



12 Days of Christmas Holiday Handbook



With Christmas I'm excited to share something special I've curated for you: a Greek-inspired holiday guide filled with stories, recipes, music, traditions, and a few surprises to help you bring a touch of Greece into your home this season.

Inside, you'll find everything from links to lyrics and sheet music for the *kalanda* (perfect for teaching the kids or refreshing your own childhood memories), to heartwarming stories you can read by the fireplace, to recipes that will fill your kitchen with the scents of a Greek Christmas. I've also included a few uplifting examples of philanthropy from across the Greek world — because giving is just as much a part of our holiday DNA as cookies and carols.

And yes... we're even going there: *karavákia*. Christmas boats! One of my favorite traditions from the islands. I've pulled together simple ideas to help you decorate your own and bring this beautiful custom to life, right alongside your tree.

Let's dive in — and let Greece light up your holidays.

Gregory C. Pappas
Founder & President
Greek America Foundation



Please note: Anywhere you see underlined green text, that is a clickable hyperlink that will take you to the source article.



DAY 1 — Stories to start the season

The Christmas tree, the holiday carols. You may be surprised to read about their origin. Most believe that the traditions that surround the Holiday Season and the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ come from northern Europe. In yet another edition of “the Greeks invented everything,” click to read some Ancient Greek traditions that were practiced during the winter period and how they evolved over time to our celebrations today. Some of what you learn might surprise you! [Read here](#).

A Slow, Soulful Journey Through a Greek Christmas Through Ariadne’s Eyes

If you want to experience Christmas in Greece as it actually feels—not the glossy travel-poster version, but the real rhythm of rural life—Ariadne’s beautifully crafted video is a gift. She captures the soul of the Mediterranean countryside: unhurried mornings, simple rituals, and the quiet magic of traditions that have lasted for generations. From the glow of the karaváki to kitchens scented with melomakarona and kourabiedes... from mischievous kalikantzari tales to winter walks for horta... it all culminates in the sound that defines a Greek holiday: children singing the kalanda. If you want to set the mood for a Greek Christmas, start here. Authentic, heartwarming, and beautifully filmed—proof that the season’s magic lives in the small, everyday moments. [Watch Ariadne’s full Christmas journey here](#)



DAY 2 — Inspire Philanthropy

The holidays have always been Greece's quiet masterclass in giving. Long before "corporate social responsibility" became a buzzword, Greek families were teaching their kids that generosity isn't seasonal—it's a way of life.

Just look at John Paul DeJoria. One of the world's most philanthropic billionaires traces his instinct to give back to his Greek immigrant mother, who insisted that even when they had almost nothing, they always had enough to help someone else. Those early lessons shaped a man who now donates millions every year. [Read his story and the lesson learned from his mom, here.](#)

And then there are Katherine and Sophie Kallinis—the Georgetown Cupcake sisters—who use their wildly popular bakeries to spread holiday cheer in the sweetest way possible. Their story is a reminder that you don't need billions to make an impact; sometimes a box of cupcakes, a good heart, and a willingness to show up is all it takes. [Read about Operation Cupcake here.](#)

If you're looking for your own way to spark a little kindness this season, here's an easy place to start: support the Greek America Foundation's Toys for Kids project, bringing holiday joy to sick and vulnerable children throughout Athens. A small gesture from you becomes a moment of magic for a child who truly needs it—and that's exactly what this season is all about. [Support this project by sponsoring some toys for sick and at-risk kids in Athens.](#)





DAY 3 — Enter the Mischief: The Kallikantzari

The Greek Christmas season wouldn't be complete without a little mischief, courtesy of the kalikantzari—the goblin troublemakers who climb up from the underworld during the Twelve Days of Christmas. For generations, these creatures have been the stars of winter folktales told beside fireplaces, woven into songs, and whispered to children. Depending on the story, they're sawing down the Tree of Life, stealing food from village kitchens, or darting through chimneys to stir up harmless trouble.

