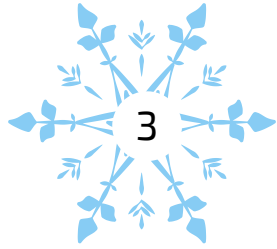




HOW TO

POLISH YOUR CHRISTMAS

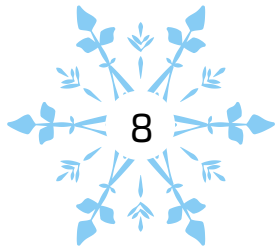
*Add some Polish spirit to your Christmas
celebrations*



Introduction



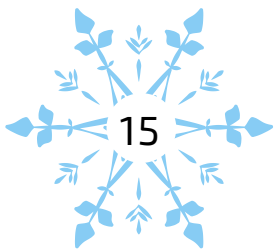
While Waiting for Christmas...



Time to Celebrate!



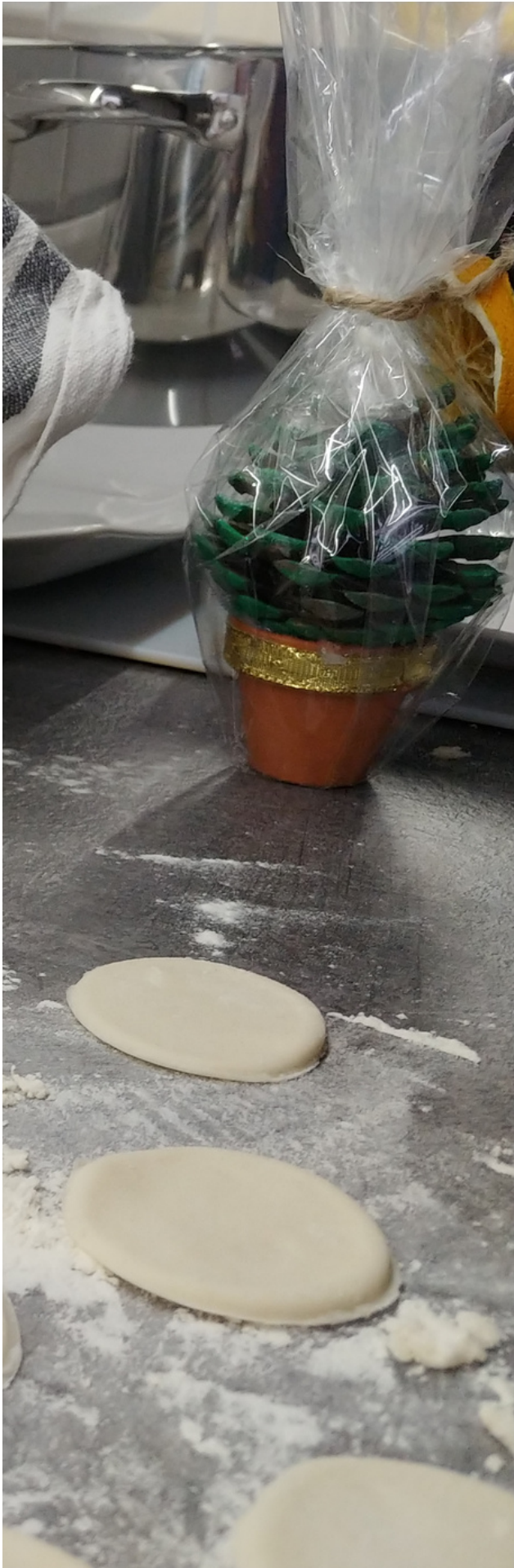
Other Christmas Customs



Polish Christmas Ornaments



Polish Christmas Recipes



Introduction

Christmas is the time of the year we all long for. In a strongly Catholic country like Poland, it is one of the most important holidays, celebrated merrily and solemnly. Despite the rush of the modern life, we still find the time and the energy for Christmas preparations and we cherish our customs and traditions.

Nowadays, these customs intertwine with what is popular around the world, but there are still a lot of traditions that are very Polish. They contribute to the unique and enchanting atmosphere of the Polish Christmas. You will recognize some of them, while other may come as a surprise.

Polish Christmas has a lot of magic to it. We'd like to share the Christmas joy with you and bring some of this magic to your homes. This book presents the most important aspects of the Polish Christmas and collects some DIY ideas on how to add a bit of Polishness to your Christmas celebrations.

Let's make this year's Christmas more Polish! *Wesołych Świąt!*

While Waiting for Christmas...

With Christmas being such an important holiday, no wonder we spend so much time on all the planning and preparations. To be honest, it really brightens the short, chilly and dark days of the late Polish autumn.

And by planning, I don't just mean the present shopping frenzy. Of course, this commercial aspect of modern Christmas is no different in Poland than in other countries. Every year, shops and malls seem to begin selling Christmas-related products earlier and earlier. We even joke that nowadays, chocolate Santas can be found on the shelves right next to the grave lanterns that we put on the graves of our loved ones on All Saint's Day. After all, business is business, right?

