

# TASTES of ITALIA

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## FEATURES

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**41 UMBRIAN CHRISTMAS** Joe Palumbo spends Christmas in Umbria, where he discovers a treasure trove of authentic holiday recipes, including Pine Nut and Fig Tart, Brandy Tart in a Hazelnut Crust, Meringue Cookies, and Oranges with Candied Slices of Orange Zest.

**52 CELEBRITY CHEFS** Enjoy these holiday recipes from our celebrity chefs. Try Mario Batali's flourless chocolate cake, Giada De Laurentiis' angel food cake with espresso mascarpone cream, Rocco DiSpirito's cannoli, Tyler Florence's crostata, and Biba Caggiano's salt cod.

**58 CHRISTMAS EVE** Susan Van Allen likes her Christmas Eve Italian style, with fish for dinner and struffoli for dessert. Inspired by memories of her grandmother, dinner also features some modern updates, like men in the kitchen.



**CHRISTMAS EVE  
ITALIAN STYLE**

**A TRADITIONAL FISH  
FEAST IS ON THE  
TABLE IN SOUTHERN  
ITALIAN HOUSEHOLDS  
FOR THE NIGHT BEFORE  
CHRISTMAS. AND DON'T  
FORGET THE STRUFFOLI.**

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MICHAEL LAURENCE

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oesn't everybody have a fish feast that goes on far into the night at their grandparents' house on Christmas Eve? That's what I thought when I was a kid, growing up in New Jersey surrounded by Italian Americans. My Nana, who'd immigrated from Molise, never used the word "tradition." It was simply a given

that every year on the night before Christmas she'd be at the stove frying fish, with her apron tied up under her arms instead of her waist to keep the oil from splattering her dress.

"You look just like your grandmother," my mother and aunts would tell me, as they bustled around the kitchen arranging platters. I saw no resemblance between my eight-year-old self and Nana—a large woman with jiggly arms, huge breasts, and ankles that swelled over her black laced shoes. Still, I put up with the comparison to watch her at work. It was mesmerizing to see eel jumping around in the skillet, floured flounder and smelts transformed to crispy golden filets.

In the dining room, where the candlelit table was set with a lace cloth and Nana's best china, the men tucked their ties inside their shirts and waited to be served. "Bacala, bacala, vieni qua, vieni qua," Uncle Bill would say, calling for the bowl of stewed fish that I was too scared to taste because it smelled so strong.

While my brother and sisters excused themselves from the table to go play with their new toys, I stayed to listen to the conversation (half in Italian), play with the candle wax that dripped on to the tablecloth, and for the sweet finish when my grandfather poured Strega into curvy cordial glasses, as struffoli was passed around.