If you want to dive deeper into their world, I've included two wonderful videos below—one, a charming children's tale in Greek; the other, a short exploration of the origins and symbolism behind Greece's most mischievous holiday visitors. Perfect for sharing with kids—or revisiting your own childhood memories.

A children's tale (in Greek) about the mischievous Kalikantzari

Kalikantzari stubbornly saw through the Tree of Life, the very tree that holds up the entire Earth! Because they're tricksters and mischievous little troublemakers, they want the Earth to collapse so that all humans tumble down. But... adventures await them instead. [Click here to watch.](#)

Kallikantzaros: The Origins of Greece's Christmas Goblins

Deep within the heart of Greek folklore exists a peculiar creature known as the Kallikantzaros. This mischievous being is said to emerge from the Earth's depths during the Twelve Days of Christmas, from December 25th until Epiphany on January 6th. [Click here to watch.](#)



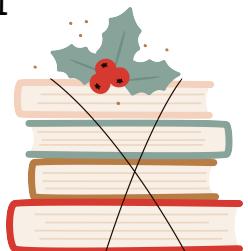
Greek Christmas Tales for Curious Kids: Magic, Mischief & Tradition

There's something about the holiday season that makes stories feel even more magical — especially the ones that travel across generations. Greek Christmas folklore has always been rich with wonder: mischievous goblins sneaking up from the underworld, brave children outsmarting mythical creatures, families gathering for vasilopita, and gods and goddesses stepping down from Olympus for a little festive fun. These tales were once whispered beside fireplaces, told by grandparents, and passed along like treasured heirlooms.

Today, a new generation of authors and illustrators is bringing that world to life again — retelling old myths, imagining new adventures, and giving children a doorway into the traditions we grew up with (or wish we had). From goblins with lessons to learn to coloring-page snowstorms on Mount Olympus, these books carry the spirit of a Greek Christmas into the hands of young readers everywhere.

Whether you're looking to share a piece of your own childhood, introduce your kids to Greek holiday lore for the first time, or simply wrap up a meaningful stocking stuffer, these stories deliver the perfect blend of wonder, nostalgia, and Greek-flavored Christmas magic.

Here are a few standout titles to light up the season.

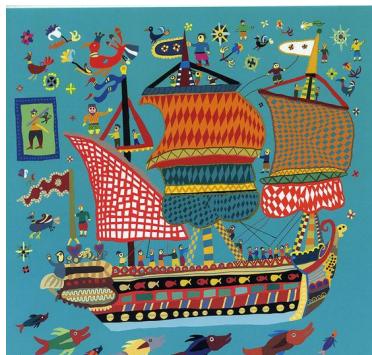




DAY 4 — Decorate a Boat (Karaváki)

While most of the world reaches for ornaments and evergreens, Greece has kept a second, equally magical Christmas tradition alive: decorating the karaváki—the humble little boat that symbolizes safe voyages, new beginnings, and the deep connection Greeks have always had with the sea. Long before Christmas trees appeared in Greek homes, families would place a small wooden boat by the hearth and dress it with lights, ribbons, and tiny tokens of hope for the year ahead.

For those of us living far from the islands, bringing this tradition into our own homes is easier—and more meaningful—than ever. A decorated karaváki instantly adds a touch of Greek soul to your holiday décor, and it's a beautiful way to pass this custom down to the next generation. [Here are some simple ideas](#) to help you create your own and keep this seafaring tradition afloat, no matter where you celebrate.





DAY 5 — The Sounds of the Greek Christmas Season

No Greek Christmas is complete without the sound of the *kalanda*—those joyful carols sung by children going door to door with triangles in hand, spreading good wishes and collecting treats. For many of us, these songs are woven into our childhood memories, but they're also one of the easiest and most meaningful traditions to pass on to the next generation.

Whether you want to teach your kids, refresh your own memory, or even start a brand-new family tradition, we've gathered everything you need: sheet music and lyrics for the classic Christmas, New Year's, and Epiphany *kalanda*. Print them out, sing them at home, or—if you're feeling brave—go door to door the way kids still do in villages and cities throughout Greece.

