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Feast of the 7 Fish: Christmas Eve Italian Style



Inarguably, one of the most treasured facets of Christmas that celebrators relish this jingle-jingle, pine-scented, bow-topped holiday is all the great tradition that comes along with it.

For many, a big part of that doesn't just happen under the tree or bursting from stockings hung by the chimney with care— but in the kitchen.



Frank Pellegrino, one of the owners of Rao's Italian restaurant in New York City.

Christian cultures the world over celebrate the same holiday with entirely different, wonderfully deliciously exciting menus. But perhaps one of the most unique food-centric celebratory meals this time of year is the annual Italian Christmas Eve dinner --a gut-busting, table-overflowing bash of seafood-centric bounty.

"I can go as far back to when I was a little boy and remember always being at my grandparent's house with the whole family," says Frank Pellegrino Jr. of eating with his clan in Oceanside, Long Island, N.Y. on the holiday.

Pellegrino isn't just any ol' nostalgic paesano—he also happens to be the fourth-generation owner of the famous 100-plus year old iconic Italian eatery Rao's in Harlem as well as the much newer five-year-old outpost in Las Vegas. He's a man who knows a thing or two about traditional Italian meals. "We'd have the seven fish... well, actually more than that! And every Christmas Eve, it was something we really looked forward to."

In America, the celebration is often referred to as the Feast of the 7 Fish, the number meant to represent in the Catholic religion either the seven virtues, or possibly the seven sacraments. Some say the number is actually 12, for the apostles. But the only thing that can be agreed upon completely is what isn't so much about a specific number as that the meal contain no red meat.

Rao's:

<http://www.foxnews.com/leisure/2011/12/13/christmas-eve-italian-style/?test=faces>

“The next day—Christmas Day—that’s when you typically have a meat-based meal. Specifically in Bari (southern Italy), where I’m from, we have a tradition of very extravagant fish meal,” says Nicola Marzovilla, owner of the Italian restaurant I Trulli in New York City’s Flatiron District.

Marzovilla emigrated to the United States from Puglia in southern Italy when he was 10 years old. Celebrating this traditional meal has spilled over into his family’s elegant southern-Italian eatery, where, for several years, they have served up Feast of the 7 Fish dinner.

“Even today in Bari, they start in late afternoon and have a huge, long meal of all fish that’s marinated, fried, baked, you name it! It’s course after course after course. In Puglia to this day, Christmas Eve is traditionally a vegetarian meal, or a fish meal, depending on where you’re from and what’s available, and that’s based in religion,” Marzovilla says.

Christmas Eve dinner is referred to as La Vigilia, or the vigil—the period before midnight, when Christians believe the son of God was born into the world.

“[Italians] are very religious, but aside from that the dinner is also about coming together with family and celebrating Christmas and the time of giving. It’s an incredibly robust celebration, and just a great time to be with your family, just say thanks and show gratitude and appreciation for what you have,” says Pellegrino.

From the late 19th century until about 1976, hundreds of thousands of Italians emigrated to the United States, many from southern Italy and many who were poor, hoping for better opportunity in the U.S.

Many of the traditional, beloved dishes, like dried cod, or baccalla, soaked for days to reconstitute its salt-cured flesh, sprung from necessity rather than as indulgent holiday treats.

“My family came over with no money, and many of the dishes and ingredients were the easiest and cheapest to find to cook with,” Pellegrino says.

Today, though, these things are all part of a beloved and bountiful tradition.

Both the New York and Las Vegas Rao’s also serve the traditional, festive meal to hungry, happy diners on the eve, with a menu chock full of many of Pellegrino’s childhood favorites.

“We have the seafood salad with octopus, lobster, calamari, shrimp, olives, celery, olive oil, lemon, and garlic; we have fritto misto, which is a mix of fried cod, calamari, shrimp, and zucchini. There’s pasta and clam sauce, lobster fra diavolo, several shrimp dishes, such as Francese, scampi, and oreganate, filet of sole, baked clams, baccala salad...” Pellegrino says.

But while families look forward to the feast and feasting, the real gift, Pellegrino offers, is about who’s around the table.

“I come from a family that loves to cook. I love to cook! And Christmas Eve? It’s about everyone getting together and having a good time. It’s about enjoying yourself and the people you’re with. Cooking for the people you love is a gift in itself.”