

The Origin of the Feast of the Seven Fishes

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Every year in the U.S., many people celebrate the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve. Although it is unclear when the dinner became so popular, this celebration is considered one of the most Italian traditions. Typically, the family gathers around a feast of seven different seafood dishes or one or two different types of fish prepared in seven different ways.

Despite its popularity among Americans, many Italians do not even know about the tradition — or its origin. Surprised? The answer can be found in the biodiversity of Italy: the country boasts so many differences between the north and south. Each of the 20 regions has a different culinary tradition for the *cena della Vigilia*, or Christmas Eve dinner. For example, families in Piemonte celebrate with *agnolotti*, fresh pasta filled with meat; in Roma, the tradition calls for *minestra di pesce*, fish-based soup; and lastly, in Sardegna, there's no Christmas Eve dinner without *malloreddus*, small semolina gnocchi usually served in a sauce with tuna and fresh cherry tomatoes. Of course, for any Italian family, it wouldn't be a Christmas feast without *panettone* and *pandoro*, the traditional fluffy cakes that adorn every table and are gifted with wishes of love and prosperity, and classic holiday desserts like *torrone*, hazelnut-studded chocolates, *panforte*, and beyond.



The ancient tradition of eating fish on Christmas Eve dates from the Roman Catholic custom of abstinence from meat and dairy products on the eve of certain holidays, including Christmas. The number seven is rooted back in ancient times and it can be connected to multiple Catholic symbols: in fact, the seven seems repeated more than 700 times in the Bible. Also, according to the Roman Catholic Church, seven are the sacraments, the days of the Creation, as well as the deadly sins. Hence seven courses!

Flash forward to the early 1900s, when the official "Feast of the Seven Fishes" first emerged. Italian-American families rekindled the Old Country's Christmas Eve tradition by preparing a seven-course seafood meal (hence the name of the newly found tradition) that both made them feel close to their homes, while celebrating the sea, a major connection in Italy. Today, it's considered one of the oldest Italian traditions — but we give America credit for that!

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