

Christmas and New Year's Celebrations in Ouanaminthe

The following are selected eleventh grade English essays describing how Ouanaminthe celebrates Christmas. None are great literature but some are exceptional considering how the writers have progressed in fluency just this school year. My personal favorite is the last by Kerline. It's her best English essay yet. She is a weak English student, a regular at my extra remedial classes, but she's a fiercely strong patriot. Given the poverty of her nation, it's an inspiring and admirable attribute. She sits at the front of a block of girls in a mostly male class. If the conversation isn't in English, she's very vocal, ready to kid. I regularly end my English class with "See you next time, God willing." She regularly responds with a Creole-English combo, "*Si nou pa dead.*" (If we're not dead.) I've yet to convert her to a full English response.



Milove Dominique, 4th Grade A

Christmas Day by Manakelle Raphael

Christmas Day is more interesting than all other celebrations for Haitians. All of the children are happy because they believe Santa Claus will bring some presents for them. As for the adults, Christmas is a precious day. They decorate their houses. They put flowers around a little bed with a doll in it to represent Jesus coming from heaven.

On the night of Christmas Eve, all the Christians go to church to celebrate this day. When they come back, they share things together. The adults put some gifts under the beds of their children and then they tell them that Santa Claus brought those gifts for them. On Christmas Day everyone is always happy.

Ouanaminthe Christmas by Francelot Raphael (no relation to Manakelle)

December 24th is a very important day in the world because it is the day of the birth of Jesus. Ourselves in Haiti, particularly in Ouanaminthe, to celebrate this occasion, we do many beautiful things. At night, everywhere we pass, we hear the fire crackers. Those are put together for fun. In certain evangelical houses, there are those who watch the Jesus film.

December 25th in the morning we go to church. After going to church, we eat with our family. After that, we have to go to the beach. Christmas is a great party. At each season of Christmas, it's a real pleasure, particularly in Ouanaminthe.

My Country's Christmas by Smeralda Valery

In my country, Christmas Day is, according to me, the most beautiful day for all Haitians. It's a great day when Jesus was born. The public square is decorated by the population. There is a competition between the neighborhoods that is marvelous. And I should remind you that my neighborhood was the best last year. And this year we will do it again!

Our Family Christmas by Lovelie Novilus

December 24th and 25th are two important days in my family. The house is decorated. We listen to Christmas songs. In the afternoon of the 24th, my mother prepares a special meal with different kinds of food and with dessert. At midnight everyone goes to church in order to pray to God. The next morning the family sits together to drink some coffee and we wish each other Merry Christmas! In the afternoon, after eating some chicken, we go to a movie just to enjoy it. In general, this is the way that my family celebrates the 24th and 25th of December.



Woodsondy Simon Pierre 3rd Grade B

Christmas by Wouscelyne Present

December 24th my family is awake at midnight to see the birthday of Jesus. On the 25th, one by one, my family takes a bath in the Massacre River. When we come home, all people drink some coffee. After that, my parents prepare the meal (rice, beans and chicken). Maybe sometimes there is not money. When there is, we can celebrate after the day.

New Year's Day in Haiti by Peterson Saintilmond

New Year's Day in Haiti is the greatest. On this day we organize a big party. We cook pumpkin soup but, before sharing the soup, we go to our aunts', uncles' and Grandpa's houses to wish them "Happy New Year!" and also to give them our best wishes. Afterwards, everyone goes back home to eat pumpkin soup. Sometimes many of us get sick from eating too much pumpkin soup. We usually have a family dinner at 6 pm before going to church to thank God for the new year. Usually we eat rice, beans and beef. Can you believe that every New Year's Day I get sick from eating? No matter how sick I feel, I always enjoy it.



Biverlinx Jean 4th Grade C

From Pam's Journal, Monday, November 30, 2009

I was pondering the eleventh grade essays as I sat at the teachers' table. I was glad that Frantz sat nearby. He's good at explaining his own culture. "Do you eat pumpkin on January first?" I asked Frantz. Clergé and Dieuseul also looked my way.

"Oh, yes," Frantz answered with an amused air of understatement.

"Is it a pumpkin sauce on rice like this?" I gestured to my lunch tray of rice and beans. "Or is it soup?"

"It's soup." All three men answered.

Clergé added, "Some cooks put in macaroni. Others add potatoes. But everyone eats pumpkin soup."

Fritz laughed. "You give away pumpkin soup. You get pumpkin soup."

Clergé smiled too. "All day long you can't escape pumpkin. Everywhere you go people offer you pumpkin soup." Then Clergé sobered. "It's a fine day. Even the poorest are fed on January first."



