

January 21st

BULGARIA

Babin den (Midwife's Day)

Bulgarian folk tradition celebrates on January 21 Midwife's Day, popularly known as Granny's Day. In modern times, the date January 21 is marked as the day of childbirth assistance

In the past, when Midwife's or Granny's Day came, all men of a village used to hide away, because on that day women reign supreme and if a man is seen anywhere in the street, he would be mocked by all the women who met him. Pulling his hat off or even trying to strip him was considered just natural on that particular day and men could not argue about it but just pay to be left 'in peace'. Tradition had it that all money collected in this way would be used for the shared feast at the end of the day. In this way men could join the party and then all celebrate together. During the day only the musician-men were safe, as they had to play tunes. Red wine to warm up the freezing January day was the other compulsory accompaniment throughout the day. This was the only day when it was considered natural for a woman to drink wine. Only on Granny's day could women free themselves through laughter and jokes, of any kind of dissatisfaction with their husbands.

The name of the Granny's day feast comes from the old tradition when elderly women were the ones assisting younger women in child delivery. Each village had its midwife or Granny in the past. Her care for the baby, however, did not end with the delivery. On Granny's day the village midwife visits all babies born with her help throughout the year. She bathes them ritually, spreads some honey and butter on their foreheads so that their life be sweet and rich, then blesses them for good health and longevity. After this ritual tour comes the turn of young brides to visit the granny at her home and perform rituals of gratitude and respect to the village midwife. Each woman brings a gift to the granny – a soap bar, a towel, a bunch of geranium flowers, a shirt, knitted socks or some money – signs of gratitude for her care. Another sign of respect to the work of the granny is the ritual of pouring water so that she washes her hands. It was believed crucial for this ritual to take place under a fruit tree as a symbol of fertility. All rituals on that day, whether seriously or in a joke, convey the message of multiplying the children in a family – that being one of the basic values in Bulgarian tradition.

