



An Introduction to
**Créole
Christmas
Traditions**

*Le Marché des Fêtes
Pilot House
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While today’s Christmas festivities are rooted in a mix of American nineteenth-century traditions—a decorated fir tree with piles of presents for the children, a great turkey feast on the table, and a jolly Santa Claus passing through the night—James Pitot and his family would have observed the holiday in colonial Creole fashion.



Un Soupçon de Citrus



While the Americans came to dress their holiday tables and rooms with holly and fir, Creole families decorated their homes with the most fragrant and pleasing offerings from their gardens: grapefruits and kumquats, camellia blossoms and magnolia leaves, nuts and fresh berries. No evergreen tree stood watch over the occasion, and gifts were kept hidden until *le Jour de l’An*, New Year’s Day.



Papa Noël

Papa Noël became a fixture of later nineteenth-century Creole Christmas celebrations, yet in the early days he was still known mostly in Eastern Europe as Kris Kringle or St. Nicholas. When Papa Noël finally did make his way to New Orleans, he was famous for a twinkling eye, a mischievous sense of humor, and a soft spot for the ladies.

Le Messe de Minuit

Christmas was a solemnly religious event for New Orleans Creoles, and on Christmas Eve families attended Midnight Mass at St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square, a tradition that continues today for many Catholic families across New Orleans. It was a holiday to celebrate not only the birth of Jesus but one’s own family, too: aunts and uncles, grandparents and grandchildren all gathered together for this holy moonlit ritual. On Christmas day, families returned to the Cathedral to pray before the *crèche*, or Nativity scene.

Le Réveillon

After *le messe de minuit*, Creole families returned home for *le réveillon*, a simple breakfast feast enjoyed before sunrise. Dishes included egg-based creations, *pain perdu* or French toast, a jellied meat delicacy called *daube glacé*, grits and grillades, and molded cakes such as *bûches de Noël*. To drink was café noir, eggnog, and an assortment of wines. Because Christmas was first and foremost a religious occasion, hard liquor was saved for the more elaborate and lighthearted New Year’s Day *réveillon*.

Une Nuit de Feu



Photo by Ian McNulty

On Christmas Eve, Creoles living on the plantations built bonfires along the river, a tradition based in the ancient European practice of lighting fires on winter solstice, the darkest time of year. Not only did the fires light up the black night, but many say that they helped Papa Noël find his way to the Louisiana coast. Laura Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, still lights a bonfire every December, and mid-City residents also keep the tradition alive with their own version of New Year’s bonfires near Bayou St. John.

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