

Christmas In Italy

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Christmas in Italy is essentially a religious festivity. The period of preparation Advent, (Four weeks prior to Christmas) is usually characterized by the "Christmas Novena" consisting of a series of church services which takes place on nine nights during which Christmas hymns are sung in anticipation of the birth of Jesus. The Advent Wreath has its first candle lit on the first Sunday of Advent. The little windows on the Advent Calendar begin to be opened on the First Sunday of Advent. A sight rapidly disappearing is to be observed in Rome, where the *Piferari* (pipers), come down from the mountains of the Abruzzo and Latium to play characteristic bagpipe tunes announcing coming festivities.

At midnight on Christmas Eve, The First Mass heralding Christ's birth is held in all churches. After Mass in Vatican City and Rome, Italy, after Christmas Eve Mass ALL the bells of ALL the Churches toll throughout Rome about 2:00 AM! The Mass at Dawn and during the morning are also celebrated.

The Christmas celebration centers around the Crib with all its figures, consisting of the Infant Jesus, Mary, Joseph; Shepherds, Angels, Three Kings, Camels, Sheep and the stable animals. St. Francis of Assisi was the originator of the Crib. In 1223, he decided to make the Christmas Mass a re-enactment of the birth of Christ by celebrating it on a manger with hay in it and with an ox and a donkey standing by. The friars and the people of the district participated in reenacting the scene. Several centuries before that, the Church used to recreate the scene of Bethlehem before the eyes of the people by dialogue with deacons representing angels and shepherds.

The *precepio* consists of many elaborate landscape settings developed around the manger scene. There are grottoes, small trees, lakes, and rivers. The background shines with the lights of Bethlehem. Figurines of angels announce the birth of Jesus and shepherds hasten to the site. At Epiphany, the Three Kings bring gold, frankincense and myrrh which are placed near the manger. The royal cortege includes camels and servants in exotic attire. The Crib as we know it today began in the fourteenth century and was reserved only for churches to display.

The Crib or Precepio is usually in place from Christmas Eve to Epiphany (January 6). The most beautiful cribs are set up in churches, but many families have elaborate *preceprios* taking up the whole room, enacting a whole village of participants.

Christmas Traditions

The Christmas Tree is growing in popularity especially in the North. Its use has not grown rapidly as the tree stems from Germanic custom.

The Christmas pyramid, forerunner of the Christmas tree in Germany, had its counterpart in Italy in the “ceppu” used mostly in the Florence area. “Ceppo” actually means tree trunk and may have been a substitute for the decorated and burning Yule Log. It is composed of shelves of varying sizes fastened to light wooden poles, decorated with sprigs of evergreen.

Candles, pictures and little figurines were placed on the shelves. The lowest shelf often contained the center’s cradle with Infant Jesus in wax or plaster, surrounded by shepherd, saints and angels. The smaller shelves contain presents and toys.

Traditionally homes are decorated with sprigs of holly and mistletoe.

Gifts are traditionally exchanged on New Years Day, traditionally the feast of the Circumcision, now celebrated as a Feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus, or the Feast of Epiphany (January 6) which is a national Holiday. Epiphany commemorates the visit the Three Kings bearing gifts for Baby Jesus and is the Twelfth Day of Christmas and is called Little Christmas, which ends the holiday season.

Food and Christmas Feasting

Christmas foods vary greatly among the twenty regions of Italy. Christmas Eve dinner is typically served around 7 or 8 PM concluding a day of fasting. The meal is customarily meatless. To eat fish on Christmas Eve was in accord with the religious traditions which prescribed a meatless meal on the day before the Feast. Since Vatican II it is no longer prescribed but many still follow the tradition of a seven course fish dinner, preparing seven different kinds of fish. The fish is a symbol for Jesus and many Italians still carry this tradition to mark the meal on the vigil of His birth. Around Venice, Rome and Naples the main course is eel, *capitone*, sold live at markets and roasted, baked, fried or steamed. Other regions prefer cod (*baccala*), clams or squid. *Frittos mistos*, vegetables dipped in batter and deep fried are also favorites on the 24th along with local pasta and antipasto specialties. The meal is concluded with sweets and Asti Spumante. The entire family attends Midnight Mass.

Christmas Dinner is served shortly after noon. Often the children prepare letters to parents asking forgiveness for misdeeds in the preceding year and promise better behavior in the next. The children hide letters under daddy’s plate and when he discovers them he reads them aloud with great solemnity.

