

There is Another Way....An Alternative Christmas

Skille-ma-dinke-dinke-du, skille-ma-dinke-du,

Hor pa Soren Banjomus, han spiller nemli nu,

Skille-ma-dinke-dinke-du, skille-ma-dinke-du,

Kom og syng og dans med os, det syn's vi at I sku

Picture this. An extended Anglo-Danish family group are dancing round a Christmas Tree holding hands and singing this catchy, addictive ditty. It is the one modern song in an obligatory canon of traditional carols. This is how my favourite Christmas party starts.

Since I was lucky enough more than half a century ago to inveigle myself into a wonderfully warm and expressive Danish family this celebration on Christmas Eve has been one of my end of year highlights. Before the communal singing the tree has to be lit up with real candles. The possibility that the tree will go up in smoke and incinerate the living room is never far from one's thoughts. When we do this in our house rather than with my in-laws in Copenhagen, I always have a pail of water placed close to the impending conflagration. The Danes think I'm a real nervous nelly.

Christmas Eve is the epicentre of the Yuletide season in Denmark. This is when the sumptuous main meal is lovingly crafted and when all presents are opened. Not for the Danes dry turkey and flatulent sprouts, they choose to feast on roast duck stuffed with apples and prunes. Accompanying this succulent waterfowl are caramelized potatoes and warm red cabbage – a marriage of flavours made in Heaven.

After the main course there is what can only be described as a competitive dessert. This is the famous *risalemande* a rice pudding like no other, with vanilla, cream and chopped blanched almonds. It is served with a hot cherry sauce, *kirsbaersauce*. There are dozens of chopped almonds in the dessert but only one whole almond. Whoever finds the whole nut wins a prize. The standard trick is for the person who finds the almond to slip it under the tongue and give not the slightest flicker of expression to betray the fact that he or she has it. This deception is maintained until every last spoonful of the pudding has been scraped from the bowl. It seems to me that this is a device which could be used to get reluctant kids to eat their dreaded greens. I'm not sure, though, what additional item could be included in, say, a portion of broccolli to stimulate a similar competitive feeding frenzy.

In Denmark, Christmas Day is more like our Boxing Day with no special meal or festivities. Of course, when we are celebrating Christmas in the UK we abide by the Danish ritual on Christmas Eve but also indulge in the full English of turkey and all the trimmings the following day. It takes most of January to shed the excess poundage gained by this forty-eight hours of massive over-indulgence.

So jeg siger til dig Glaedelig jul og godt nytar - Happy Christmas and a good New Year.