

What Are We Eating this Christmas?

Natasha Lardera (December 22, 2007)



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In Italy Christmas is not just colorful gift boxes, blinking lights, and cheerful carols, Christmas is an opportunity to slow down, sit at the dining table and enjoy family and friends but also delicacies from a strong gastronomic tradition.



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They are soups, meat-based recipes, breads, and sweets, exceptional treats that make a special night even more extraordinary.

Preparing these recipes is not just plain cooking but following a certain tradition – on Marche’s idyllic rolling hills, capon is boiled in water on Christmas Eve. When fully cooked it is left in the pot overnight, either on the stove or outside of the window, on the sill.

On Christmas morning all the fat on the broth’s surface is removed and set aside, as it is considered “blessed,” a necessary unguent useful for cuts and burns.

Some say that in the South, Christmas and the holidays are awaited for with more eagerness, as they used to mark the return home of emigrants who came back for a brief cheerful visit. Christmas in Naples is so rich of menus, and there are sweets that actually make Christmas, without them there would not be reason to celebrate – these are called struffoli, tiny honey covered fritters sprinkled with colorful sugar grains. They are prepared days before Christmas Eve, and are given to guests throughout the week leading to the holiday.

For more specific information, let’s look at each region closely.

ABRUZZO: Lu rintrocilio, pasta with a sauce of mutton, pork, chili, and grated pecorino.

BASILICATA: Picciliatiedd, bread with almonds.

CALABRIA: Quazunielli, dough pockets filled with raisins, walnuts, cooked must, and cinnamon.

CAMPANIA: Insalata di rinforzo, cauliflower, pickled vegetables, peppers, Gaeta olives, and salted anchovies. Fried eel is another favorite of all Neapolitans tables. While waiting for Midnight, on Christmas Eve, people like to munch on fruit and mixed nuts and struffoli.

EMILIA ROMAGNA: Panone di Natale, bread made with candied fruit, honey, cocoa, dark chocolate, dried figs.

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA: Brovada e muset, soup of turnips and cotechino, cooked pork sausage, served with polenta.

LAZIO: Pangiallo, bread made with dried fruit, candied peels, honey, and chocolate.

LIGURIA: Pandolce, bread made with raisins, candied pumpkin, essence of orange flowers, pine nuts, fennel seeds, milk, and marsala.

LOMBARDY: Cappone ripieno, capon stuffed with a mix of ground meat, mortadella, and hard-boiled eggs. It is served with mostarda di Cremona, fruit preserve spiced with mustard essential oil.



MARCHE: Pizza de Natà, bread made with walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, raisins, chocolate, grated lemon and orange peel, and figs.

MOLISE: Pizza di Franz in brodo, pieces of pizza dough, baked in the oven with eggs, parmigiano, and parsley.

PIEDMONT: Insalata di carne cruda all'albese, beef filet tartar scented with white truffles.

PUGLIA: Carteddate, rose-shaped fried cookies drizzled with honey.

SARDINIA: Pabassinas, sweets made with almonds, walnuts, raisins, anis seeds, and cooked must.

SICILY: Mustazzoli, sweets made with almonds, cinnamon, and cloves.

TUSCANY: Brodo di cappone in tazza, consommé of capon.

TRENTINO: Canederli, balls of flour, eggs, old bread, speck, pancetta, and salame.

UMBRIA: Panpepato, bread with walnuts, chocolate, almonds, candied fruit, honey, pine nuts, hazelnuts, pepper, and red wine.

VALLE D'AOSTA: Carbonata, strips of meat macerated in wine and aromatic herbs, served with polenta.

VENETO: Ravioli in brodo di cappone, ravioli cooked in capon broth.

Italy has many Christmas sweets, ranging from simple cookies to extraordinarily elaborate puddings and cakes. Pandoro the Christmas cake of Verona, has achieved national popularity and is Panettone's fiercest enemy. It is a light, sweet yeast bred cake made with lots of butter and baked in a high 8-pointed star-shaped pan. It is generally just dusted with confectioners' sugar and there are versions with custard fillings. Pandoro symbolizes Christmas like few other cakes: It even looks Christmassy. The Italian Trade Commission describes it as, "tall, distinctive and shaped like a Christmas tree, it is topped with powdered sugar reminiscent of snow, or a twinkling star." And indeed, if cut horizontally, each slice is a star.

Many love Siena's panforte, a rich flat cake of honey, hazelnuts, almonds, candied citron, citrus peel, cocoa, and spices. In Ferrara, people celebrate with panpepato (see description above).

Zeppole, representative of the area of Sorrento, are small fried ricotta doughnut-like cookies dusted with confectioner's sugar that must be served warm.



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