The Christmas Day menu varies according to regions.

North of Rome *Capelletti* (little dough hats stuffed with meat) or *tortellini*, (belly buttons and various types of ravioli) are traditional choices for the pasta course. In the South, the first course is typically macaroni with minced meat and tomato sauce. Then comes roast chicken or meat in jelly. The main course in other regions is turkey stuffed with chestnuts, or a baked ham, a boiled chicken with mustard, or *zampone*, a pork sausage packed in a pig's leg smothered in lentils. Customary side dishes of lentils are regarded as a guarantee of prosperity in the New Year.

Dessert in most parts includes *panetone*, (Bread of Tony) a type of raised yeast cake filled with raisins and candied fruits. Once a specialty of Milano, it is said to be named for a Milanese Baker, *Antonio*, who set about to improve upon Milano's delicious *pan di Cherubini* (Cherub's bread) to win the hand of his beloved.

Sicilians are noted for their dolce and those for Christmas are both varied and elaborate. At Agrigento, in the south of Sicily, they make *affuca-patri* which are long flat biscuits made with honey and flour. At Palermo one finds the *pietrafennula*, made of sugar, honey and dried figs with thin slices of orange peel, almonds and a little rum for flavor. Another specialty served chiefly in Sicilian homes is the *cassata*, a sponge cake with filling of ricotta cheese, candied fruits, almonds, grated chocolate and rum.

Nuts and spicy honeyed *Panforte de Siena* are concluding treats that carry symbolic overtones for all Italians. Nuts eaten at this time of year were once believed to ensure fertile farms and families, honey was a gift that was thought to bless the recipient with a sweet future. (Information source: *Istituto Italiano Di Cultura*; New York, New York; Paper # 37)

Recipes for Christmas Feasting

Frittos Misto (fried vegetables)

Parboiled broccoli or cauliflower pieces, or defrosted drained or fresh artichoke hearts. Make a mixture of dried grated bread crumbs, Italian grated cheese, salt and pepper. If you used commercial bread crumbs buy the Italian bread crumbs and add more grated cheese and salt and pepper. Use whole package of bread crumbs for two heads; mix in a bowl and transfer to a flat small roaster lid or shallow bowl as needed. Beat about seven eggs in another deep bowl. (Or about 3 eggs for each head of vegetable) Dip each piece of vegetable in the egg wash with tongs or fork; drip off excess and then dip in breading mixture, pressing on evenly and well with fingers. If not frying immediately, lay out on paper towels in a cookie

sheet to dry; refrigerate until ready to fry. Fry in very hot oil in large frying pan or french fryer till golden brown. Do not crowd. Drain on paper towels. Delicious hot or cold! Enjoy! (Frances Franchina and Maggie Longo; John Pirelli Lodge # 1633)

Baccala (Dried Cod Fish)

3 lbs baccala (dried or presoaked)

1 cup olive oil

4 garlic cloves, chopped

1 cup Italian wrinkly or other Italian black olives

1 small jar capers

1/4 cup raisins

1/4 cup pignoli nuts

1 tsp basil

1 tsp oregano

salt and pepper

2 lbs. plum tomatoes (canned or fresh)chopped

Soak dried baccala in refrigerator for 3 days. Change water 3 times a day. Or buy *Presoaked* Baccala. Boil black Italian olives (wrinkly kind) for 2 minutes, drain, set aside. Run water over capers, drain, set aside. Place fish in baking pan in a single layer, sprinkle all ingredients over top bake at 375 for one hour.

(Rose Testagrosso submitted by Gladys Marino; Sunrise-Tamarac Lodge #2542)

Easy Cassata alla Siciliano (Sicilian Wedding Cake)

2 lbs ricotta, drained

1 tsp vanilla

1/2 cup mini chocolate chips

1 cup sugar

1/4 cup creme de cocoa (white)

3 pkgs. Lady Fingers

Combine ricotta, sugar, vanilla and creme de cocoa. Beat for ten minutes at medium speed. Stir in chocolate bits. Line a spring form pan with Lady Fingers, bottom and sides. Pour half of the filling in the pan. Cover filling with Lady Fingers. Pour remaining filling in and cover with Lady Fingers. Refrigerate.

Remove from pan just before serving. (Vito J. Rossi; Charles J. Bonaparte Lodge # 2504)