

Seven Fishes for Young Italian Americans

Gabrielle Pati (January 03, 2011)



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In Bushwick, the feast of the seven fishes turned into an all out cooking marathon, staring live eels, goods from Italian Williamsburg, and the colorful faces of family and friends.

We killed the eels the night before Christmas Eve. As they slithered around my sink, we got the hammer and cutting board ready. Some friends cringed while others watched in awe as the brains behind the operation, musician Feral Foster, lathered the live eels in salt in a ritualistic-like procession leading to their sacrifice. Meanwhile, in the refrigerator, mussels fought to stay alive, and whole sardines rested on ice awaiting the shock of hot oil the next day. The preparation of the feast of the seven fishes took brain power and dedication to detail. One mistake and a whole dish could be ruined.



My idea for Christmas Eve was to bring my family to my new place, modest but cozy, and tackle the feat of the Feast for the first time. What better way to lure people to your home than with the promise of lots of food, including fresh seafood from Arthur Avenue's Little Italy, Chinatown and Howard Beach, and locally purchased goods?

On the menu: calamari and shrimp breaded and fried dangerously in extravagant amounts of olive oil, in-season flounder baked with the crumbs of day old semolina bread and lemon, octopus crock-pot simmered in lemon juice and herbs, savory breaded and fried sardines and fresh eels, home-made pasta from Savino's Quality Pasta in Williamsburg's "Little Salerno", complimented with marinara source from DOP San Marzano tomatoes and basil, an assortment of antipasti, ranging from olive, carciofi in olio to provolone, caciocavallo filled with butter, and fresh mozzarella, bottles of wine, Campari, rum, and Mexican ponche made with fresh fruit and an entire sugar cane. Nothing was lacking that night, except my mother, who had to work.

Italian Williamsburg is spread between the Lorimer and Graham Ave. L trains stops. In this area you can find fresh pasta from Savino's, imported cheeses and meats from Emily's Pork Store, bread from Napoli Bakery, pastries from Fortunato Brother's, and more. For a slice of great pizza and an espresso, there's Carmine's Pizzeria, whose owners are from the Province of Salerno, like many of the Italians in this neighborhood. Within a ten block to fifteen block radius it is possible to find all one needs for a perfect and diverse Feast.

Trying to fit all that food and about a dozen guests into a Bushwick rail-road apartment is no small task. In fact, we had to eat in shifts. The process of cooking the food, shockingly enough, came more or less naturally. My parents had schooled my sisters and me about frying the shrimp and calamari since we were old enough to look over the stove. Chef Foster, on the other hand, incessantly took de-stressing cigarette breaks, and a few times I found him collapsed in my bedroom, lamenting like an exhausted nonna.

For my entire life I have eaten fish on Christmas Eve, as do many Italian Americans of southern origin. The meal is also known as La Vigilia, and each family has its own traditional selection of dishes. Baccala' is a general staple of the meal, along with fried calamari and shrimp, some variation of octopus, cod, mussels, lobster, crabs, scallops, etc. There is no formula for the perfect meal, which is good for young Italian Americans who want to innovate on past traditions, and perhaps begin new ones, even if they involve killing eels and terrifying non Italian-Americans who may not understand how seriously we take the word "fresh."

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