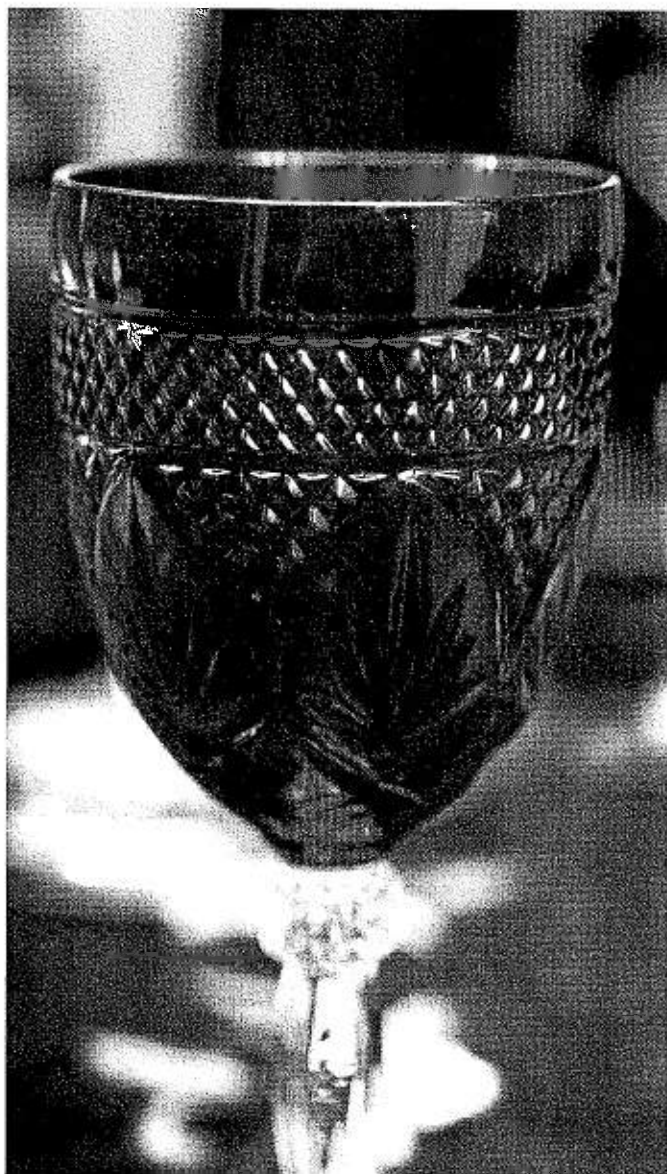
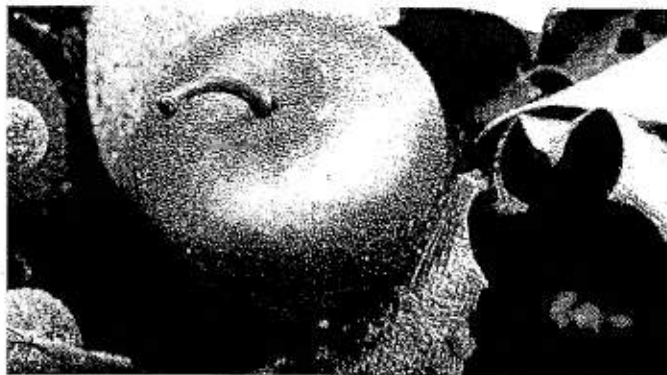
I didn't realize until years later that this Christmas Eve dinner was quintessentially Southern Italian. The practice of eating fish originated from Catholic law, which deemed the day before Christmas to be one of abstinence, so meat was not to be eaten. Of course, the Italians turned that into a good thing. And in Southern Italy, where fresh fish is abundant on both the Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts, it was easy to follow the guidelines.

Much has been written about the Italian's Christmas Eve "Feast of the Seven Fishes," but the number of fish Nana served had less to do with that rule, and more to do with what the fish seller had on hand and what her family liked to eat. There are lots of theories as to why the number seven was chosen: That it's a magical number from the Bible, that it commemorates the seven days of creation, the seven deadly sins, the seven deadly virtues, or the seven days it took Joseph and Mary to get to Bethlehem. The most widely held belief is that it stands for the seven sacraments of the church.

Now my husband and I host Christmas Eve dinners in our California home. As Nana never used written recipes, we rely on Arthur Schwartz's cookbook, *Naples At Table* (Harper Collins, 1998), a veritable bible of Southern Italian cooking, to guide us through. We've adapted the La Vigilia di Natale dinner. We don't

go overboard with a lot of fried food, the men help out, and I don't spend long hours at the stove with an apron tied up under my arms.

Still, the essence of La Vigilia di Natale from my childhood lives on: a big feast, with lots of fish, where loved ones gather in joyful anticipation of Christmas. For more southern Italian recipes from Arthur Schwartz, see [www.thefoodmaven.com](http://www.thefoodmaven.com).





## Fried Honey-Dipped Dough Balls

### STRUFFOLI

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs
- Peanut or canola oil for frying
- 1 cup honey
- Optional garnish: 1/4 cup finely diced candied orange peel or mixed candied peels; 2 tablespoons to 1/4 cup slivered almonds or coarsely-chopped hazelnuts or pistachios, multicolored sprinkles and/or candied cherries

In large mixing bowl combine the flour and salt. Make a well in the flour and break in the eggs. With a fork, gradually beat the flour into the eggs until a stiff dough forms.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured board and knead vigorously 8 to 10 minutes until you have a smooth, compact dough. Shape it into a disk, wrap in plastic or wax paper, and let rest for 20 minutes.