But there's so much more to Christmas preparations in Poland than just this crazy present hunt. And believe me, this whole waiting and planning can be just as wonderful as the Polish Christmas itself. So, let's learn how to prepare for Christmas the Polish way.



Get an Advent calendar

What can make the waiting more pleasant than counting down the remaining days with pieces of chocolate or candy? Without a doubt, children are the ones who appreciate this tradition the most, but don't we all sometimes long to be children again? So don't hesitate and get yourself an Advent calendar.

The most common calendars have the form of flat cardboard boxes with chocolates hidden inside little windows

but other kinds of calendars are beginning to gain popularity. Especially DIY calendars. You can make little boxes with numbers or hang bags and get creative about what to put inside. Sweet treats are the most obvious choice, but Christmas-themed stickers or pieces of paper with ideas for a pleasant winter-related activity can also be a great idea.

Go to church before sunrise

Attending the Rorate Mass is a very Polish tradition. And a very beautiful one, too. During the Advent, this mass is held every day, Monday through Saturday.

Early in the morning, before the sun rises, you can see people on their way to church, carrying lanterns, which are a reference to the Parable of the Ten Virgins. The mass begins in the dark, with the only source of light are the candles being inside the lanterns. At different moments during the mass, churchgoers light candles, gradually bringing more light.



Polish your shoes

On December 6th we get a little foretaste of Christmas, as we celebrate *Mikołajki* - Santa's nameday. On this occasion, Santa brings little gifts or sweets and puts them in our shoes - but only if they're clean, so we have to make sure to polish them the night before! In some houses Santa leaves the presents under the pillow instead.

Mikołajki is often also celebrated at schools, where every child gets to be a



secret Santa. Children draw one another's names and are supposed to get a little present for the person whose name they've drawn. But they need to keep that name secret! On *Mikołajki*, they bring the presents to school and the teacher distributes them.

Clean the house

Preparing for Christmas in Poland involves cleaning, more cleaning, and yet some more cleaning. And did I mention cleaning?

Every corner of the house or apartment needs to be fresh and shiny. Every item on the shelves must be dusted. Every carpet and every curtain washed. Every window pane cleaned. Every inch of the floor waxed. Polish homes simply have to be spick and span!

Make Christmas ornaments

We like to decorate our Christmas trees with beautiful baubles, some of which have belonged to our parents, or even grandparents. Actually, Poland is one of the most valued producers of Christmas ornaments, and our hand-made baubles are known all around the world.

But apart from baubles, we like to decorate our Christmas trees with home-made paper ornaments. Especially if there are children in the



house. Gathering with the whole family to make paper chains, stars, birds or peacock eyes together is an amazing experience. Why don't you give it a try? At the end of this book you will find some simple ideas for Christmas ornaments that you can make with your children and grandchildren.

Arrange herring meetings

Of course, the main Christmas celebrations are a family thing, but with Christmas being such a joyful time of the year, why not share some of this joy with our friends and have a little *bigos* and *pierogi* together? Polish people are very sociable, which is probably why such pre-Christmas meetings are gaining popularity and we have a lot of them on the agenda.

Herring is one of the many dishes served for Christmas in Poland, and it has become the colloquial name for these December meetings with friends or colleagues from work. We invite people *na śledzika*, which means to meet and have some herring.

Cook plenty of food

Polish Christmas entails a lot of eating. Traditionally, we serve twelve dishes on Christmas Eve. Obviously, cooking this much food requires a lot of work and planning. Sometimes even as much as six weeks ahead...

That's the case with the traditional maturing Christmas gingerbread. Once you knead the dough until it's smooth, you put it into the fridge and leave it there for four to six weeks to mature. Then it's ready to bake.

The delicious beetroot soup also needs



to be prepared in advance. After all, making the beetroot sourdough is the most important part, and the beets will need about a week to ferment.

It is impossible to make twelve dishes for the entire family in just one day, but our trick is to make some of the time-consuming dishes like *bigos*, *uszka* or *pierogi* in advance and simply freeze them. Even poppy seed cake can be frozen. And gingerbread cookies can be baked in advance and stored in a jar.



Time to celebrate!

When do we celebrate Christmas in Poland? Well, at first glance we are not very original in this respect. Like most countries, we celebrate it at the end of December. Surprisingly, though, the most important Christmas celebrations in Poland take place on Christmas Eve, *Wigilia*, when the whole family gathers to have dinner together.

Paradoxically enough, *Wigilia* is officially a working day in Poland. But most people get to leave their workplace earlier in order to have more time for the last preparations before the Christmas Eve celebrations begin.

Last preparations

Wigilia is celebrated solemnly, so we pay a lot of attention to creating the right atmosphere. We lay our finest tablecloth on the table and place some hay underneath it to symbolize the birth of Jesus in a stable.

