



Education and Culture

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St Martin's Day  
10th of November

# St Martin's Day

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## **Mardipäev (Martinmas)**

For centuries, Martinmas has been one of the most important and cherished days in the Estonian folk calendar. It remains popular today, especially among young people and the rural population. Martinmas celebrates the end of the agrarian year and the beginning of the winter period. It also often marks the end of the period of all souls.

### **Historical meaning of Mardipäev**

Originating in France, the tradition of celebrating Martinmas spread to Germany in the 16th century and later to Scandinavia and the Baltics. In Estonia, Martinmas signifies the merging of Western European customs with the local Balto-Finnic pagan traditions, it also contains elements of earlier worship of the dead as well as certain year-end celebration that predate Christianity.

Martinmas actually has two meanings: in the agricultural calendar it marks the beginning of the natural winter, but in the economic calendar it is seen as the end of autumn. Among Estonians, Martinmas also marks the end of the period of all souls, as well as the autumn period in the Estonian popular calendar when the souls of the ancestors were worshiped that lasted from November 1 to Martinmas.

Like St. Michael's Day, celebrated on September 29, Martinmas is also known as the celebration that marks the end of field work and the beginning of the harvesting period. Following these holidays, women traditionally moved their work indoors for the winter, while men would proceed to work in the forests.

### **Customs**

From the late 4th century CE to the late Middle Ages, much of Western Europe, including Great Britain, engaged in a period of fasting beginning on the day after St. Martin's Day, November 11. This fast period lasted 40 days, and was, therefore, called "Quadragesima Sancti Martini", which means

in Latin "the forty days of St. Martin." At St. Martin's eve, people ate and drank very heartily for a last time before they started to fast. This fasting time was later called "Advent" by the Church.

On St. Martin's Day, children in Flanders, the southern and north-western parts of the Netherlands, the Catholic areas of Germany and Austria participate in paper lantern processions. Often, a man dressed as St. Martin rides on a horse in front of the procession. The children sing songs about St. Martin and about their lanterns. The food traditionally eaten on the day is goose. According to legend, Martin was reluctant to become bishop, which is why he hid in a stable filled with geese. The noise made by the geese betrayed his location to the people who were looking for him.

In Malta, children are sometimes given a bag full of nuts, hazelnuts, oranges and tangerines. In old days, nuts were then used by the children in their games. The parish of Baħrija is dedicated to Saint Martin and on his feast a fair with agricultural produce and animals is organized.

Also, in the east part of the Belgian province of East-Flanders and the west part of West Flanders, children receive presents from St. Martin on November 11, instead of from Saint Nicholas on December 6 or Santa Claus on December 25.

In recent years, the lantern processions have become widespread, even in Protestant areas of Germany and the Netherlands, despite the fact that most Protestant churches do not recognize Saints as a distinct class of believers from the laity.

Many churches in Europe are named after **Saint Martinus**, also known as Saint Martin of Tours. St. Martin is the patron saint of Szombathely, with a church dedicated to him, and also the patron saint of Buenos Aires.

In Latin America, he has a strong popular following and is frequently referred to as **San Martín Caballero**, in reference to his common depiction on horseback.

Though no mention of St. Martin's connection with viticulture is made by Gregory of Tours or other early hagiographers, he is now credited with a prominent role in spreading wine-making throughout the Touraine region and facilitated the planting of many vines. The Greek myth that Aristaeus first discovered the concept of pruning the vines after watching a goat eat some

of the foliage has been applied to Martin.<sup>[1]</sup> He is also credited with introducing the Chenin Blanc grape varietal, from which most of the white wine of western Touraine and Anjou is made.

Martin Luther was purportedly named after St. Martin, as he was baptized on November 11 (St. Martin's Day), 1483.

Estonia's Martinmas customs are connected foremost with those of Halloween, which is widely celebrated in other European countries. St. Martin himself was considered the patron of beggars and this has contributed to the Western European custom of begging for charitable gifts on this day. In Estonia, children often go from house to house on Martinmas, singing their Martinmassongs and wishing households good luck for crops, cattle and for the household in general.

Martinmas is a male holiday, since it honors a male saint. When men went singing and dancing door-to-door, one of the men was disguised as a woman.

The most cherished time for going door-to-door is St. Martin's Eve, when traditionally the group leader was a male, called the Martin Elder or Elder Saint. Masks of animals, such as bears, goats and rams have been common in both Estonia and the rest of Europe on this night.