[CLICK HERE](#)

And for a fun twist, don't miss the bonus video below: a mind-blowing, instrumental performance of the *kalanda* by Chicago musician Dimitri Dallas. It's the tradition you know... but like you've never heard it before.

[Click here to watch this mind-blowing video.](#)

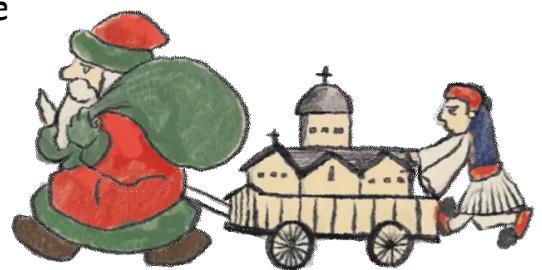




“The Carols” by Nikiforos Lytras

“The Carols” by Nikiforos Lytras is one of the most famous paintings in the history of modern Greek painting. The work, created in 1872, depicts a characteristic example of modern Greek art. A group of children of different backgrounds and nationalities dressed in the clothing of their time hold traditional musical instruments and sing Christmas carols in the yard of a house. A housewife stands with the toddler in the window and listens to the carols. Behind the wall, there is the head of another child viewing this Christmas tradition. The full moon and the flowers hanging from the pot on the wall give a serene harmony to the whole picture.

The fallen bucket is obviously the result of a rush of the children to sing carols to as many houses as possible before dawn. The statue in the right side corner shows the continuity of the Greek culture, as well as the painter’s appreciation of his father’s profession, who was a sculptor.





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*When completing your purchase and checking out, use the code GAF2025 in the box marked "Discount code or gift card"



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DAY 6 — Cookie Day #1: Kourabiedes

If there's one scent that instantly signals "Christmas in Greece," it's the sweet cloud of powdered sugar that follows a freshly baked tray of kourabiedes. These buttery, melt-in-your-mouth cookies are one of Greece's two iconic holiday treats—and they take center stage in almost every home this time of year.

Every family has "their" version, but the fun is in discovering new twists, new textures, and new ways to perfect that snowy finish. Whichever you choose, you're carrying on a delicious tradition—and filling your home with the unmistakable flavor of a Greek Christmas.

Below, you'll find several takes on the classic:

- Greece's beloved chef Argiro Barbarigou [sharing her traditional recipe here](#)
- A rich aromatic batch [from The Hungry Bites](#)
- And a festive mastiha-infused variation [from Calliope Haralambous](#)



Kourabiedes from The Hungry Bites

[CLICK HERE FOR RECIPE](#)



[Follow The Hungry Bites
here for more recipes](#)



DAY 7 — Cookie Day #2: Melomakarona

And then comes the other half of Greece's legendary holiday cookie duo: melomakarona—the honey-soaked, spice-filled beauties that balance the sweetness of kourabiedes with something deeper, earthier, and undeniably festive. If kourabiedes are the snowy sparkle of Christmas, melomakarona are the warm glow of the fireplace: cinnamon, clove, orange, and good Greek honey coming together in the most comforting way. Every family guards their recipe, but there's no shortage of delicious versions to explore. Together with kourabiedes, these cookies are the inseparable pair that define a Greek Christmas—and baking them is as much a tradition as eating them. Below, you'll find some of the best:

- A charming holiday moment with Martha Stewart and Arianna Huffington, rolling dough and laughing their way through a classic batch. [Watch here](#).
- A traditional recipe from Greece's beloved Argiro Barbarigou [here](#).
- A rich, aromatic version [from Akis Petretzikis](#), full of bold flavor
- And a tried-and-true melomakarona recipe from Greek American food blogger [Eleni Saltas](#) [here](#)





Spanakopita (Greek Spinach Pie) by Cat Cora

There's something magical about a dish that connects two worlds with one bite—and Cat Cora's Spanakopita pie does exactly that.

