

# *Why do we leave milk and cookies for Santa?*

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**T**hose who grew up celebrating Christmas in the United States may remember this scenario well. It was December 24 and although you were filled with anticipation for the biggest holiday of the year, your parents made you go to bed on time. You could worry about presents in the morning. Or so they thought. The reality was, you were lying in bed, heart thumping with excitement at the thought of what Santa Claus would leave for you.

You were also pleased with yourself about what you had left for him: A plateful of homemade chocolate chip cookies that you assisted your mother in baking and a nice, tall glass of milk. And hopefully, with his

sweet tooth satisfied and thirst quenched, Santa would be feeling especially generous with the stocking stuffers.

While you may have wondered a million different things that night as butterflies danced around in your stomach before finally falling asleep, there's one question you may not have asked yourself: *Why do we leave cookies and milk for Santa anyway?*

## ***A Delicious History***



According to [The Kitchn](#), the tradition may have begun centuries ago with the Feast of St. Nicholas:

“The Saint who is most often associated with Christmas, Nicholas was a third-century bishop known

for being particularly generous to children and the downtrodden. The Dutch would hold a grand feast in his honor on December 6. Unable to stay up for the celebration, children would leave out treats for Saint Nick and other attendants who were surely weary after traveling a great distance to be there, awaking to discover their kindness had been exchanged for presents in the night. As the Protestant Reformation took hold of Europe, this ceremony was considered excessive, and in order to continue honoring St. Nicholas, the feast was delayed until Christmas, and the practice of leaving treats for travelers soon became the custom of leaving cookies for a Christian Santa Claus.”

In the United States, the tradition of leaving cookies and milk for Santa gained popularity [during the Great Depression](#) as a teachable moment. With so much financial suffering being experienced by families around the country, parents didn’t want their children to stop being charitable and thankful for what they have, so they encouraged youngsters to engage in this Christmas Eve ritual.

While many children took the intention of this lesson to heart and left cookies and milk to express gratitude for the presents they would receive, the naughty kids certainly used it as an opportunity to bribe the jolly gift-giver into overlooking their yearlong transgressions.

## ***Another Tradition, Another Treat***

Before American children began leaving cookies and milk for Santa, Norse legend connects the practice to

the god Odin, who would spend the Yule season traveling around on a hunting trip with his eight-legged horse, Sleipner. Instead of making their appeals for presents directly to Odin, children would leave carrots for Sleipner in the hopes that the treats would get the horse's attention and inspire the god to leave gifts to express his appreciation.

As European immigrants came to America in the early 1900s, they brought this custom with them and it evolved into the Christmas Eve milk and cookies for Santa tradition that we know today.

## ***Greeting St. Nick Around the World***



Just as the United States took the Odin tradition and transformed it, countries around the world have settled into their own version of the cookies and milk practice. For example, instead of milk and cookies, in some countries, Santa can expect libations: Australians leave sherry for Mr. Claus, while the Irish leave him a pint of beer. And recognizing that he will also need some food to sustain him during his travels, both countries leave mince pies for Santa to enjoy with his drinks.

In Sweden, families know that Santa will have a long night ahead of him, so they put out cups of coffee to give him a quick pick-me-up. However, in Germany, the children bypass food and drinks altogether and leave letters for Santa Claus.

In other countries, children actually don't leave anything for Santa and instead try to curry favor by leaving gifts for his companions. In the Netherlands, children leave carrots for Santa's horses inside of wooden shoes, Argentinian children leave hay and water for his reindeer, and in Denmark, rice pudding is left for Santa's elves to appease them into not causing mischief throughout the night.

*Looking for a cookie recipe that Santa will love? You'll find it in [the ACF's recipe collection](#).*

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