

An Authentic Italian Christmas at Table

Coppola Otylia (December 20, 2016)



Each Italian region has its own Christmas specialties: fresh filled pastas, like tortellini and ravioli, the capon, or seafood cooked in different styles, and many savory and sweet pies. Christmas desserts are very important and range from the ubiquitous Panettone and Pandoro, to the Struffoli, Torrone, Panforte, Mustazzoli and many more.



In Italy, Christmas is not about colorful gift boxes, blinking lights, and cheerful carols. Christmas is an opportunity to slow down, sit around the dinner table and enjoy family and friends, and also to savor delicacies from a strong gastronomic tradition. Every Italian region has its time-honored dishes that are the “stars” of the Italian Christmas table. These recipes are synonymous with Christmas and are enjoyed every holiday season, year after year. As such, they’re prepared with care and respect for tradition. They include fresh filled pasta, soups, meat-based recipes, seafood dishes, savory pies and breads, and sweets, all exceptional treats that make a special meal even more extraordinary.

Preparing these foods doesn’t follow the same ritual as everyday cooking; rather, it follows a specific tradition. For example, on Marche’s idyllic rolling hills, capon is boiled in water on Christmas Eve. When fully cooked, it’s 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’s considered “blessed,” and is used as an unguent for cuts and burns. Some say that in the South, Christmas and the holidays are anticipated with more eagerness, as they used to mark the return home of emigrants who returned for a brief, yet cheerful, visit. Christmas in Naples is rich with treats; there are sweets that actually make Christmas what it is--without them there would be no reason to celebrate. They’re called struffoli, small, honey-covered fritters sprinkled with colorful sugar. They’re prepared days before Christmas Eve, and are given to guests throughout the week leading to the holiday. Let’s look at each region closely for its specialties.

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

BASILICATA: Picciliatied--bread with almonds.

CALABRIA: Quazunelli--dough pockets filled with raisins, walnuts, cooked must (pulp of crushed grapes), 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.

EMILIA ROMAGNA: Panone di Natale--bread made with candied fruit, honey, cocoa, dark chocolate, and 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’s served with mostarda di Cremona, fruit preserve spiced with mustard 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 brood--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.

VENETO: Ravioli in brodo di cappone--ravioli cooked in capon broth. Italy has many Christmas sweets and desserts, ranging from simple cookies to extraordinarily elaborate puddings and cakes. Pandoro, the Christmas cake of Verona, has achieved national popularity and is Panettone’s arch



rival. It's a light, sweet cake made with lots of butter and baked in a high 8-pointed star-shaped pan. It's usually dusted with confectioners' sugar; 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 (bread with different nuts, chocolate, candied fruit, honey, pepper, and red wine.). 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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