In Greece, spanakopita is a beloved Christmas staple, baked in countless variations and shared as part of the holiday table's comforting, celebratory spread. Cat takes that timeless tradition and gives it a cozy American twist, baking her flaky, spinach-filled masterpiece in a classic pie dish that feels right at home on any holiday buffet. It's the same irresistible Greek flavor, wrapped in a form that nods to the American pie culture she grew up with—familiar, festive, and perfect for feeding a crowd. If you're looking to bring a bit of Greek warmth to your holiday season, this is the dish that delivers.

And who better to bring this recipe to life than Cat Cora? Raised in a tight-knit Greek community in Jackson, Mississippi, Cat grew up surrounded by the smells, sounds, and flavors of her family's kitchen. Those influences shaped her long before she became the first female Iron Chef, a celebrated restaurateur, and one of the most recognizable culinary figures in America. Her cooking has always been a love letter to her heritage, blending Greek tradition with her own modern flair.

[Click here for Cat Cora's recipe.](#)



[Follow Chef Cat Cora here for more recipes](#)



Argiro Barbarigou - The Essential Holiday Helper in the Kitchen

When I think of "home for the holidays," I think of my mom's cooking. All of the traditional flavors and smells, simple dishes with the purest ingredients that come from long lines and generations of Greek kitchens. And while there are many Greek chefs doing great work preserving these culinary traditions, in my humble opinion, there is only one that takes me back to my mother's kitchen in Pittsburgh. **Argiro Barbarigou**.

Her website is packed with recipes (mostly in Greek, but also several in English) including most of the traditional recipes to create an authentic Greek experience.

Full disclosure: Argiro was my mom's favorite Greek chef and always smiled when she appeared on Greek satellite television channeling, commenting that "only Argiro cooks correctly, the traditional way."

[VISIT ARGIRO'S WEBSITE HERE.](#)



Christmas Pork Roll w/ dried fruits and butter sauce



DAY 8 — Before St. Basil's Bread, there's Christopsomo

Christopsomo—literally “Christ’s Bread”—is one of Greece’s most beautiful yet lesser-known Christmas traditions. In certain regions, families bake this ornate, gently spiced loaf on Christmas Eve, adorning it with symbolic designs that represent blessings for the home: wheat for prosperity, a cross for protection, and intricate patterns made by hand, just as they’ve been for generations.

It’s not just bread; it’s a quiet act of devotion, artistry, and hope for the year ahead. If this isn’t a tradition you grew up with, consider starting a new one this season. Baking Christopsomo is surprisingly meditative, deeply meaningful, and a wonderful way to bring a touch of old-world Greece into your holiday table—no matter where you live. Here are a few recipes to help you begin your own Christopsomo story.

Christopsomo (Christ’s Bread) [by Akis Petretzikis](#)
Recipe by Dimitra ([Demetra's Dishes](#))





DAY 9 — Bread and Cake Traditions: Vasilopita

No Greek New Year's celebration is complete without vasilopita, the cherished cake—or bread—named after St. Basil, whose feast day falls on January 1st. Like many Greek traditions, vasilopita comes in regional variations: some families bake a beautifully aromatic, yeasted bread, while others prepare a tender, citrus-infused cake dusted generously with powdered sugar. Two different textures, two different culinary paths—but both lead to the same beloved ritual.

At the heart of the tradition is the hidden coin, baked inside as a symbol of blessing and good fortune. Its origins go back to one of the most touching stories of Greek Christian folklore: when St. Basil sought to return valuables unfairly taken from the poor, he asked each family to bake loaves with coins and jewels mixed inside.