In the Estonian folklore archives, some 1,500 variations of Martin and Catharine songs have been collected, which indicates the extraordinary significance of this type of ritual song and its survival throughout time. At the same time, the begging tradition has grown in popularity and has been adopted by ethnic minorities living in Estonia, like the coastal Swedes and Russians who lived at the eastern border on the shores of Lake Peipsi.

The customary culmination of the holiday is the Martinmas supper, which involves the eating of many rich foods, especially meat products. In Western Europe people ate goose, which has been depicted as the bird of St. Martin in sacral pictures since 1171. However, the tradition of eating goose on this holiday was mainly enjoyed by the wealthy in Estonia. Most Estonians instead ate other types of birds, such as chicken. Some also ate pork and lamb for St. Martin's Day. It was also common to eat grain, flour or blood sausage on St. Martin's Eve in Estonia.

St. Martin's Party, the entertainment portion of St. Martin's Night, has traditionally been the culmination of the activities. The event is elaborate,

filled with traditional folk dances, musical performances and games. At the same time, the commonly gathered St. Martin's harvest is shared and used. In some districts of the country, such as in Läänemaa, the St. Martin's Party also includes the theatrical St. Martin's Wedding, an imitation wedding with a couple costumed as bride and groom.

Martinmas has retained its historical significance and cultural traditions, and therefore, still remains popular today, especially amongst Estonia's young and rural populations.

## St Martin's Day in Tallinna Kindergarten Vesiroos

St Martin's Day is always on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November.

St Martin's Day was a men's holiday and was related to agriculture. By then all field works had to be or soon going to be finished.

Work evenings started for women. (The most important was spinning.)

On St Martin's Day all wool-related works were forbidden (for example spinning, knitting etc.).

The evening before St Martin's Day was called St Martin's Day Eve.

On St Martin's Day Eve rooms were tidied up and the house was set in order.

Also in the previous evening Marts ran around.

Marts always had the Marts' father with them.



One Mart was wearing a bag where bounties were collected.



For entering the room, permission was asked with a song:

MARDILAUL.

LASKE SISSE MARDISANDIDI MARTI, MARTI.  
MARDI KÜÜNED KÜLMETAVAD MARTI, MARTI.  
MARDI VARBAD VALUTAVAD MARTI, MARTI.  
MARDID TULNUD KAUGE 'ELTA MARTI, MARTI.

Then a greeting song was sung to the mother, father and others.

#### TERETUSLAUL

TERE, TERE PEREKENE MARTI, MARTI  
TERE PEREEIDEKENE MARTI, MARTI  
TERE PERETAADIKENE MARTI, MARTI

Then were checked if the rooms were in order. Also children's social graces were checked and riddles were asked:

Cold as ice, white as a bread, soft as a feather? (snow)

Meadow, mowed twice? (sheep)

An elk runs over the field, feet don't touch the ground? (wind)

The size of a big apple, the length of a league? (ball of yarn)

Estival boy, wearing a hundred shirts? (cabbage)



After that was sang and danced.



Finally the mother gave Marts candies, apples, turnips etc.

**St Martin's Day weater forecasts:**

If there was snow on that day, it brouht a good corn year and lots of apples.

If that day was rainy and foggy, it brouht a soft winter with lots of snow, but a cloudy and rainy summer.

When the weather was fine, a fine weather and a decent hay crop could be awaited. Also came a good corn year.

Cold on St Martin's Day brings cold Christmas, melt - warm Christmas.

## Estonians abroad celebrating St Martin's Day

### A time of spirits and the St. Martin's Day Fair

Estonians abroad have always called Hallowe'en *mardipäev* (St. Martin's Day), for even though the latter is not until Nov. 10, the custom of running from household to household begging for treats is basically the same. Estonia's tradition is more archaic in look: *mardisandid* (Mart beggars / "cripples", dependant on the mercy of others) dress the part and are grimy, dishevelled and under a mountain of vests, coats and hats. They sing about their bad lot: „*Laske sisse mardisandid, Mardi küüned külmetavad, Mardi varbad valutavad* - Let the mardisandid in, Mart's nails are freezing, Mart's toes are aching". The name Martin is by no means unfamiliar to Estonians, but Mart was quickly derived and favoured as a more palatable short form, becoming one of the more common Estonian names.



Fly Kadri, fly! Hanging by the entrance to the children's handicraft-making area at the MARDILAAT (St. Martin's Day Fair) in Tallinn, this doll enticed children to come and pick up a needle and thread. Or a stick, or a reed.