We set the table with stylish plates and



cutlery. Traditionally, we leave one empty space at the table and prepare an extra set of tableware for an unexpected guest. After all, Polish people are known for their hospitality, and even though the Christmas Eve dinner is reserved for the family, nobody should be left alone on this day.

Naturally, we dress up for this occasion. Women put on their finest clothes, men usually wear a suit.

Wait for the first star

Traditionally, the Christmas Eve dinner begins when the first star appears in the sky. It is usually the children's task to try to spot it and let everybody know when they do. It is also the reason why the colloquial name for Christmas is *Gwiazdka*, which means 'little star' in Polish.

Share the wafer

At the beginning of the celebrations, before we sit at the table, we break and share the *opłatek* (Christmas wafer) with our loved ones. It is one of the most important Christmas traditions in Poland - and a very beautiful one, too. The wafer symbolizes love and reconciliation. We share it with every member of the family, hug them and give them our best wishes.

Serve twelve dishes

Why twelve?

Because it represents the twelve Apostles and the twelve months of the year. It is also the symbol of wealth.

First we serve soup. Most often it is beetroot soup (*barszcz*) with cabbage- or mushroom-stuffed *uszka*, but mushroom soup is also popular. We don't eat meat on Christmas Eve, but we do eat a lot of fish. We serve herring in oil or herring with sour cream, but the king of the table is definitely the carp. It used to be popular to buy live carp and keep it in the bath tub before it ended up on the table as fried carp or carp in jelly, but in recent years people have become concerned about the carp's

Christmas tip:

If you want the Christmas carp to bring you luck and wealth in the upcoming year, don't forget to put carp scale in your wallet.



well-being and many shops no longer offer live fish.

We have a lot of sauerkraut for Christmas. *Bigos*, cabbage with peas and pierogi stuffed with cabbage and mushrooms are popular Christmas dishes. Actually, forest mushrooms, picked by the family in the autumn (which is almost like a national sport in Poland!), are lavishly used for Christmas. We add them not only to our *pierogi*, but also to our *bigos*, *uszka*, *barszcz*... not to mention the mushroom soup and the pickled mushrooms that we also like to have for Christmas. And the vegetables that were used in the process of cooking the soup end up in our all-favorite vegetable salad.

The Christmas sweets are mostly about gingerbread and poppy seeds. We have old-fashioned maturing gingerbread, gingerbread cookies, poppy seed cake (*makowiec*) or *kutia* (wheat grains with poppy seeds, nuts and honey).

Later in this e-book, you'll find some recipes to add a bit of Polish flavor to your Christmas. One thing's for sure: having so much food for Christmas can make our New Year's resolution quite obvious.

Sing Christmas Carols

Singing Christmas carols is deeply



rooted in our tradition. There are hundreds of beautiful Polish carols, and we have two names for them. *Kolędy* are sung during church service and tell the story of Christ the Savior being born, while *pastorałki* are folk carols with a less religious character.

Christmas carols played a very important role in preserving the national identity during the 123 years of partitions, when Poland did not exist on the map. For a short while, "*Bóg się rodzi*" ("God is Born") was even considered as a candidate for our national anthem. The lyrics were written in 1792 by Franciszek Karpiński, one of the leading Polish poets of the Enlightenment, and the melody is the traditional coronation polonaise for Polish kings. In the last verse of this

carol, the Son of God is asked to bless our homeland and to give it strength. Nowadays carols are still eagerly sung by Polish families at the Christmas table, with "Wśród nocnej ciszy" ("In the midst of the night's quiet") being one of the most popular ones.

Open the presents

That's right! We open our presents on Christmas Eve. After dinner, the youngest family member dives under the Christmas tree and distributes them.

And who brings the Christmas presents in Poland? Well, the answer is not obvious and it depends on which part of Poland you are from. In most places it is Santa's job to bring presents, but if you're from the area of Toruń and Bydgoszcz, you'll be visited by Starman instead. In some regions of Poland it is

Grandfather Frost, Little Star or even Baby Jesus who bring the presents instead.

Sometimes Santa or Starman can be a bit mean. If you misbehave throughout the year, you can expect to get a birch rod (*różga*) instead of presents.

Attend the Midnight Mass

At midnight, many people go to church to attend the Midnight Mass, *Pasterka*. During this joyful mass, we sing carols together.

A close translation of *Pasterka* would be the Shepherds' Mass, which is a reference to the Biblical shepherds that were visited by an angel.

Fun fact:

Animals are believed to speak human language at midnight. (But who do they talk to, if everyone's in church?)



Other Christmas Customs

Our joyful Christmas celebrations continue on December 25 and 26. Both of these days are bank holidays in Poland and people spend time with their family and closest friends. But the Christmas mood stays with us even longer and there are a few interesting Polish customs and traditions worth having a closer look at.

Szopki

We love Nativity scenes. There's a Nativity scene in every Polish church. Some of them are really exceptional, so if you're ever in Poland at Christmas time, don't miss them.

Some parishes arrange cribs with live animals, including sheep, donkeys and goats. These are especially popular among families with children.

