

French-American Christmas Eve Reveillon traditions recalled with art

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WINOOSKI — Alyce Piche will celebrate her 87th birthday next week between Christmas and New Year's. It is a time of year Piche remembers fondly for seasonal and family celebrations in the Winooski community where she has lived almost all of her life. "There were nine houses on Elm Street," she recalled earlier this week about her childhood home, "and five of them were related to my family." The festivities began, she said, with Reveillon, a tradition among Vermont families with roots in French Canada. Everyone went to Christmas Eve midnight Mass and returned home to a big meal starring the French-Canadian classic, tourtiere, or meat pie. Often there was singing and music, too. "We lived across the street from my grandmother, and I remember big celebrations," Piche said, "although being the oldest girl of eight children, I usually had to stay home and babysit." "The last one I remember was in 1941," she said. "I don't remember anyone doing it after the war started. All the boys were gone."

From Quebec to Vermont

The big community Reveillon celebrations had largely disappeared by the 1970s childhood of Michele Choiniere, a Franco-American singer from St. Albans who performs and records both traditional songs

and her own original compositions. But Choiniere's parents, now 75 and 83, have strong memories of Reveillon in their native Quebec, she said, where the late-night celebration kicked off a series of house parties, often all the way to the Epiphany on Jan. 6. "Le Reveillon" translates to the awakening. Some say it symbolizes a religious awakening and others that it represents staying awake through the night, to which Choiniere added, "It wakes up and kicks off the holiday season." "The winter was so, so cold. And back then there was no TV," Choiniere said. "You made your own entertainment, especially if you were isolated in the countryside." "The food was substantial, meant to keep you warm, like the meat pie and pea soup," she continued, adding that headcheese, meat from the pig's head set in jelly, was also traditional for the season. Her mother also made maple fudge and dumplings cooked in boiling syrup. "There was lots of food and they'd have dancing in the kitchen," Choiniere explained. "There was usually a fiddler. The kitchens were large. The dances were called sets carres." The late-night ritual had a lasting impression on all who grew up with it. Micheline Junas, 79, was raised in Montreal and now lives in Shelburne. She remembers going to sleep early on Christmas Eve as a child and being woken to go to Mass and sing in the choir before returning home to a big family feast with tourtiere as the centerpiece. "We'd stay up until 3 or 4 a.m. We were so excited, we never fell asleep," she said.



'We sang songs'

When French-Canadian families moved to Vermont, they brought Reveillon with them. The memories of Bob Picher, 87, of Winooski are remarkably similar to those of Junas. He was one of Alyce Piche's classmates at the local parochial school where the day was taught half in English and half in French and French-Canadian culture thrived. "We'd go to bed early in the evening and then my mother would wake us up to go to Mass. We'd be so excited," recalled the former altar boy. "After Mass, we came home and had tourtiere and we always had pickled beets, too, from our garden. And we sang

songs. In some people's homes they'd roll back the carpet and have a fiddler and accordionist and dance," Picher said. "On Christmas Eve, anyone who wanted to could drop in," recalled Claire Chase, 91, who also grew up in Winooski and now lives in Burlington. "There was singing and dancing that night and Christmas Day and also of New Years.. We would sing the French-Canadian songs like Minuit Chretien and Alouette. My uncle played the accordion; my father played the mandolin and the piano if there was one. Another uncle played the mouth organ." "Reveillon had to have tourtiere. That was a must," Chase said. "It was so much a part of my life I never really gave it much thought until I realized not every family had it." Her mother would make multiple meat pies earlier in December and put them out on the porch to freeze. "In those days, Vermont was much colder," Chase said. "When guests came, there was always tourtiere and a glass of wine, mostly homemade dandelion wine," she said. "We children had helped collect the dandelions and we were very careful not to let any of the stems in. We prided ourselves on how many dandelions we could collect."

Bob Kaigle, 86, now of South Burlington, grew up in Burlington's Lakeside neighborhood, which he estimated was probably 90 percent French-Canadian back then. "We were a community," he said. "We'd go to midnight Mass and then we'd go from one house to another and they would play the Victrola and we'd go in and have a little meal and sometimes a little drink. The food was mostly tourtiere," he said. "I

remember it most from my teens before World War II. There wasn't so much of that kind of celebration after the war started," Kaigle added, echoing the words of Alyce Piche.



The flavor of the season

The celebrations may have faded, but meat pie remains. Kaigle's son had asked him to teach him the family recipe this year. Junas always makes a number of pies to share with friends and family, she said. Her crusts were already prepared and in the freezer, although she wasn't planning on making the pies until the week between Christmas and New Year's. Every family's meat pie had its own twist, Piche explained, as she put one together in her Winooski kitchen on Tuesday morning. She'd already cooked the meat filling, a mix of ground pork and beef hamburger with onions seasoned with

some cinnamon and cloves. The combination is a seasonal family favorite, she said, which makes its annual debut as stuffing for her Thanksgiving turkey. "My mother added potatoes," she said, "I think to stretch the meat. We were a big family. And she used allspice. This recipe is from my mother-in-law." Despite the fact that Piche can no longer see very well, she ably mixed the meat with potatoes and layered it between store-bought pie crusts (one concession to her age), cutting a round hole in the center of the top crust just like her mother always did before brushing it carefully with milk. Her youngest son, who is 53, will be coming to spend Christmas with her and he'll expect tourtiere. "He loves it," she said.

Contact Melissa Pasanen at mpasanen@aol.com and follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/TasteofVermont.

Information, performances

- For information on Vermont's French-Canadian heritage, contact the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society at www.vt-fcgs.org, via email at mail@vt-fcgs.org, or by phone at 238-5934.
- Franco-American singer Michele Choiniere will be performing next Saturday at both First Night in Burlington (4 p.m.) and in Montpelier (6 p.m.). For more information, go to www.michelechoiniere.com.