Both boys and girls trick or treat, which is called „running Mart” (marti

jooksma) but the girls have their own day as well, just two weeks later on Nov. 25 in the form of *kadripäev* (St. Katherine's Day). Kadrid usually dress in white, more in the guise of spirits and are called *kadrisandid* or *hingesandid* (kadri- or spirit beggars). *Mardid* are thought to bring luck to the farmer (men's work) while Kadrid will protect the herd (women's work), so no hunting or slaughtering allowed on her day!

All of this running is actually done on the eve of the forthcoming day: like All Hallows' Eve to All Saints Day (*pühakutepäev*), *Mardid* also dash on the eve of the 9th and Kadrid on the 24th. This eve is referred to as the *laupäev* or "Saturday" of the holiday itself, hence *jõululaupäev* (Christmas Eve) and *mardilaupäev*. Today the tradition of going door to door is more common in (safer) towns and villages, where people know one another but I did meet a crowd of creepy beggars at the entrance to my 8-story midtown apt. building this year.

Hallowe'en has also steadfastly made its way to continental Europe. Although it seems to be celebrated mainly in pubs by North American / British expatriates, trinkets of witches and jack-o-lanterns made in China have arrived. Luckily they are generally looked upon as foreign in countries with their own, age-old versions of "souling".



Friida is sewing a big blue nose onto her stuffed kitty-cat at the children's handicraft area of the *Mardilaat*. On hand to help is Margit Sondberg of the Estonian Folk Art Club - *Eesti Rahvakunstiklubi*.

## **A candle in the window on Nov. 2**

The entire month of November and in some places up until Christmas is called *hingedeaeeg* - the time of the spirits. *Hingedepäev* (Spirits Day) on Nov. 2 is marked by people going to the cemetery to place candles on the graves of loved ones. They may also light a memorial candle at home and even place them on the window for the spirits to find their way home, since this is when old friends come back to visit. One of the old names for November is *kooljakuu* - month of the dead and there is also a melding of the old Catholic saint day for Martin(us) and another old Estonian synonym for death Mardus, also apparent in the Finnish name for the 11th month - *marraskuu*, which also means month of the dead.

People used to heat their saunas and leave food out on the table on Nov. 2, so the visiting deceased family members would feel at home. It was generally a quiet time: shouting was discouraged, the house was tidied and quiet preparations were made for winter.

There is no better time for a fall fair (if you keep the dancing and singing low-key), but not in the sense of North American fairs with pumpkins and other fresh produce. In Estonia everything is pickled and preserved by November and the annual MARDILAAT, "Mart's Fair", held at the Tallinn Song Festival grounds (more precisely the halls behind the song stage) is more of a winter-hoarding event in every sense of the word.

The theme of this year's Mardilaat was lace (PITS) and here we see one of the more challenging forms of weaving bobbin lace (NIPLISPITS / NIPLAMINE). Each thread is attached to a small pillow on one end and a bobbin on the other. A pair of bobbins is either crossed or twisted without the use of



knots, explained teacher and author of a recent book on the subject Eeva Talts (left), who is also a member of the board of the folk art and handicraft association organising the fair. Bobbin lace is used to adorn the cuffs, blouses (KÄISED) and headdresses of many local national costumes.

## Maavillane - salt (or in this case wool) of the earth

This was the 11th year for the very successful 4-day event, awaited by all fans of home-grown, practical and health-promoting products, but it's not only the best place to start your Christmas shopping. The fair is organised by the Estonian Folk Art and Handicraft Association (Eesti Rahvakunsti ja Käsitöö Liit), the people whose Eesti Käsitöö shops are in many places in Tallinn's old town and who also organise the many smaller, summer fairs held in the Town Hall Square. They promote, instruct and organise competitions. Fall's Mardilaat is a good place to find out about groups and schools teaching traditional crafts and to learn a thing or two from the vendors. There are instructors on hand to keep kids and other enthusiasts busy making Christmas decorations out of reeds or weaving lucky stars to hang in your window. Traditional goodies available include moose meat and blood sausage and Mulgi porridge (mashed potatoes with barley and meat) which you can enjoy while watching the performances of traditional song and dance. I was busy stuffing a toy bear when a group of feisty, well-set older ladies began roaming the premises, wearing masks and singing old kadripäeva songs.



Tiina Kivipõld and Silja Jaska of Uuetoa farm in the county of Viljandimaa convinced people of the wonders of the buckwheat husk pillow: it maintains its shape supporting the neck and head, stays cool and can be used by people allergic to dust mites (TOLMULESTAD). They were also selling their own honey and barley, flour and semolina, all made from the farm's organically-grown buckwheat (TATAR). This grain does not only grow in Ukraine! Photos: Riina Kindlam