One of the most famous Nativity scenes in Warsaw is the crib with moving figures in the Capuchin Church at Miodowa Street. What makes it



interesting is the reference that it makes not only to the Bible, but also to the history of Poland. It presents the architecture of Warsaw and some of the most important Polish historical figures, including Polish kings and pope John Paul II. This Nativity scene is very popular. Every year it attracts about 60 thousand visitors.

Szopki krakowskie

A very special kind of Nativity scenes are the ones from Kraków, where the Holy Family is presented on the backdrop of the beautiful historical architecture of this city. They also contain figurines that illustrate elements of Polish culture, including politicians, artists, the Pope or even... the Wawel Dragon.

The tradition of making these Nativity scenes dates back to the 19th century, They are made of wood or plywood and decorated with colorful tinfoil.

The *szopki*-makers used to make their *szopki* in two sizes. The small ones, with static figurines, were for sale, and the bigger ones served as puppet theaters and were carried around by carolers.

Every year, on the first Thursday of December, a *szopki* contest is held on the Main Market Square in Kraków. From December to February, the best *szopki* are displayed to the public in the Historical Museum of Kraków.

Kolędowanie

This tradition is more popular in the countryside and is slowly starting to disappear, which is a pity. Starting from December 26, groups of people walk from house to house, sing carols and do some role-playing. The carolers, *kolędnicy*, dress up as Mary, Joseph, the Three Wise Men, Herod, shepherds, angels, devils or death and they carry a large Bethlehem star. Carolers are believed to bring luck to the homes they visit, so they are always welcome. People give them money or offer them a small snack.



Epiphany

Epiphany, also known as the Three Kings' Day, is celebrated on January 6 and it officially marks the beginning of the carnival. It commemorates the day when the Three Wise Men (whom we refer to as the Three Kings) arrived to meet Jesus and pay him tribute.

Nowadays the Three Kings' Day is a bank holiday in Poland and colorful parades are held. The journey and the arrival of the Three Wise Men is played out in the streets of the Polish cities, with beautiful costumes, camel riding, handing out candy on the way and caroling.

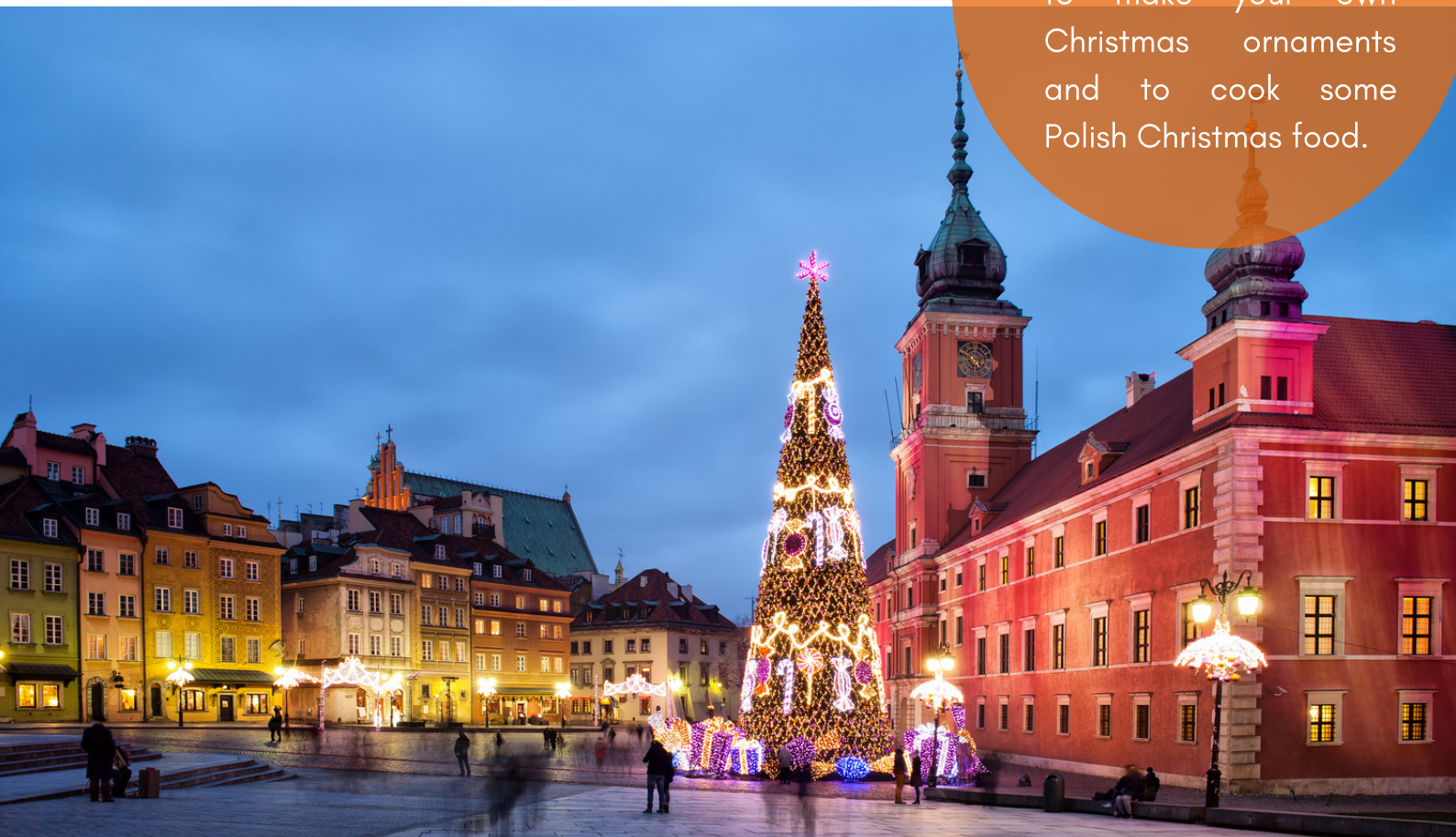
On Three Kings' Day, people gather in churches and they bring home a piece of chalk that was blessed during the