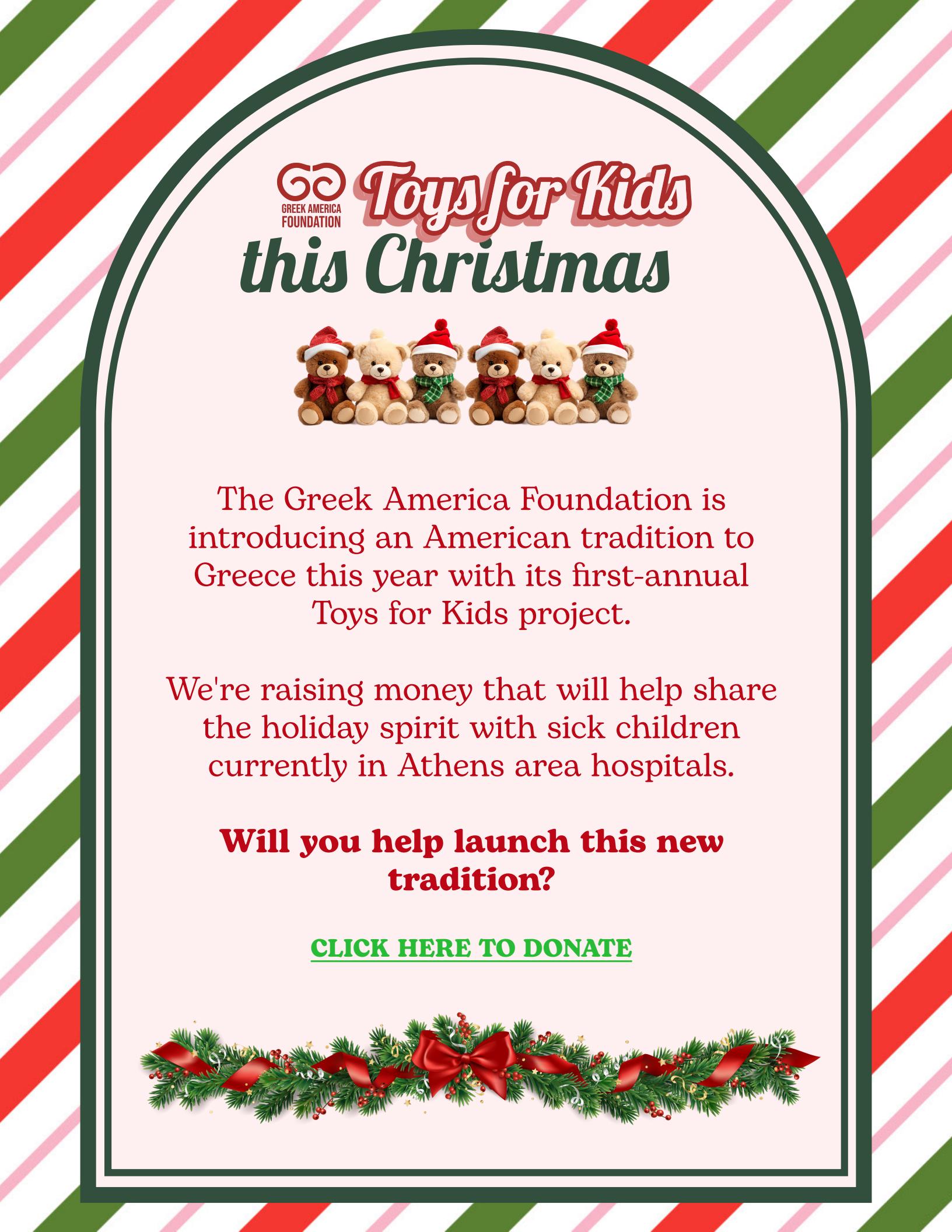
Miraculously, the right items found their way back to each rightful owner. From that act of compassion came the custom we know today — cutting the vasilopita at midnight, sharing slices with loved ones, and celebrating whoever finds the lucky coin.



Vasilopita from The Hungry Bites

[CLICK HERE FOR RECIPE](#)





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Toys for Kids *this Christmas*



The Greek America Foundation is introducing an American tradition to Greece this year with its first-annual Toys for Kids project.

