

NAURYZ

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There is a legend in Central Asia that every year during the night between the 21st and 22nd of March (the spring equinox), the wise elder Kadyr-Ata walks across the Earth. Kadyr-Ata brings people happiness and wealth, and he also possesses special magical powers. At three o'clock in the morning, Kadyr-Ata opens the door to the sky and lets Spring come to the world. At this time, he breathes life into the earth; in essence he renews the earth from its death-like winter state, and brings it back to spring.

When Kadyr-Ata breathes life into earth, he also signals the Light Spirit to return from underground, where the spirit had been hiding from the cold of winter. In traditional Kazakh lore, the Light Spirit represents the sun and springtime. When the Light Spirit gets the signal from Kadyr-Ata, he returns to earth and fights the Dark Spirit, the symbol of the cold winter. The Light Spirit brings spring and new life to the Steppe, and makes the Dark Spirit run far, far away.

For the Kazakh nomads, the arrival of spring was a time for great celebration. Life was hard for nomads on the Kazakh steppes, and Nauryz marked the end of the difficult winter season and the beginning of spring renewal. With spring came the beginning of a new year's cycle of life, the time of year when the nomads happily said goodbye to harsh winter weather, welcomed warm weather, and rejoiced in the birthing season of their valuable livestock upon which they depended for food and their very livelihoods.

Nauryz symbolized the birth of a new year's cycle of life and Kazakhs came together in their Auls to celebrate as a community. Nauryz was an Aul celebration because throughout the year, families worked together on behalf of their village. The Aul provided vital community support that kept families alive during harsh times and the Aul as a whole welcomed spring and celebrated the easier times that came with the New Year as symbolized by Nauryz.

The roots of the holiday are ancient, and it is believed that the roots of Nauryz began at least 2000 years ago, most likely in Persia. *Nauryz-Meiram* (*Mei-rham* means "holiday" in Kazakh) is celebrated mostly in Muslim countries, but it is not a religious holiday. Nauryz is a traditional celebration of the spring equinox celebrated today by many nations throughout Asia and Europe, including Russia, Ukraine, Japan, and China.

In modern Kazakhstan, Nauryz is truly a social event. People gather together at their main city squares, where holiday organizers erect yurts, stages, and trading tents where crafts and goods are sold. Food is cooked on open fires in huge pots, and people dress festively. Throughout the day loud music is played and national singers and dancers perform their arts. Above all, it is a time for people to spend time with their friends and family, to meet new people and to make new acquaintances.

As evening approaches, when most elders retire to their homes, Nauryz organizers often stage a huge open-air disco show. Pop musicians of Kazakhstan and invited guests from other countries (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Turkey etc.) perform, and the music may last all night long.

There is a traditional belief that people will spend their new year in a manner similar to the way they celebrated Nauryz. So, in the spirit of the season and a desire to have a comfortable year, people work hard to clean their homes, they wear their best clothing, and they cook a lot of good food. Indeed, the Nauryz table has important symbolism: the more food you have on your table, the better and more sufficient your life may be in the coming year.

According to tradition, the number "seven" has a magical meaning and it is good to have seven dishes on your table. At the Nauryz table, all the dishes have to be homemade and not bought in a supermarket, for the food must be made very carefully and with great love. You never cook

common dishes for Nauryz, only special holiday foods. Above all, everyone in the family has to be involved in the preparations – in this way everyone gets to feel the importance of this annual event.

There is a special Nauryz meal called *Nauryz-Kozhe*, but it is not easily replicable in the States. It needs ten types of meat (including horse meat as a major component), seven types of milk products (including sheep's milk & Kumys), and three types of grain. *Nauryz-Kozhe* takes about ten hours to cook and is the king of all Kazakh cuisine.

Kazakhs are usually very conservative in the use of their best possessions, but on the occasion of Nauryz, people can't resist the joy of the holiday and exhibit all their best possessions. Families take out their special carpets, table cloths, blankets, pillows, and whatever is special to them. People decorate their homes with these treasures and take great pleasure in the holiday.

