

Greek Vasilopita (St. Basil's Bread) New Year's Cake

Overview of the Vasilopita “vah-see-LO-pee-tah” New Year's Cake in Greece

Traditionally, many Greeks bring in the New Year eating a “Vasilopita” which means “Saint Basil's Bread”. This cake is eaten on the day of Saint Basil's death which occurred on January 1, 379 (48 yrs old). Coincidentally, the death of Saint Basil was on New Year's Day. Every January 1st, Greek families honor Saint Basil by cutting into a special “pita” (meaning bread, cake, or pie). The sweetness in the cake symbolizes hope for the coming year to be filled with life, liberty, health, and happiness for all who participate in the Vasilopita Observance. The most important part of Vasilopita is the lucky coin baked in the cake. The lucky person to receive the slice with the coin is thought have 1 year of good luck and blessings. Ultimately, the cake serves as a reminder of what Saint Basil did for Greece and the early church (Greek Orthodox Church).

History of Vasilopita & Saint Basil

The Vasilopita cake can be traced back to the Byzantine Empire during the 4th century, specifically to Basil the Great (a Bishop) of Caesarea (Turkey). Basil was an influential theologian who opposed heresies during the early Christian church. He was known for his care and support for the poor and underprivileged.

There are several legends that describe the history behind this cake. One of them suggests that Saint Basil wanted to distribute money to the poor in the churches he served. To preserve their dignity, he cleverly devised a plan so no one would feel pitied. He sought the assistance of local women to bake sweetened bread. He gave them gold coins to place in each loaf prior to baking. Then, each family received a loaf. As the families cut into the bread, they were pleasantly surprised to find the coins.

Traditional Rules for Cutting & Serving the Vasilopita

A family member (usually the “head” or “server” of the household) makes 2 cuts in the top of the cake in the shape of a cross. The cross is meant to bring luck and blessings to the home. Then, the cake is cut into enough slices to equal all family members and guests present. All people in the home line up from oldest to youngest. While taking a slice of cake, no one is allowed to look at the slice until everyone is given their piece. Then, the “head” or “server” gives his/her permission for everyone to check so see if they have the coin. After the celebration of the “winner” of the coin, everyone enjoys their slice of cake.

You may want to try this other traditional (more religious) way to slice and portion out the cake. This works for families with less people than can eat the cake in one sitting. The first slice is cut in remembrance of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The second slice is for the Holy Mother of our Lord, The Virgin Mary. The third slice is for Saint Basil the Great. The remaining slices are cut for the members of the family beginning with the oldest. Slices may also be cut for the church, the house, the traveler, the visitor, and the poor.

****IMPORTANT NOTE:** Please advise those consuming the cake to carefully bite into the cake and locate the coin to ensure it is not swallowed or bitten down on which could cause dental issues.