

An Italian Holiday Dinner

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For my family, it wouldn't be Christmas without Struffoli ...

Every year just before Christmas, I start making lists. One list is for the gifts I need to buy, while another is for all of the things I need to do, like decorating the house. The list I most enjoy making is one of all the old traditional family dishes I will make for the holidays. Preparing these recipes not only reminds me of the past, but it is also the best way I know to pass on my Italian heritage to the next generation.



Among the dishes I will be preparing this year is manicotti, delicate crepes filled with cheese and served with a simple tomato sauce, and roasted capon stuffed with pork, veal and Parmigiano Reggiano. For dessert, we will have struffoli, crisp little fritters rolled in honey and sprinkled with multicolored candy sprinkles. Struffoli are part of what is known in Italy as “la cucina povera” or “the food of the poor”—referring to the traditional peasant dishes of the Southern countryside, where food was scarce and making a living from the land was difficult. For my family, it wouldn't be Christmas without them. So, here is my recipe...

Struffoli Makes 8 servings

1 cup all-purpose flour plus more for kneading the dough

1/4 teaspoon salt 2 large eggs, beaten

1/2 teaspoon grated lemon or orange zest Vegetable oil for frying

1 cup honey Multicolored sprinkles, candied fruits or nuts

In a large bowl, combine the flour and salt. Add the eggs and lemon zest and stir until well blended. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured board and knead until smooth, about 5 minutes. Add a little more flour if the dough seems sticky. Shape the dough into a ball. Cover the dough and let rest 30 minutes. Cut the dough into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Roll one slice between your palms into a 1/2-inch-thick rope. Cut the rope into 1/2-inch nuggets. If the dough feels sticky, use a tiny bit of flour to dust the board or your hands. (Excess flour will cause the oil to foam up when you fry the struffoli.) Line a tray with paper towels. Pour about 2 inches of oil into a wide heavy saucepan. Heat the oil to 370°F on a frying thermometer, or until a small bit of the dough dropped into the oil sizzles and turns brown in 1 minute. Being careful not to splash the oil, slip just enough struffoli into the pan to fit without crowding. Cook, stirring once or twice with a slotted spoon, until the struffoli are crisp and evenly golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove the struffoli with a slotted spoon or skimmer and drain on paper towels. Repeat with the remaining dough. When all of the struffoli are fried, gently heat the honey just to a simmer in a large shallow saucepan. Remove from the heat. Add the drained struffoli and toss well. Pile the struffoli onto a serving plate. Decorate with the sprinkles, candied fruits, or nuts. Store covered with an overturned bowl at room temperature.

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