Between Fir Tree and Festive Roast

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Christmas as It Once Smelled, Tasted, and Was Told

A small, snow-covered Christmas tree, beside it a wooden crate, a sack of apples, a hatbox—and in front of them a hare, dead yet peacefully laid out, as if it naturally belonged to the celebration. Above it all appears the greeting "Merry Christmas!" in old German script—an irony

Christmas card from 1907: From a printing perspective, this is a chromolithograph on sturdy cardboard, partially overlaid with varnish inks, which explains the gloss and depth of the colors. Like many cards of this period, it is embossed and finished with gilded edges. The reverse bears a 5-Pfennig *Germania* stamp and the Saxon postmark *Taucha near Leipzig*, dated December 23, 1907. At the lower left appears the printed publisher's mark "S.F.T. Serie 22," which has not yet been conclusively identified. Comparable inscriptions such as "S.F.T. Serie XV No. 1601" are documented on original Easter and Pentecost cards, suggesting that S.F.T. was a small publisher of festive greeting cards that produced themed series, including this Christmas issue.

that contemporaries would hardly have perceived, but that is all the more striking to us today. Such Christmas still lifes, sent in large numbers around 1900, combined folk scenes with symbols of abundance,

Game was and still is a popular festive dish at Christmas, but it must be properly hung and aged (Saint Pierre and Miquelon 2009).

warmth, and gratitude. Writing, gift-giving, and eating were closely intertwined; Christmas took place in the mailbox just as much as at the dining table.

At that time, Christmas food was not a matter of abundance, but of preparation, storage, and preservation. What appeared on the table had to be procured, stored, and processed in good time. The dead hare points to a cuisine in which meat was a rare luxury—not from a freezer, but from the wild. People spoke of "hanging" game: the animal was meant to "ripen nobly," as the expression went.[13]. After slaughter, the musculature stiffened due to rigor mortis, and only during the hanging process did those quiet yet decisive processes begin that made the meat edible at all. In its final moments, the body used up its remaining energy, producing lactic acid—an invisible transitional substance between life and food. This caused the pH value to drop, protected the meat from germs, and at the same time prepared the ground for the enzymes that now began to act. Initially, the acid tightened the tissue, but over the days it was broken down again, and the enzymes slowly dissolved muscle fibers and connective tissue until toughness turned into tenderness.[14]. At the same time, small, volatile compounds developed from proteins and fats—substances that give mature meat its distinctive aroma: free amino acids with their hint of umami, along with aldehydes and ketones that contribute nutty, buttery, or slightly animal notes. Aromas that we today might mistake for spoilage were once regarded as the crown of ripeness. The onset of decomposition was not a flaw, but part of the path to flavor. Meat, it was understood, had to live before it could taste good—and to die a little before it became tender.

What happens unseen during the hanging of meat—the action of enzymes in the muscle (Portugal 2014), the awakening of umami and those subtle aldehydes—later found its curious counterparts: enzyme pellets were intended to help the stomach digest meat (advertising postal item Germany 1970), Maggi replaced long aging with instant seasoning (demonstration cancel Czechoslovakia 1934), and even Chanel No. 5 (France 2021), with its aldehydes, recalls those volatile compounds that give both aged meat and perfume their distinctive scent.

Today, by contrast, hygiene regulations and consumers alike demand freshness, cold, and sterility. The kitchen has become clinical. With the introduction of refrigeration technology, later modern aging cabinets, and standardized methods such as vacuum aging,[15], the practice of hanging meat shifted from cool pantries to technically controlled spaces in which temperature, humidity, and airflow are precisely regulated. Instead of freely hanging carcasses that slowly absorbed the breath of the seasons, meat is now usually

The refrigerator took over what the cool pantry once provided—controlled aging instead of the slow hanging process in the breath of the seasons (Australia 2012).

[13] Dashdorj, D., Tripathi, V. K., Cho, S., Kim, Y., Hwang, I. (2016). Journal of Animal Science and Technology, 58(20).
[14] The Organic Butchery (2025). https://www.organicbutchery.co.uk/blogs/news/whats-the-point-in-hanging-meat
[15] Revutskaya, N. M. (2025). Pol. J. Food Nutr. Sci. 2023;73(2):175-186

aged sealed in its own juices—a quiet, clean form of wet aging that allows little aroma and even less risk. Only in specialized facilities is meat still hung openly, dry-aged as in the past, though under controlled climatic conditions. The fundamental biochemical necessity of aging still remains—but the process has been standardized, made predictable, and stripped of its wild character. Where intuition and the nose once decided, best-before dates and hygiene regulations now define the measure of trust.

The crate beside the hare remains mysterious. We do not know what it contains. Perhaps it holds the roast for the next holiday, or perhaps something of the mind—a book of fairy tales, a treasure, a story. Why should there not be a novel hidden among the winter-scented apples, a tale for long December evenings? Books were gifts of lasting value in those days, much like preserved foods: they satisfied a different kind of hunger.

On these stamps, we still encounter the small treasures of the old postcard Christmas room: stories (GDR 1985), fruit and nuts (Sweden 2014; Guernsey 1992), and gingerbread (Jersey 2013). In the past, they were gifts enough—small treasures that did not need to be unwrapped, because their value lay in their scent, their taste, and in the act of storytelling.

The sack of fruit is a reminder that fruit in winter was once almost a small miracle. Apples, nuts, and dried pears often kept surprisingly well in cool storerooms. Anyone who pulled an apple from a linen sack after weeks received a whole winter's scent for free—a mixture of wax, wood, and a hint of "I was once fresh."

Between apples and fir greenery lies a red, heart-shaped gingerbread. Almost too small to notice, yet a quiet message within the image. It stood for what Christmas meant: affection not loudly proclaimed, gratitude shown in everyday life, and joy that does not erupt at once but grows slowly. The heart was not merely decoration—it was the gift. And like the dough that rested for weeks in the cellar, these gentle feelings also needed time to become warm and genuine.

And the fir tree? It stands there as if it does not quite know itself why it has suddenly ended up indoors. The snow on its branches recalls winters that were reliably white, when no one immediately thought of climate charts. One simply looked outside and thought: "Ah, winter."

The commercial success of the Santa Claus image threatens to obscure that of St. Nicholas, the beloved patron saint of children depicted here from historical references. St. Nicholas, the 4th century Bishop of Myra was known for his generosity and love for children, hence the 'birth' of the Santa Claus persona but most importantly he embraced the true meaning of Christmas: the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Not only have the gifts changed—Santa Claus has changed as well: from the quiet Saint Nicholas with a bishop's staff (Liechtenstein 1967) to a cheerful package carrier in a red suit (USA 2012; Monaco 1971). Postage stamps reflect the spirit of the times—less saint, more gift bearer (as lamented on the reverse of the Gibraltar stamp, 2008).

Thus, the Christmas still life on the postcard shows what was once considered valuable: a bit of nature, simple provisions, a story, and a quiet measure of feeling. Perhaps it reminds us that even today, a little is sometimes enough to give a celebration warmth.