mass. They use it to write C+M+B on their front door, which represents the names of the Three Magi: Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar, and also stands for "Christus Mansionem Benedicat", which is latin for "May Christ bless the house".

End of Christmas

The Three Kings' day marks the end of Christmas. It is when some people decide to say goodbye to their Christmas tree and decorations, while others keep it until February 2, which commemorates the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple.

The following section of this book is a DIY section. You will learn to make your own Christmas ornaments and to cook some Polish Christmas food.



Polish Christmas Ornaments

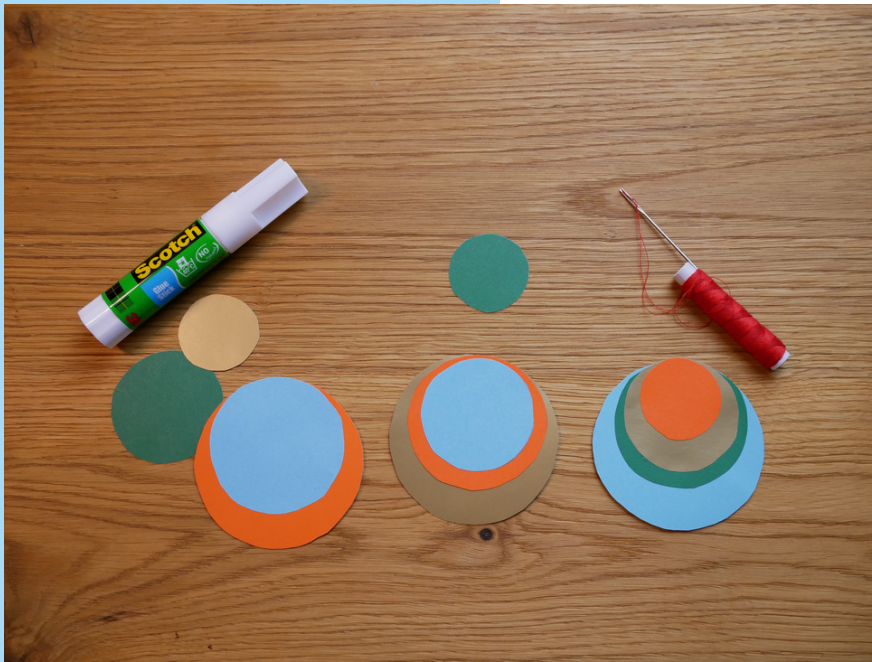
Getting ready for Christmas brings many joyful moments spent together with the family. Making Christmas ornaments is a tradition we pass on from generation to generation. Our grandparents made them with our parents. Our parents made them with us. And now we're teaching our own children to make them. Join us and decorate your Christmas tree with some of these easy home-made Christmas ornaments.

