AN Italian American Christmas
IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

It is Christmas Eve in the early decades of the 20th century. Italian immigrants throughout southwestern Pennsylvania are gathering their families for Vigilia, the Christmas Eve meal.

Part 1: Christmas Eve

By Cassandra Vivian

In the rough and tumble coal patch of Oliver, deep in the "Klondike" region of Fayette County, Giovanni and Caterina Mele and their 11 children sit down to a seven-course fish dinner celebrating the heritage of Campania (around Naples in southern Italy). In the booming steel town of Monessen, tucked in a bend of the Monongahela River in Westmoreland County, Nazareno and Carolina Parigi and their daughter Elizabeth are joined by cousins Geno and Sandrina Pelini and their children Arnold, Bobby, and Vivian from New Castle for a Tuscan-style Christmas Eve. (Traditions in the Parigi household are known firsthand, for the Parigis are the author's grandparents, and Elizabeth is her mother!) Along the swarming flatland on the eastern shore of the Allegheny River before it joins the Monongahela in downtown Pittsburgh, Giuseppe and Giovanna Balestreire Camarda and their five children celebrate not only their hometown of Santa Elia, but the family occupation as fishermen along the western Sicilian coast. They will cook and eat an orgy of Sicilian fish dishes. The Christmas Eve meals the Mele, Parigi, and Camarda families are enjoying offer telling clues to each family's heritage and dispel the myth that all Italian food is the same. While the holiday celebrates their religion, the food choices and preparations celebrate their native regions in Italy. Combined, the two points herald a very simple but overlooked truth: Italian American food does not stem from a single foodway.

Food Photography by Tom Gigliotti
The provinces of Italy were not united as a single nation until 1861. The independent regions that Giuseppe Garibaldi brought together had a history and culture uniquely independent of each other. Each also had a distinct geography. All of these elements had a tremendous impact on the food supply. In the Mezzogiorno, the semi-arid, mountainous region south of Rome, olives, olive oil, lemons, fish and goats were the major products of the land. Garnished by oregano, meats were grilled in Arab and Greek fashion or baked as the Norman invaders liked to do.

Further north, olive oil was replaced by butter and the cooking methods reflected a different mix of invaders and traders. Tuscany had an Etruscan influence. The lush farmland of both Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna produced beef, veal, and pork that were garnished with local herbs such as sage, rosemary, and thyme.

In the far north, the variety of food was similar to central Italy, but the influences were distinct. In Piedmont, Veneto, Lombard, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, traditional recipes were influenced by the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which they once belonged. In Lombard, heavily influenced by France, pasta was rarely seen on the menu. Friuli-Venezia Giulia had a Slavic influence. In the Alto Adige, the influence was predominantly Austrian, so the foods reflect strudels, pork, and rich desserts like kastanientorte, a puree of chestnuts mixed with butter, flour, sugar, and eggs.

Beginning in about 1870, and continuing until the mid-1920s, some 4 million people, from nearly all of Italy’s provinces, immigrated to America. In one instance in 1901, the Mayor of Moliterno in southern Italy described the situation in his town when he welcomed the Prime Minister by saying: “I greet you in the name of 8,000 fellow citizens, 3,000 of whom are in America, and the other 5,000 preparing to follow them.”

Most of the immigrants to America had already arrived before the concept of a united Italy had time to develop. Immigrants brought their distinct regional differences and food traditions to America. That uniqueness not only separated them from other nationalities, it isolated them from other Italians, too. In fact, few regarded themselves as Italian. They were Abruzzese, Piemontese, Siciliani, Toscani... As they worked and lived in the coal patches and steel towns of southwestern Pennsylvania, most could only nod to other “Italians” because they could not speak with one another. The dialects were actually separate Romance languages—as many as 6,000 of them, by some estimates. A Romagnoli calls a fish stew brodetto. To a Tuscan, brodetto means a soup with bread, eggs, and lemon. In Tuscany, soprassata means head-cheese, but in Calabria it is a salami.

The Christmas Eve feast keeps the ancient traditions intact. As their homeland marched toward unification, Italian Americans marched in the opposite direction, maintaining their regional identities. If a person does not understand these basic concepts about Italian Americans, he or she will never understand what constitutes Italian-American food and traditions in the United States. It is not pasta. It is not pizza. It can never be that simple.
CATHOLICISM & FISH

It was not “Italianism” that linked Italians, but Catholicism. The church unified people long before Giuseppe Garibaldi united the provinces to form the Italian state. The Catholic Church decreed the eve before a holiday as a mangiare di magro, a time of “eating lean,” and in the most Catholic of countries, surrounded on three sides by water, fish is the food of ritual for Christmas Eve.

The ingredients that dance with the fish are regional: fish with pasta, and in soups and stews; fish boiled, fried, baked, and grilled; fish combined with onions or leeks, or with olives, pine nuts, and raisins. We simmer fish in rich red tomatoes or in pure white milk. And each ingredient carries the history of an entire region. It has a story to tell.