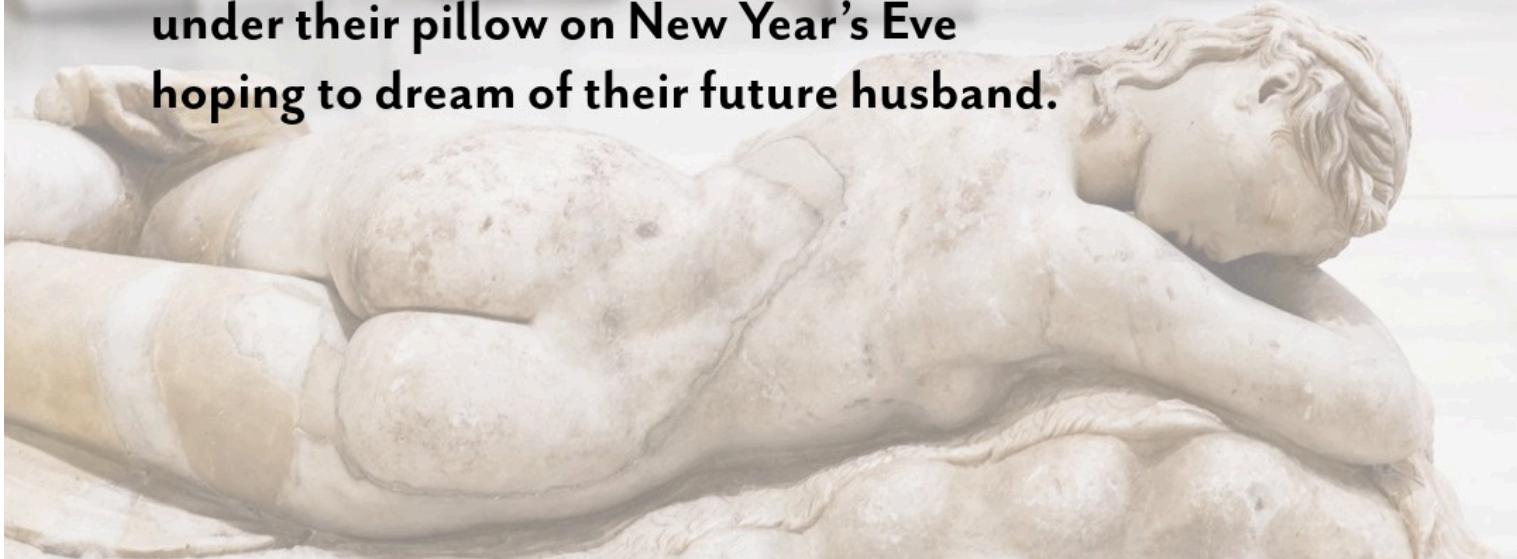
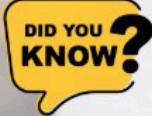
We're raising money that will help share the holiday spirit with sick children currently in Athens area hospitals.

Will you help launch this new tradition?

[**CLICK HERE TO DONATE**](#)



In some regions of Greece, unmarried women place crumbs from their Vasilopita under their pillow on New Year's Eve hoping to dream of their future husband.



Whether you grew up with the bread version from one part of Greece or the cake version from another — or you're starting the tradition for the first time — vasilopita brings sweetness, symbolism, and a little bit of magic to the New Year.

Below, you'll find a handful of wonderful vasilopita recipes to choose from — whether you prefer the traditional bread-style vasilopita or one of the many cake variations that different regions of Greece have made their own.

- A fragrant, orangey vasilopita bread variation [here](#)
- A simple and comforting cake-style vasilopita [from California Greek Girl](#)
- A classic, beautifully spiced vasilopita cake [from celebrity chef Akis Petretzikis](#)
- A light, festive cake recipe from Greece's beloved [Argiro Barbarigou](#)
- And a flavorful, modern twist [from The Hungry Bites](#)





Up Your Vasilopita Game this Year

Need some fancy ideas to up your Vasilopita game this year?

How about some Vasilopita cupcakes? These might make for some fun times with the young ones. A coin can still be backed in one lucky cupcake from the batch. [Here's a recipe from Mia Kouppa.](#)



It's named after St. Basil so why not put his likeness on your cake? Use powdered sugar and [this food safe stencil](#) from The Orthodox Design Company. This is definitely "next level" design.