Peacock Eyes

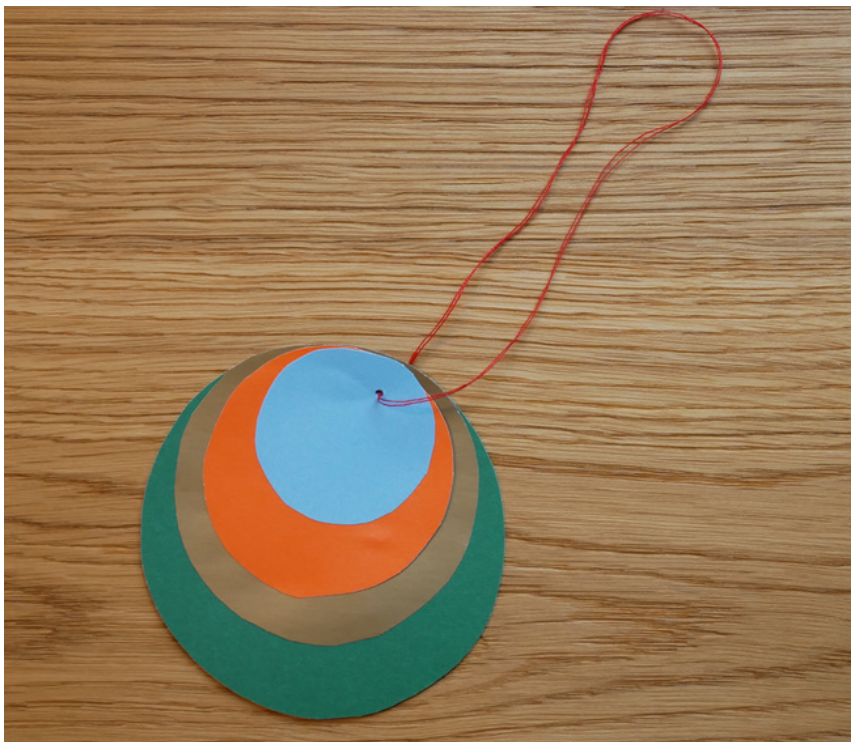
To make these simple and beautiful peacock eyes, you will need some colored paper, scissors, glue, a needle and a piece of thread.



Choose 4-5 colored papers and cut out some circles. To make peacock eyes, you will need 4-5 different sizes of circles.



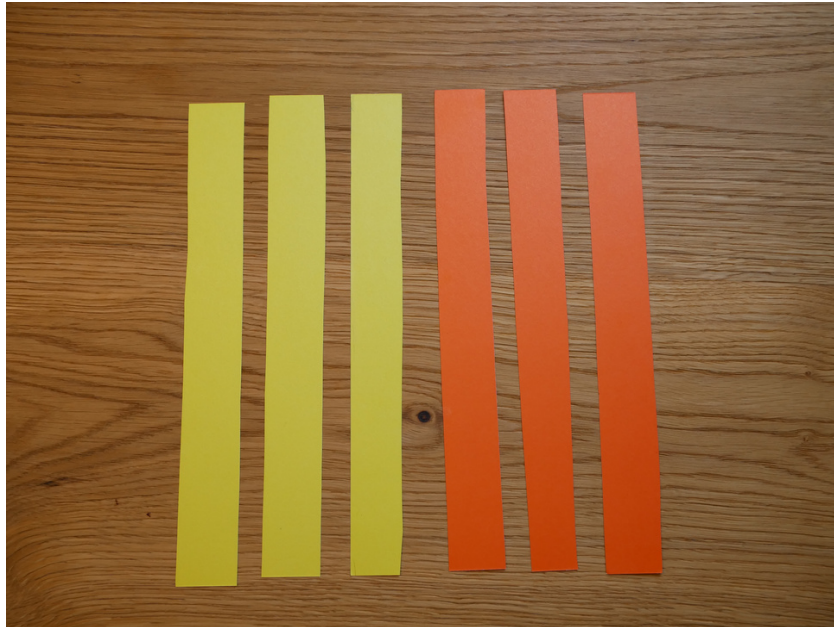
Take a glue stick and stick the circles on top of one another, starting with the biggest and ending with the smallest. Every circle should be of a different color.



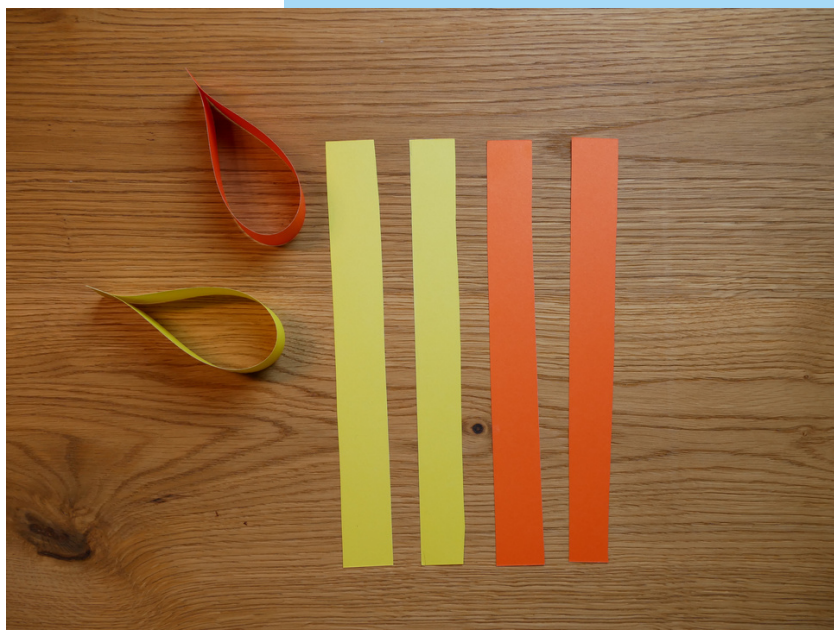
Make a hole with the needle, pull the thread through the hole to make a loop, and you're ready to hang your peacock eye on the Christmas tree!