Catholicism also gave us a system of mystical numbers for Christmas. Three is the number of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is also the number of wisemen in the nativity story. So, either were honored when a family served three fishes on Christmas Eve. In the Italian region of Abruzzi, the sacred number for Christmas Eve is seven—for the seven virtues or the seven sacraments. Seven can also mean the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, or the seven champions of Christendom. There are also the seven winds of Italy, the seven hills of Rome, the seven days of creation, and even the seven wonders of the world or the seven veils of Salome.

Some Abruzzi families prepare nine dishes on Christmas Eve: the nine months that Mary carried Jesus, or the Trinity times three. In the Marches, the number is nine for an all-vegetable Christmas Day meal including cabbage, turnips, asparagus, anise, and stuffed artichokes. An Apulian family may prepare 13 dishes symbolizing Jesus Christ and his 12 disciples. In Calabria, the number is nine or 13 or even 24 or 25, the latter for the days of the Christmas season.

If you ask a Tuscan American how many dishes he or she prepares, they may look at you strangely. They do not fix a set number of dishes—most northern Italian Americans do not. In fact, most have never heard of the tradition. The custom is stronger among southern Italian American families, though many do not know why or what the numbers represent. They continue the tradition because the family has always done it. It is one of the mysteries of the Christmas season. The number of dishes, the type of dishes, and the meaning behind each preparation is lost in each family’s Medieval past.
The Mele family of Fayette County hails from Sala di Serino, Province of Avellino, in the hills of the Campania countryside high above Naples. Christmas Eve dominates their holiday celebration. Rita Mele maintains seven was always the number of dishes prepared in their family. But if you count the dishes on the Meles’ holiday table, they number far more.

The Meles serve their Christmas Eve meal as a buffet, and leave the remainder of the feast out after everyone has eaten. This is tradition, too. In Parma, Emilia-Romagna, leftovers are for the souls of the dead; in Calabria, food remains on the table awaiting a visit from the Madonna. The Meles keep their table through Christmas Day and replenish it as new guests arrived. During Christmas week in Parma, Rita Mele remembers, “the dining room table always had a large bowl of fresh fruit and a bottle of wine on it so that visitors could be offered something immediately when they came to visit.” It still does.

David Ruggerio, a Neapolitan American chef and restaurant owner who grew up in New York City, is author of the celebrated Little Italy Cookbook; he agrees with the Meles’ hospitality: “Every Italian family makes twice what they can eat because it’s the day everybody goes visiting. Usually, the older people stay home to receive guests while the younger generations go visiting. If you’re on the visiting team, you end up going to 10 different houses and eating 10 different meals. You better be prepared to eat! If you’re on the home team, you have to have an all-day feast ready from mid-morning until night because you never know who’s going to show up at what time.”

Valia Dalfonso Ray of Monessen—her parents Ef- aiano and Nazzerena Mappozi D’Alfonso came from Prata Dannfione, Province of Aquila, in Abruzzi—remembers, “All my Slavish girlfriends from Friedland’s Dress Shop [in Monessen] loved to come to my house for Christmas Eve. They could not believe the amount of food on the table, and how good it all tasted.”

Mele’s Neapolitan Olive Salad (see text p. 167; caponata di pece for ingredients) >
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Next comes the pasta. It can be prepared *aglio e olio* with garlic and oil or mixed into a red sauce. But it must have fish—usually anchovy, sardines, clams, or squid (*calamari*), but sometimes snails, perhaps lobster, and maybe an occasional sea urchin. The Mele family have two types of pasta for their traditional Christmas Eve: *vermicelli* in red sauce with *calamari*, and angel hair pasta in *aglio e olio* with the expected anchovies.

The dressing of *aglio e olio* is regionally inspired. Created by poor families in the crowded alleys of Rome, the Christmas Eve version there is simply called *spaghetti alle alici*, spaghetti with anchovies. Jana Siciliano, a columnist for the *New York Daily News*, calls her family's Sicilian Christmas Eve pasta *olio* and combines the typical *aglio e olio* with walnuts, anchovies, and black olives. Rizzi DeFabio of Crabtree, Westmoreland County, still honors his great-grandparents Giuseppe and Rosina Massari DeFloria—immigrants from Cerce Maggiore in Molise—by serving the family's traditional *aglio e olio* for Christmas: spaghetti with garlic, oil, bread crumbs, walnuts, and raisins. Leonard and Lillian Carl (Carlona or Carlone) Plaitano enhance their *aglio e olio* with stuffed *calamari*. They came to the glass-making center of Jeannette in Westmoreland County from Salerno in the Campania.

