

Buon Natale — Christmas in Italy

by Kathy Tretter

Confession: I have never spent Christmas in Italy, and even though my immigrant grandpa, mother and uncles were Italian through and through (my grandma, or Nonna, died before I was born), they adopted American customs after emigrating to the United States in 1915. We didn't celebrate on Christmas Eve with the Feast of Seven Fishes (as my cousins do in Grea di Cadore, a small village in the Dolomites, or Italian Alps), I think because my mom was not all that fond of fish. Also, Santa Claus brought our gifts, not La Befana — a kind of "good witch" who is believed to have been invited by the wise men to help find Jesus but was busy with housework. When she decided to follow them she got lost.

This good witch delivers the presents to my littlest cousins, although not until January.

Christmas or Natale, is a major holiday in Italy, centered on food and family and also faith! Like in the United States, people in different regions celebrate in their own way, but it's definitely a time reserved for loved ones.

In other countries such as the U.S., Thanksgiving (or even Halloween!) signals the start of the Christmas season. In Italy, though, Christmas officially kicks off with the Day of the Immaculate Conception of Mary on December 8, when decorations go up (both on the streets and inside homes) and when some Christmas markets start. This religious and state-sanctioned holiday (lots of offices and businesses are closed for the day), doesn't have anything to do with the day Mary conceived Jesus, it celebrates the day when the Catholic Church decided Mary was born without having the stain of original sin.

And while La Befana may bring gifts, Italians have their own version of Santa Claus or Father Christmas. His name is Babbo Natale and his job is spreading holiday cheer. Besides writing to Father Christmas with their wishes,

it is traditional for children to write letters to their parents, telling them how much they love them. The letters are usually decorated and tied up beautifully, and are read out loud after Christmas lunch. As to the letters to Babbo Natale, just as Santa Claus, Indiana is the place letters to Santa land, the village of Piave, very near Grea, is where letters to the Italian Father Christmas go. He has a little house in the woods overlooking the Piave River where children can visit him as well.

The nine days before Christmas, also known as the Novena, are filled with carolers singing traditional songs around the neighborhood. If you're in Rome, southern Italy or Sicily, zampognari — or bagpipe players—travel from the nearby mountains to play merry folk carols. But my family hailed from the very far north, almost in Austria, so no bagpipers. The purpose of Novena, is to remember the journey of the shepherds to the manger that sheltered Baby Jesus. In rural areas in particular, children go from house to house dressed as shepherds and perform Christmas songs or poems, often in exchange for money or sweets.

Like in American, homes and businesses are bedecked with twinkling lights, wreaths and Christmas trees, as well as presepi (nativity scenes), which are also displayed in most churches and piazzas (town squares). These are not the kind that are mass produced in huge quantities but ornate works of art hand-made by artisans, some of whom learned from their forefathers. Naples in southern Italy is world-famous for hand-made presepi, with entire streets containing one workshop after another devoted to the craft.

Now to that Feast of the Seven Fishes. To prepare and purify their bodies for Christmas Day, Italians avoid meat on la Vigilia (Christmas Eve). Although the idea is to eat lean, most indulge on multiple courses of fish.

The Feast of the Seven Fishes ('Esta dei Sette

Pesci' in Italian) on Christmas Eve seems to have its root in southern Italy, but when my son spent Christmas with our relatives in Grea my cousin Oswald's wife prepared just such a feast. Common types of fish eaten at the feast include Baccala (salted cod, which my grandparents used to prepare and nail to a wall in our garage), clams, calamari, sardines and eel. There are different theories as to why there are seven fish dishes eaten. Some think that seven represents the seven days of creation in the Bible, other say it represents the seven holy sacraments of the Catholic Church. But some families have more than seven dishes! You might have nine (to represent the Christian trinity times three), 13 (to represent Jesus and his 12 disciples) or 11 (for the 11 disciples without Jesus or Judas!). Or maybe the variety is dictated by the family's love of fish or just family tradition.

After the dinner, Italians head to Midnight Mass at their local church to celebrate, but traditions vary from city to city. In Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomite Mountains, not far from my family in Grea, thrill-seekers ski down the slopes with torches at midnight to welcome Christmas.

After eating "light" on Christmas Eve, Italians invite family and friends for a large lunch that usually goes on all Christmas Day, serving up traditional dishes like pasta in brodo (pasta in broth), roasts and desserts such panettone.

The party continues the next day, December 26, with the national holiday of Santo Stefano (St. Stephen) when families gather yet again and eat leftover Christmas dishes and sweets.

The official end of the Christmas season, however, isn't until January 6 — the Day of the Epiphany, and the twelfth day of Christmas. On the eve of the Epiphany, families prepare a large dinner to mark the end of the holiday season; children are given candy or coal

(usually made of black sugar), depending on if they were naughty or nice. After January 6, Christmas markets close and decorations start to come down.

When to exchange gifts is also more complicated than here, where it's either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

In some parts of the country, gifts are exchanged on Christmas Day after that long, long lunch. But in some northern Italian cities blind Saint Lucia brings gifts for children on December 13, so they open them that morning. Other families may wait until January 6 (or give gifts both or all three days). The Epiphany is when La Befana brings her gifts, particularly in Rome and Bologna, and when I visited my relatives in January, an effigy of La Befana still hung from the kitchen ceiling mid-month.

Regardless of when they open their presents, many Italians keep their wrapped gifts on display on the pyramid-shaped ceppo (yule log), along with candles and other decorations.

Want to go a wee bit Italian on Christmas Eve? The following is my gift to you, a recipe that's easy to prepare and while it's not seven fishes it will still satisfy and give just a wee taste of Italia on la Vigilia.

Seafood Casserole

6 oz. pkg. long grain and wild rice
1 lb. frozen crabmeat, thawed or 2-1/2 cups canned lump crabmeat, drained
1 lb. cooked shrimp, peeled, de-veined and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
2 ribs celery, chopped
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1/2 cup finely chopped green pepper
4 oz. can mushroom stems and pieces, drained (or use fresh)
2 oz. jar diced pimientos, drained
1 cup mayonnaise
1 cup milk
1/2 tsp. pepper

Dash Worcestershire sauce

1/4 cup dry bread crumbs

Method

1. Cook rice according to package directions and preheat oven to 375°.

2. Combine crab, shrimp, celery, onion, green pepper, mushrooms and pimientos. In a small bowl, whisk mayonnaise, milk, pepper and Worcestershire sauce; stir into seafood mixture. Stir in rice.

3. Transfer to a greased 13x9-in. baking dish. Sprinkle with bread crumbs. Bake, uncovered, until bubbly, 40-50 minutes.



Collision Center Inc.
JAW'S 16675 N State Rd. 245
Santa Claus, IN
(812) 937-2899 • (812) 631-3642
AUTO SALES & SERVICE
Offering good dependable used late model vehicles


- Front End Alignment • Oil Change
- Brakes • Tire Service
- Spray-on Liners • Auto Accessories

ASE Certified Collision Repair Technicians
with over 90 years combined experience



Santa, bring more beer!

St. Benedict's Brew Works wishes you and yours a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.



St. Benedict's Brew Works
860 E. 10th St., Ferdinand

CHRISTMAS HOURS:
Wed., Thurs., Fri., Sat. & Sun., December 19-23 - 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Christmas Eve - Monday, December 24 - 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Christmas Day - Tuesday, December 25 - noon to 8 p.m.

Check us out on Facebook or saintbenedictsbrewworks.com