Christmas Stars

You will need: colored paper, scissors, glue, a needle and a piece of thread.



Cut out 6 slips of colored paper. Each of the slips should be of the same length. The longer you make the slips, the bigger your star will be.



Fold each slip gently and glue the ends together to make them resemble a droplet.



Glue the bottoms of the droplets together to form a star.



Use the needle to make a hole and pull the thread to make a loop. That's it, your star is ready!

Easy Christmas Chain

You will need: colored paper, scissors and glue.



Take some sheets of colored paper and cut them into slips of paper. The longer your slips, the more oval the shape of your chain links will be.



Roll one slip to make a round or oval link. Glue the ends together, one on top of the other.



Pull another slip of paper through the link and glue the ends together. Continue with different colors of paper slips.



When you reach the desired length of your chain, hook it at the top of your Christmas tree and then wrap the tree gently from top to bottom.

Christmas Bow and Straw Chain

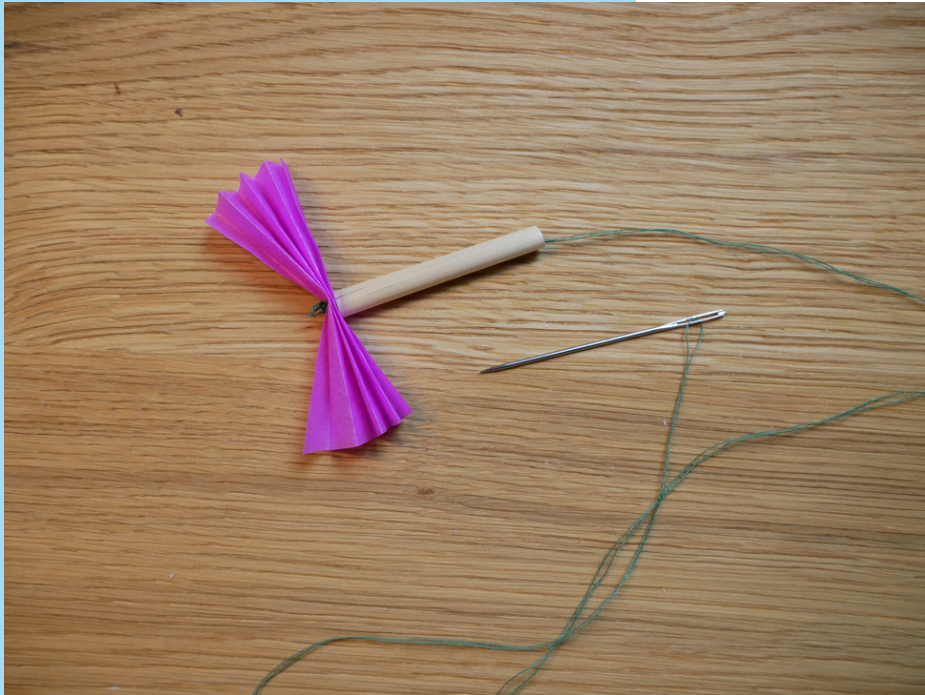
You will need: colored papers, straws (preferably natural), scissors, a needle and a thread.



Cut the sheets of colored tissue paper into small rectangles. Cut the straws into smaller pieces as well.



Fold the tissue paper back and forth to make it accordion-shaped.



Make a hole in the middle of the accordion and thread it. Then thread a piece of straw. Continue with a different color of tissue paper and another piece of straw.



The more colorful and merry your chain is, the better. When you reach the desired length, wrap it around your Christmas tree.

Polish Christmas Recipes

Polish Christmas would not be the same without the delicious, traditional food on the table. How about bringing a taste of Poland to your Christmas dinner? Here are a few ideas for Polish Christmas dishes that you can try to make on your own.

Beetroot Soup

INGREDIENTS (for 6 people)



Sourdough:

35 oz / 1 kg beetroots
5 cloves of garlic
2 bay leaves
5 allspice berries
4 cups / 1 l water
1 tbs salt

Vegetable broth:

3 carrots
2 parsley roots
1 beetroot
1 small celery root
a piece of leek
5 allspice berries
3 bay leaves
5 pepper grains
1 tsp salt
6 cups / 1.5 l water
1.5 oz / 40 g dried mushrooms
dried marjoram



Begin your work at least a week in advance by making the beetroot sourdough. Prepare a large glass jar and rinse it with boiling water. Boil 4 cups of water, dissolve the salt in it and let it cool. Cut the beets into pieces and put them in the jar. Add garlic, bay leaves and allspice. Pour the salted water (make sure it has already cooled down)..



Leave this mixture for 5-7 days to ferment in a dark, warm place. Don't close the lid tightly. Control the sourdough every day to make sure it doesn't get moldy. Strain the beets and pour the sourdough into glass bottles (first rinse the bottles with boiling water). You can keep the sourdough in the fridge for a couple of weeks. You can drink it (it's very healthy) or use it to make beetroot soup, which is our next step.



