

WHAT IS MASLENITSA AND HOW IS IT CELEBRATED?

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Maslenitsa is one of the most religious and folk holidays in the Russian nation. Many people await the coming of Maslenitsa with trepidation. The traditions of celebrating go deep into history. In the olden days, this holiday was celebrated on a grand scale, with chants, dances, and competitions. Maslenitsa is one of the favourite holidays in Russian culture. From time immemorial, Maslenitsa has been celebrated on a grand scale, which is why it got its name, 'Wide Maslenitsa'. People said that at this time, you need to eat as many times as a dog wags its tail or as many times as a crow crows. Unlike other holidays, on Maslenitsa, people not only indulge in gluttony at home or in the family but also often go visit and invite guests to their place.

Maslenitsa is a pagan holiday. Its origin was lost in ancient times, but it was noted among all Slavic peoples. People called for a good harvest and rich offspring for their homes. The holiday was associated with the cult of the emerging sun, hence the tradition of pancakes. Round, hot, and golden, they are like miniature images of our luminaries. Alexander Kuprin wrote: A pancake is a symbol of the sun, red days, good harvests, marriages, and healthy children. Over time, Maslenitsa lost its mystical meaning and turned into a mass folk festival dedicated to seeing off winter. Only on Maslenitsa are the full breadth of the Russian character and Russian prowess fully revealed. And in our time, in the last days before the longest and strictest fast, it is customary for people to "take a walk to the fullest," visit, eat pancakes, and rejoice with family and friends.

Pancakes are a dish whose ritual use is known among the Eastern Slavs, mainly Russians. Of particular importance in the rituals are the hot first pancake and the last baked pancake, laid on top of the leg. Pancakes were baked in Russian throughout all the years, but still, they became the main treat and symbol of the Maslenitsa holiday. Each housewife had her own special recipe for making pancakes. Pancakes were baked from wheat, buckwheat, oatmeal, and corn flour, sometimes with the addition of millet or semolina porridge, potatoes, pumpkin, and apples. In the villages, the dough was placed on Monday night, so that in the morning, for breakfast, there would already be a stack of fragrant ,hot" pancakes on the table.

There was an interesting custom: the first pancake was always dedicated to the dead. The pancake, the first to be baked during Shrovetide week, was laid out for the "parents" on a dormer

window, shrine, roof, or given to the poor. If it was placed on the dormer window “for the souls of the parents,” then they would always say, “Our honest parents, here is a pancake for your darling!” In the cities, the first pancake was served to a beggar so that he would remember all the losses. Particularly popular were the rich yeast pancakes, which were sold from trays on every corner and served in taverns and eateries along with sour cream, mushrooms, caviar, herring, sprat, whipped cream, jam, or honey. They washed it with tea, whipped milk, or hot milk. In famous St. Petersburg and Moscow restaurants, efficient floor workers, along with a menu card, placed printed congratulations on Maslenitsa on the tables, often written in verse and decorated with bright drawings. Each day of Maslenitsa week has its own names and rituals.

Monday is “meeting” day. By the first day of Maslenitsa, public slides, swings, booths for buffoons, and tables with sweet dishes get arranged. The children made a straw doll in the morning, dressed it up, and carried it in a sled. Tuesday is “play” day. In the morning of this day, girls and boys get invited to ride the slides. The fellows were looking for brides, and the girls were stealing glances at their betrotheds. Previously, people crowded around street puppet booths, and in the evenings, the mummers went home. Even today, no one bothers you to go on a visit or even organise a small amateur concert there.

Wednesday: “gourmet.” The “belly festival” officially begins on Wednesday. On this day, mother-in-laws invited their sons-in-laws for pancakes, and to entertain their beloved son-in-laws, they called all their relatives to come. And in the evenings, they sang songs about a caring mother-in-law and played farces with a dressed-up bear about how the mother-in-law baked pancakes for her son-in-law, how her mother-in-law’s head hurt, and how her son-in-law said thank you to his mother-in-law.

Thursday is “revelry” or “wide Thursday” day. On this day, the festivities are approaching the middle. Under Ivan the Terrible, hot fist fights took place on Thursdays. After that, the men were not afraid to fulfil their second duty—to send an invitation to their mother-in-law for pancakes.

Friday is “mother-in-law’s evening.” On this day, sons-in-law treated mothers-in-law to pancakes, sometimes with all their relatives. However, there is another version: on Friday, it is the sons-in-law who should come to their mothers-in-law for pancakes. Whichever you like the most, choose it for yourself. The main thing on this day is that it should be held under the motto, “Damn is not a wedge; it won’t burst your stomach!”

Saturday is “sister-in-law’s get-together” (for those who are curious: sister-in-law is her husband’s sister). It’s the young daughter-in-law’s turn to cook. The girls must fatten up their

husband's sisters with pancakes. On Saturday, children built a snow town with towers and gates on rivers, ponds, and fields, then divided it into two halves: one of them tried to protect the town, and the other had to take it by force.

Sunday is “forgiveness day,” the crown of all Maslenitsa. At sunset, it is prescribed to go from house to house and humbly ask for forgiveness from everyone who has been annoyed or hurt since the last Maslenitsa. The newlyweds visited their relatives and presented their father-in-law, mother-in-law, matchmakers, and friends with wedding gifts. They also went to give gifts to godfather and godfather; it was believed that the most honourable gift for godfather was a towel, and for godfather, a bar of soap.

In the villages, fires were lit, but not just ordinary ones—from brushwood and logs, or from straw and old things. They threw away everything that would no longer be needed in the new year in order to free themselves from excess.

The culmination of Maslenitsa remains the burning of the effigy. The burning is preceded by songs, games, dances, and round dances, accompanied by a treat with hot sbiten and pancakes. As a sacrifice, they made a huge, funny, and scary doll—a scarecrow of Maslenitsa—from straw or rags and usually dressed it in women's clothing. Then they carried it through the entire village, sometimes placing the stuffed animal on a wheel stuck on top of a pole. A large fire was being made outside the outskirts. They gave the scarecrow a pancake, after which “Maslenitsa Madam” was burned at the stake with the words, “Burn, pancakes, burn, Maslenitsa!”

Not only the effigy of Winter was thrown into the fire, but also various old things, the remnants of holiday food, which symbolised the funeral of Winter, everything that was obsolete and old at the same time—the renewal of nature, the birth of spring, and new forces of fertility.

Maslenitsa is one of the most popular folk holidays. I think this is a good occasion when people can get together, enjoy fun events and treats, and show their commitment to folk traditions and culture.