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Are You Gonna Finish That? A Brief History of Modern Holiday Food Traditions

The end-of-year holiday season is the time of year for togetherness and showing appreciation for those around you. Individuals travel all over the world to be with family to celebrate the holidays. Businesses are hosting get-togethers to show appreciation for their staff and their clients. The common thread, of course, uniting these festivities on the personal and professional levels is food. Around the world, different cultures have developed different food traditions that are associated with this season. While many of us may picture the Dickensian "Christmas goose" as the baseline for Anglo holiday dining, more modern traditions have emerged, and these modern traditions bear their own significant history. This article explores some of my personal favorites, especially at my current low blood sugar levels.

RÉVEILLON DINNERS IN NEW ORLEANS

Starting at home in New Orleans, the tradition of the Réveillon Dinners started in the early nineteenth century. In French, the word réveillon means "awakening," and historically, the Réveillon dinner was served after the midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Early New Orleans was predominantly Catholic, so this tradition was widespread. At that time, the traditional Réveillon dinner looked more like breakfast, with egg dishes, bread and pastries, and puddings. Of course, these also included wine, cordials, and other beverages to enhance the celebration. However, as more American holiday conventions, such as Christmas

trees and holiday shopping, gained popularity in New Orleans, this tradition began to fade.

In the 1990's, the Réveillon Dinner experienced its own re-awakening. In an effort to attract business during the holiday season, a time when out-of-town conventioneers are few and far between, French Quarter restaurants began offering special holiday meals and holiday prix fixe menus. Typically, these menus contain staple New Orleans foods such as gumbo and fried oysters. This rebranding and repurposing of the Réveillon Dinner gave both locals and tourists an opportunity to sample New Orleans's finest dining in a manner that would not break the bank. Muriel's Jackson Square is one of many locations where locals and tourists can experience a delicious Réveillon Dinner.

KFC IN JAPAN

The traditional Christmas dinner in Japan is KFC. While traditional is not the first word that comes to mind when thinking of eating KFC, the synergistic cultural and economic conditions of post-WWII Japan created what is now their traditional holiday meal. A Japanese print ad for eating KFC for Christmas In the 1960s and 1970s, Japan's economic spending power significantly increased. During this time, the Japanese also became greatly interested in Western fashions, films, and foods. Kentucky Fried Chicken, as an American business seeking to globalize its brand and establish chains internationally, was more than willing to meet this Japanese fascination. Takeshi Okawara, manager of the first Kentucky Fried Chicken chain that opened in Japan in 1970, recognized both the Japanese obsession with Western culture and the lack of an American Christmas tradition among a predominantly Shintoist population. In 1974, Kentucky Fried Chicken launched its "Kentucky for Christmas" campaign, which was wildly successful. Today, KFC sells in Japan around 800,000 Christmas packs and 300,000 larger party barrels; over 3 million Japanese citizens dine on a variety of the Colonel's recipes during the Christmas season.

CHINESE RESTAURANTS ON CHRISTMAS EVE

For over a century, American Jews have enjoyed dining out at Chinese restaurants on Christmas Eve. But this tradition has a far richer history than it is credited for when typically mentioned as a late-night monologue punchline. When Jewish Europeans began immigrating to New York City, they largely settled in the city's Lower East Side in close proximity to the city's Chinese immigrants.

The first mention of Jews eating at Chinese restaurants came from an 1899 American Hebrew journal where the publication was critical of those who were eating at non-kosher restaurants. New York Jews were eating at Chinese restaurants at the turn of the century for two reasons. First, it was far easier to remain kosher, as Chinese restaurants did not use milk products in their food preparation. Second, Jews felt largely left out of Sunday Church lunches, which were essential gatherings for prominent Christian community figures. Over time, dining in Chinese restaurants became viewed as a safe haven, where Jews as outsiders could forge their own tradition. Today, dining in a Chinese restaurant on Christmas is both a secular way for Jews to celebrate Christmas, but also to affirm Jewish identity in a safe environment.