Cut the dough into 1/2-inch slices. Between the palms of your hands (not on a board), roll the dough slices into 1/4-inch-thick ropes. Cut the ropes into 1/4-inch pieces.

In a 12-inch skillet, heat 1/4 to 1/2 inch oil until a piece of dough sizzles immediately. Fry the struffoli, turning them in the hot oil with a slotted spoon, until they become dark, nutty brown on all sides. They will expand to more than double their size, so do not crowd the pan. When done, drain the stroffoli on absorbent paper.

In a large saucepan, heat the honey over low heat until very hot but not boiling. Add the struffoli and stir with a wooden spoon until all the balls are well coated. Remove the pan from the heat and continue to stir until the honey has cooled and thickened and is sticking well to all the dough balls.

Stir in any optional ingredients.

Pour the struffoli onto a dinner plate, mounding them or fashioning them into a wreathlike ring. Scrape any syrup out of the pan and let it drip on the struffoli. Garnish as desired. Let stand until thoroughly cool before serving. The struffoli keep at room temperature for a week.

Makes 1 dinner plate size mound or wreath.

## Spaghetti Marinara Alla Cecilia

- 1 pound spaghetti or linguine
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, lightly smashed
- 2 to 4 oil-packed anchovy filets
- 1 (28-oz.) can peeled plum tomatoes
- 3 ounces light tuna in olive oil (1/2 a can)
- 5 pitted Gaeta or round Greek olives, each cut into at least 6 pieces
- 5 large sprigs parsley, finely cut
- 1/4 teaspoon hot red pepper flakes (or to taste)
- 1/4 cup salted capers, thoroughly rinsed

Cook the spaghetti or linguine in salted boiling water until al dente. Meanwhile, in a deep 10-inch skillet, combine the garlic and olive oil and cook over medium-low heat. Press the garlic into the oil to release its flavor, until it barely begins to color on both sides. Remove the garlic.

Immediately add the anchovies and increase the heat to medium. With a wooden spoon,

mash the anchovies into the oil.

Add the tomatoes with their juice. With a wooden spoon, break and mash them into a coarse sauce.

Stir in the tuna, olives, parsley, hot pepper and capers. Simmer over medium-high heat, without stirring for 5 to 8 minutes, until the oil separates slightly from the tomato. Taste and season with salt, if needed. Add more hot pepper if desired.

Drain the pasta and pour it into the sauce. Toss over medium heat for about a minute, until the pasta is cooked to taste. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

## Yeast Fritters Stuffed with Anchovies

### PASTA CRESCIUTE DI ACCIGHE

- 1 envelope dry yeast (2 1/2 teaspoons)
- 2 cups warm water, divided
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, or slightly less
- Peanut, canola, or corn oil for frying
- 12 chopped anchovy filets
- Special equipment: Deep-fat or candy thermometer

In a large mixing bowl, whisk the yeast in 1/2 cup of warm water. Let stand for 10 minutes, until fizzing. Whisk in the salt and 1 1/2 cups more warm water. Whisk in the flour a few tablespoons at a time, incorporating each addition completely before adding the next. You will end up with a soft, smooth dough, neither too liquid nor too stiff, but better on the looser side.

Cover the bowl with a dish towel and set aside to rise for 1 hour, until the batter is bubbling and puffed to nearly double its volume. If the batter is ready before you are ready to begin frying, stir it down gently and let it rise again. Stir in the chopped anchovy filets.

Heat about 3 inches of oil in a deep, wide pot to about 380°F. Drop the batter, roughly by the tablespoonful, into the hot oil. It will not be of uniform shape, which is fine, allowing for extra-crispy parts. Do not overcrowd the pan.

As the fritters fry on the surface of the oil, turn with tongs so that they become golden-colored all over.

Drain the fritters on absorbent paper or a rack. Sprinkle with salt if desired. Serve immediately.

Makes 24 to 30 small fritters.