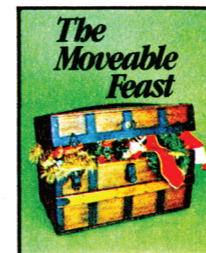


# The Philippines



## New Christmas Customs Wherever We Go

By Claudia Nichols



When I was a child, Christmas always meant being with the relatives. If all the aunts, uncles and cousins weren't there, it wasn't Christmas. Then when I grew up and married a career military man, I learned what everyone in the military community learns: Our Christmases change as surely as our addresses do.

How can it be Christmas if your closest kin are thousands of miles away? Christmas comes every December, with or without your relatives, and whether you celebrate it or not. Therefore, you learn to celebrate Christmases that are different from the ones you grew up with.

A family we know here in the Philippines continues a Christmas tradition from the States, slightly altered. In the States, the land around their home is planted with evergreens from previous Christmases. Here, their Christmas tree is a potted palm decorated with miniature lights. After Christmas, the palm will be planted in the yard to be enjoyed by the families who come after them.

The people next door are an Air Force family originally from Jamaica. Here, they're able to enjoy their traditional Christmas meal, which they often had to miss in the States — they buy a slaughtered goat from someone in a barrio and serve goat curry.

When our children were small and we were in Greece, we borrowed a tradition from another Air Force family in the same situation. We have our holiday meal on Christmas Eve instead of on Christmas Day. Then youngsters don't have to be dragged away from their toys for a big dinner, and Mom gets to enjoy Christmas instead of spending the morning in the

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Recapture Christmas in the Philippines by serving Chicken Adobo (rear) and Lumpia with Sweet-Sour Sauce. (TTM photo by Joseph Matera)

kitchen. On Christmas Day we lunch on sandwiches made from leftovers from the big dinner.

Serving the holiday meal on Christmas Eve is also a Philippine tradition. After midnight mass, everyone comes home for *noche buena*. The meal might be roast pig or the simpler Chicken Adobo, served with rice.

Our own family dinner is served early in the evening. We use the good china and crystal we bought when we took leave in Greece and flew space-available to Germany. We used the china and crystal even when the children were toddlers, reasoning that the finer things in life are meant to be enjoyed, not hidden away. Besides, a dish broken in use (rather than during a move) seems less of a tragedy.

As we enjoy our Christmas now, we think back to our first Christmas in the Philippines, 16 years ago when we were newly married. I hadn't learned that, when you see something on the shelf that you want, you buy it right then, before it disappears. So when I got ready to buy our first Christmas ornaments, there were none.

On our next overseas tour in Europe — several years and two children later — the problem was with the trees. One year they arrived in time, but had been transported in a nonpressurized area of the airplane. The trees froze, and after being put up and decorated, promptly began losing their needles. The following year, the shipment was late and smaller than expected. We bought an artificial tree and put an end to our tree anxieties and pine needles on the rug.

Years later in Hawaii, live trees were going for \$35 or more one Christmas. We dragged out the familiar artificial tree and decorated it with the ornaments we had collected over the years. Here in the Philippines, we've been able to buy a large, live tree each year. We don't miss the artificial tree, but it's good to know it's there.

A *parol* is also part of our Philippine Christmas. It's a star made out of colored tissue paper stretched over a bamboo frame. The process, if not the final product, is familiar to anyone who ever built a homemade kite. At the back of the *parol* is an opening where you can insert an electric bulb. I never put a light in ours because I

think they're beautiful just as they come from the market.

Another important part of Christmas is always the food. When I was first married, I made fudge, divinity and pastries as though I had a house full of relatives to share them with. Then I looked around and saw two adults who didn't need the calories, and I cut back on my Christmas cooking. You can't cut it out entirely, though, or it wouldn't really be Christmas. You can do without relatives, and you can get by without a tree, but you have to have the goodies.

The Christmas we were stationed in Arkansas, I went on a baking binge. We were less than a hundred miles from our relatives, and we would have a real Christmas. I had cooked all the old favorites, yet I wanted to bake something else. But I had used up all the eggs except one, and there was only one envelope of yeast left. I looked through a cookbook until I found something I could bake that sounded good. Danish Kringle was it, and I've made it every year since.

I still go on baking binges every Christmas although my relatives are half a world away. I cook Danish Kringle and all the rest. I pack the goodies in handmade baskets from the market, and then I give them away.

I like watching our *parol* as it sways in the breeze of our carport. We'll take one with us when we leave, just as we've taken other things we've liked and made them ours. Our Christmases are different from the ones we knew as children, and when our children are grown, their Christmases will be different too. I'd like to think military children grow up with the idea that you can have a meaningful Christmas wherever you are, with whatever you have — or don't have.

### CHICKEN ADOBO

(pictured)

- 1 2- to 3-pound chicken, cut into pieces, or the equivalent in parts cooking oil
- 1/2 cups water
- 1/4 cup vinegar
- 1 teaspoon whole peppercorns
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 medium onion, peeled and cut into quarters
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1/2 cup water

Brown the chicken in a large skillet, using a small amount of oil. Pour off oil.

Combine remaining ingredients