Let's start with the mushrooms. Pour 2 cups / 0.5 liters of water over the mushroom and leave them overnight. The next day, cook the mushrooms until soft.



Wash and peel the vegetables, cut them into large pieces and put them into a pot. Pour 4 cups / 1 liter of water over the vegetables, add salt, pepper, allspice and bay leaves. Cover the pot with a lid and simmer for 1,5 hours. Strain the broth through a sieve.



Strain the mushrooms and add the mushroom stock to the vegetable broth (keep the mushrooms for *uszka*). Add 2 cups of the beetroot sourdough. You can add a bit more or less, according to your liking. Heat the soup, but be careful not to let it boil, or else its color will change. Add some salt, pepper and dried majoram.



You can serve it alone (in a glass) or with *uszka* (in a bowl). *Uszka* can have different kinds of fillings, e.g. mushrooms or sauerkraut and mushrooms.



Uszka with Mushrooms



INGREDIENTS (for 6 people, approx. 60 *uszka*)

Dough:

11 oz / 300 g wheat flour
a pinch of salt
0.8 cup / 200 ml hot water
1 oz / 30 g butter

Stuffing:

mushrooms used in the beetroot
soup recipe
1 onion
2 tbs butter
salt and pepper



Sieve the flour and add a pinch of salt. Melt the butter in the hot water. Slowly pour it into the bowl with the flour, while you mix the flour with a spoon. Join the ingredients.



Sprinkle the tabletop with flour and knead the dough for a few minutes, until it is soft and smooth. Put it into a bowl, cover the bowl with a clean kitchen towel or with foil and put it away for half an hour.



To make the filling, melt the butter in a pan, add finely chopped onion and fry it for a few minutes, stirring it every now and then. Add the mushrooms that you used for making the beetroot soup, add some salt and pepper and let it fry for another 2-3 minutes, but keep stirring. Chop the stuffing very finely and let it cool.



Divide the dough into three pieces. Sprinkle the tabletop and the rolling pin with flour. Roll one piece of dough out until it's about 2 mm thin (leave the other two pieces covered). Take a small glass and cut out little circles.



Put a little bit of stuffing in the middle of the circle. Fold the circle with the stuffing inside. Make the two sides stick together (wetting the inside with your fingertip should help). Then form a ring by connecting the two edges and make them stick together.



Boil water in a pot, add some salt. Add a teaspoon of vegetable oil to the water. Put your uszka into the boiling water and cook them for 1-2 minutes. Take them out with a strainer spoon. *Uzka* can be kept in the fridge or frozen. To avoid them sticking to one another, let them dry on a plate (avoid placing them too close to each other) and then apply some vegetable oil on them.



Vegetable Salad

There's a different version of this salad in every home. Some people add diced onions and canned sweet corn. Others leave the leek or the celery root out.



INGREDIENTS

3 carrots	3 pickled cucumbers
2 parsley roots	1 apple
a piece of leek	1 can sweet peas
1 small celery root	1 glass mayonnaise
3 potatoes	salt and pepper
5 eggs	



Wash the carrots, parsley roots, leek and potatoes, and cook them until soft in salted water (you can use the carrots, leek and parsley roots from the beetroot soup). Peel the vegetables, let them cool and dice them.



Hard-boil the eggs. Let them cool down, dice them and add them to the vegetables.



Rinse the sweet peas in a sieve, strain them and add them to the salad. Dice and add the apple and the pickled cucumbers.



Add some salt and pepper. Mix the ingredients carefully. Add most of the mayonnaise and mix the salad. Put it in a nice bowl and cover it with a layer of the remaining mayonnaise. Leave it in the fridge overnight for the tastes to blend.



Christmas Eve Cabbage



INGREDIENTS (for 6 people)

42 oz / 1.2 kg sauerkraut

2.5 oz / 70 g dried mushrooms

1 cup warm water

1 big onion

6 tbs vegetable oil

1.5 tbs wheat flour

20 dried plums

2 bay leaves

4 allspice berries

salt and pepper



Wash the mushrooms, pour a cup of warm water and leave overnight to soak. Cook the mushrooms for 20 minutes. Drain them off and keep both the stock and the mushrooms. Cut the mushrooms into stripes.



Rinse the sauerkraut with cold water, squeeze the water out and chop it. Put the sauerkraut in a pot and pour the mushroom stock.




Chop the dried plums and add them to the pot. Put a lid on the pot and let the sauerkraut simmer for about 40–60 minutes. You can add more water if necessary.



Put the vegetable oil in a pan. Dice the onion and fry it for a minute or two. Add the flour and continue frying and stirring until the mixture becomes a little brown. Then add it to the cabbage. Add the mushrooms, add some salt and pepper.





We hope that you've enjoyed reading about Polish Christmas. We also hope that this book has brought a bit of joyful atmosphere to your home and will encourage you to introduce some of the Polish customs and traditions to your Christmas celebrations. We wish you a Merry Christmas. May all your dreams come true.

Wesołych Świąt!