Rose Jennie-Flore Cersine 4th Grade C

January First in Haiti by Kerline Simon

January first is the date that Haitians proclaimed their independence. It's a great day for all Haitians. It's a day for us to cook pumpkin soup and share it with our family. It's a day for everyone to reconcile. It's a day for the children to go everywhere to say Happy New Year to their family. It's marvelous for us.

Some of us use this day to think about our ancestors. Some of us go to a festival or to dance. It's a great holiday. We are happy.

From Pam's Journal, Wednesday, December 2, 2009

I was sitting with Arsène, the elementary principal, and Thelius, the assistant principal, at lunch. Always trying to understand my students, I explained to them the eleventh grade English essay assignment. "Some kids wrote about bathing in the Massacre River."

They both chuckled. The Massacre is a stone's throw from IU. Despite its muddy pollution, people bathe and wash laundry there. "I suppose some still bathe in the Massacre," Arsène said. "But it's not clean. I wouldn't."

"In Cap Haitian," Thelius added, "where you can go to the seashore, swimming is more common. People tease that Christmas and January first are the days you have to bathe, even if you don't bathe otherwise. On January first, it has the idea of washing off the old and starting anew."

"I had one girl write that January first is a day of reconciliation. Is that your experience?"

Arsène nodded. "It's a time for visiting family. And, since it's the first of the year, people think about getting a fresh start. It's common for tension to develop among relatives. The oldest generation especially will push for peace in the family."

My turn to nod. "And why pumpkin? Pumpkin is available year-round here."

Arsène looked at Thelius. "I think that dates back to the years of slavery. We had the idea that pumpkin soup was

something fine that the French slave masters enjoyed. We longed for equal access. What better way to celebrate our independence?"

"We drink coffee in the morning and eat pumpkin soup in the afternoon," Thelius put in, "like free men."

"If you're too poor to make pumpkin soup," Arsène said, "at least you can have morning coffee."

Thelius laughed. "Of course, it could be 4 o'clock, even 3 o'clock in the morning."

"Ah, okay." I was remembering the students' descriptions of all night partying. "Because everyone is awake all night anyway."

"It's probably our biggest holiday of the year," Arsène said, more seriously. "We fought twelve long hard years for our independence. After Vertières (the final decisive battle near Cap Haitian on November 18, 1803) the French gave up. On January 1, 1804, we made it official. We were free, independent and equal with one another."

"Amazing," I said and meant it sincerely.

Haitian Independence Day Pumpkin Soup

This recipe is the result of three separate conversations with IU cooks. Of course, every cook has her own special way of making the best pumpkin soup. Things got a little hot in the IU kitchen when I interviewed four cooks simultaneously. I won't do that again. I've tried to list ingredients which were common to each cook's preference. This will serve 6-10, depending on how many Haitian teenage boys you invite. Your cooking won't have the subtle smoke flavor of a charcoal fire but you can share it in the same generous spirit of equality as millions of Haitians worldwide on New Year's Day.

Wash dirt and market flies from:

1 pound of beef chuck

Rub the juice of one lemon or lime, sliced, into the meat. Leave it 5-10 minutes while preparing:

2-4 cloves of garlic

2-3 banana peppers

_ teaspoon each: fresh ground cloves, fresh ground peppercorns (or to taste)

1-2 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley

salt to taste

bouillon cubes if you like (some Haitians use them a lot; others prefer salt and their own spices)

1-2 stalks celery, chopped

(No onions, the ladies were unanimous on this interdiction)

Add just enough water to your soup pot to cover the meat. (I wanted to cube the meat but the ladies said that's not how it's done.) Bring to boil, then simmer 1-2 hours.

Meanwhile, in another pot, cook your pumpkin. We would call it a squash. Its skin is green. You cut it up, scoop out the seeds, peel it, cook it in lightly salted water. The drained pumpkin water goes in the soup pot with the meat. Mash the drained squash. It goes in the soup pot once the other vegetables are nearly tender.

Add to the meat after the first hour of stewing:

4-6 peeled carrots, cut in chunks

4-6 peeled potatoes, cut in chunks

peeled green plantain chunks (optional)

1 peeled turnip, cut in small pieces (optional, though Zoulit was emphatic about good soup flavor)

Once the above vegetables are cooked, add the mashed pumpkin. Twenty minutes before serving, you add chopped cabbage, 1 small head. Also, in the last minutes, you can add a cup of elbow macaroni. This is optional. Be sure you have enough liquid to boil the macaroni if you choose that option.



"Sharing Pumpkin Soup"
Victor Awens 6th Grade A

Bon Appetit! And remember to share with those who may not have soup themselves.