbols. Pancakes are tossed with the right hand while holding a gold coin in the left hand. If the pancake lands squarely back in the pan, the coming year promises to be prosperous!



In Marseille, *navette* biscuits made with orange flower water and shaped like a rowing boat are traditionally savoured at Candlemas too. They are said to represent the arrival of a wooden statue of the Black Virgin on the shores of Marseille in the 13th century. When Candlemas comes around, the inhabitants of Marseille get up extra-early to see the procession of the Black Virgin, starting out at 5 a.m. on February 2nd from the city's Vieux-Port (Old Port).



A must-do! Le Four des Navettes

This Marseille boulangerie boasting a 13th-century oven specializes in traditional navette biscuits made with orange flower water. Their delicious scent fills the whole of the Saint-Victor quarter every morning.

[CLICK](#) Four des Navettes

And other delicacies...

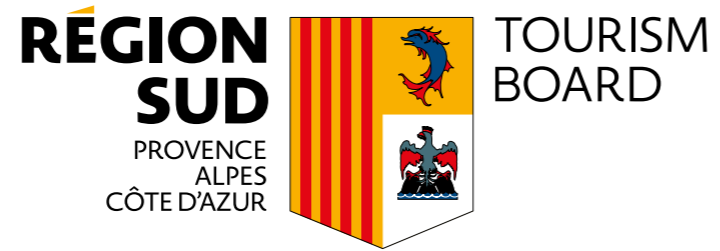
Candlemas is the perfect time to discover and savour our local sweet treats! Treat yourself to some lavender honey, fig jam and fruit juice from the orchards of the Southern Alps...

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