In years past, Nauryz also was also a day for sweethearts, similar to Valentine's Day here in the west. Young people prepared special presents for their sweethearts. Girls invited their boyfriends to their homes and treated them with a special dish called "Awakening". "Awakening" was prepared a special way, intended to increase a man's power and help him win traditional sport contests such as a horse races or wrestling. In turn, guys would bring their girlfriends presents, like sweets, jewelry, or cosmetics.

It is hard to overestimate the meaning of such gifts. Years ago, when this tradition was actively practiced, there were no malls or large markets in Kazakhstan, and people were unable to buy things whenever or wherever they wanted. It was not unusual for a young man to save money for an entire year just to order a present from Uzbekistan, China, Iran or Russia to please his sweetheart. These presents were viewed as very special and in turn, were kept for one's entire life and passed through the generations, as a memory of that beautiful time.

In addition, for young unmarried people, there was a game on horseback called "*Kyz-kuu*" (chasing a girl). The girl rode a very fast horse to escape a bunch of guys who tried to catch her. The winner was the lucky guy who kissed the girl on her cheek while riding at maximum speed.

Nauryz is a great day for national sports in Kazakhstan. In modern times, people in the countryside organize traditional games. Most of the sports are on horseback, and there are many variations. There are also ground sports, such as wrestling, archery, and tug-of-war. Most Kazakh sports are actually ancient warrior trainings, so the play often gets very rough, and only well trained adults are allowed to participate.

For boys and girls there are many games and activities, such as puzzles, memory contests, hide and seek, chasing, and swinging on traditional "*Alty-Bakan*" swings. There is also a traditional Kazakh game called "*Asyktar*", which is similar to what Americans know as marbles. *Asyktar* is a major children's game, played with bones from the feet of sheep.

Nauryz is celebrated in every school in Kazakhstan, and has been since the downfall of the former Soviet Union. I remember the very first Nauryz in my school. We put insulation on the ground of our court (it was still pretty cool outside) and covered it with Kazakh rugs. Each grade decorated its own corner and every grade tried to organize a better table than all the others. It was almost a competition – whose table was richer! One of the grades even erected a real yurt right in the court of our school.

In many schools, the decorations are not as traditional or costly as we had in ours. Usually schools organize Nauryz art exhibitions, music contests, talent shows etc. Schools are decorated with paper Kazakh ornaments, painted rugs, "Nauryz" banners, and it is tradition to have a lavish holiday meal.

Ideas for celebrating Nauryz in the American home

There are many simple things that families can do in their own homes to commemorate Nauryz. You can infuse as much Kazakh culture as you want or are able. Remember, Nauryz is about welcoming spring, so even just getting outside to commemorate the change of seasons is a way to welcome the holiday. Here are some suggestions:

- ✦ Take some special time together as a family to talk about the meaning and legends behind Nauryz.
- ✦ Decorate your home with special things you brought home from Kazakhstan
- ✦ Decorate your home with drawings in honor of the holiday. Children or any family members can draw anything with a Kazakh theme, such as yurts or horses
- ✦ As a family, cook a special dinner that includes Kazakh dishes, and if you are feeling ambitious, cook seven homemade dishes.
- ✦ As a family, play games outside in the nice spring weather. Play the Kazakh/American games of hide-and-seek, tug-of-war, or just go swing on some swings. Indoors, play a game of marbles or a memory game.
- ✦ Visit friends and family and tell them about Nauryz
- ✦ Talk to your child/ren's teacher(s) about Nauryz and share Kazakh culture. For early childhood classrooms, toy felt yurts, traditional clothing, photographs of nomadic culture, and Kazakh-themed coloring pages have been successfully used.

Above all, Nauryz is a family holiday. It's about spending time together with family and friends, taking the time to connect with those who are important to you.

Nauryz Kuttuh Bolsyn!

(pronounced *Now-RYZ Kut-TUH Bol-SYN*)

Have a happy Nauryz!

If someone wishes you a happy Nauryz, it is proper to reciprocate with the following phrase:

Birghe Bolsyn!

(pronounced *Bir-Geh Bol-SYN*)

You have one, too!