If you want to go really "old school," find one of your yia yia's doilies and use it as a stencil and dust with powdered sugar.

For some color and zest, try some pomegranate seeds on top of your cake. Or when all else fails... there are always M&Ms.







DAY 10 — Forget the Eggnog. Try some “Krasomélo”

If eggnog isn't your thing — or if you're just ready to upgrade your holiday drink game — try a warm Greek classic that deserves a spot by your fireplace: krasomélo. Think mulled wine's earthier, more aromatic cousin, infused not just with spices but with the unmistakable scents of the Greek countryside. Krasomélo starts with a semi-sweet or sweet Greek red wine gently heated with cinnamon, cloves, citrus peels, and a touch of honey. But the twist that sets it apart? A splash of brewed mountain tea.

Aromatic Greek-Style Mulled Wine: A classic version made with semi-sweet red wine, honey, cinnamon sticks, cloves, and citrus. [From My Greek Dish](#)

Krasomélo [from The Spruce Eats](#): A simple, beginner friendly approach with easy substitutions and instructions.

[Vasiliki's Non-Alcoholic Krasomélo](#) (Kid-Friendly!)
A mulled “wine” variation using grape juice, honey, citrus, cinnamon, and star anise — perfect for families or gatherings with young children.





DAY 11 — Don't forget the Pomegranate

The Greek New Year wouldn't be complete without the dramatic thud of a pomegranate smashing at the front door. At midnight, the fruit is hurled to the ground so its seeds scatter everywhere — a joyful (and slightly messy) ritual believed to bring abundance, luck, and prosperity for the year ahead.

The more seeds that burst out, the better the fortune. It's an ancient symbol of fertility and blessing woven into the very first moments of the new year... and a tradition that fills Greek households with hope, laughter, and a fresh start.





DAY 12 — Keep the Tree Up Until Epiphany

In Greece, taking down the Christmas tree right after December 25th would feel almost premature. The festive season stretches all the way to Epiphany on January 6th, marking the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas.

Tradition holds that the tree — along with boats, lights, and all the holiday decorations — stays up until the Blessing of the Waters, when priests across the country dip the cross into the sea, rivers, and harbors.

Only then is the season truly considered complete. Keeping the tree up until Epiphany isn't just about extending the holiday glow; it's a nod to centuries of customs that link Christmas, New Year's, and Epiphany into one beautifully connected celebration.



From me to you...

Dear Friends of the Greek America Foundation,

As we close out the year and reflect on everything this community has made possible, I want to pause and speak to you directly—not as subscribers, not as supporters on the sidelines, but as people who believe that Greek values still matter in the world.

The Greek America Foundation exists for one reason: to ensure that the ideals of Hellenism—philotimo, generosity, culture, service, and human dignity—are not just remembered, but actively lived and passed forward. Not in theory. In action.

Through education, culture, philanthropy, and community, we work every day to turn heritage into impact. From supporting vulnerable children and families in Greece, to inspiring young people through service and leadership, to preserving the stories and traditions that define who we are—this work is deliberate, hands-on, and deeply human.

But here's the truth, plainly stated: None of this sustains itself.

Meaningful programs, responsible growth, long-term planning, and real impact require something stronger than good intentions. They require committed members—people who stand behind this mission and help ensure it doesn't fade, pause, or compromise. Becoming a member of the Greek America Foundation isn't about a title or a transaction. It's about choosing to be part of something enduring. It's a way of saying: *I believe this work should exist not just today, but for generations.*

Membership directly supports our ability to plan ahead, respond when help is needed most, and expand our reach without sacrificing our values or independence. It is the backbone of our sustainability—and the reason we can keep doing this work with integrity.

[I hope you'll take the next step and click here and become a member.](#)

From my heart, thank you for being part of this community—for caring, for showing up, and for believing that heritage is not something we inherit quietly, but something we protect and advance together.

With gratitude and resolve,
Gregory C. Pappas
Founder & President
Greek America Foundation