In Palermo, one of the main cities of Sicily, the Christmas Eve dish is *pasta con le sarde*, pasta with sardines. This dish, writes Anna Del Conte in *Gastronomy of Italy*, is “like a history of Sicily writ small: part Greek [sardines and fennel], part Saracen [raisins and pine nuts], part Norman [baked in the oven].” Sardines in Liguria are baked in a dish called *tortino di sarde* with layers of beet leaves, then cooked in olive oil and combined with eggs and Parmesan alternating with sardines. In Puglia, *cozze* (mussels) are cultivated, so eating mussels at Christmas is not a surprise, especially with potatoes, zucchini, and tomatoes. In Apulia, *orecchiette* (“little ears” of pasta) is the traditional pasta.

In Monessen, meanwhile, the Parigi table has pasta, too, but not *pasta asciutta* (pasta in which the water is drained after cooking). Following their Tuscan heritage, they make *zuppa di ceci*. This is a *chickpea soup* with chick peas, rosemary, garlic, celery, carrots, tomatoes, and parsley cooked and pureed before adding homemade pasta. There are no onions in this dish because Tuscan tradition in their village of Quarata never combines onions and garlic. Nazzareno and Carolina Parigi's grandchildren call it Christmas soup, for as delicious as it is and as much as the family enjoys it, it is only served on Christmas Eve.

Maybe you know someone who makes a lasagna for Christmas Eve. In the Piedmont, the Christmas Eve pasta dish is a special *lasagne della Vigilia*. The noodles are much wider than the traditional lasagna, as they signify the swaddling clothes of the baby Jesus. *Lasagne della Vigilia*—recall that Vigilia is the word for the Christmas Eve meal—is flavored with typical *Vigilia* fare: butter, anchovies, garlic, Parmesan, and black pepper. In the Veneto, another Christmas Eve pasta is *lasagne da fornel*, deliciously premoistened with melted butter and covered with crushed walnuts, poppy seeds, raisins, grated apple, bits of fig, and a sprinkling of sugar. Sounds delicious and very Balkan!

How about polenta? The family of Norma Marcolini Ryan of Brownsville, Fayette County, continues the Christmas traditions of her mother and father Attilio and Giovanna Persello Marcolini of Dignano al Tatlimento in the Province of Udine, Friuli. The Friulani are *polentoni*—polenta eaters—and the Marcolini Christmas Eve pasta course is exactly that: polenta topped by *baccala* cooked with leeks in tomato sauce.
PARIGI'S TUSCAN CHICKPEA SOUP WITH EGG NOODLES

- 48 oz. canned chickpeas
- ½ cups broth (or water)
- ¼ cup fresh or ¼ t dry rosemary
- 2 large cloves garlic
- 2 T fresh parsley
- ½ cup celery ribs and leaves
- 2 small carrots
- salt and pepper, to taste
- ¼ cup corn oil
- ½ cup whole or crushed fresh or canned tomatoes
- 2½ cups wide pasta (optional)
- Parmesan cheese or lemon wedge

Place a 4-quart pot over medium-high heat. Add chickpeas (including liquid), reserving 1 cup, and 1½ cups broth or water. Bring to a boil. Add rosemary, cover, lower heat, and allow to simmer slowly for 30 minutes. While simmering, chop garlic, parsley, celery, and carrots in a meat grinder or food processor (the grinder is better because it releases the juices). There are no onions in this soup.

Place a medium-size iron skillet over medium-high heat. Heat to hot. Add oil. Add garlic mixture, salt, and pepper to oil. Sauté 20 minutes. The longer you cook this mixture the better the soup will taste. Simmer until vegetables are dark and begin to stick to the skillet (about 20 minutes). Add tomatoes, mash them into small pieces. Simmer slowly an additional 10 minutes.

Add vegetable mixture to simmering chickpeas. Continue to simmer for an additional 30 minutes. Remove from stove and puree in blender at high speed. Return to pot and simmer slowly for about 30 minutes. Stir often.

About 15 minutes before serving add the remaining whole chickpeas. Some people prefer to eat ceci soup without pasta. If so, serve and garnish with Parmesan cheese or wedge of lemon.

To combine with pasta, add 1 cup wide pasta per quart of soup, cook 15 minutes or to taste, and serve with freshly grated Parmesan cheese or wedge of lemon, not both.

Yields 2 to 2½ quarts. This is a thick soup and gets thicker as it sits. To thin, add additional broth. It can be refrigerated for up to a week or frozen for a couple months. Do not add pasta to broth to be stored.
Eel is unappetizing to many people, but it is a Christmas Eve must in most Italian American homes. That's because eel (Anguilla if female and capitone if male) symbolizes happiness in the year to come. Because it loses its skin, the eel is considered to renew itself, to “leave the world of the profane, and, in its vulnerability, enter the world of the sacred,” as Piero Selvaggio explained in a 1997 article in World and I.

There are as many ways to prepare eel as there are people who eat it. Some families roast eel, others combine it in a stew, others fry it, and some, like the ancient Romans, marinate it. In the Little Italy Cookbook, the Ruggerio Neapolitans serve their eel in a stew of anchovy, garlic, mushrooms, and peas with a tablespoon of tomato sauce and good soup stock. The DeFabo family from Molise fry their eel as part of a large fritto misto, mixed fry, of baccala, smelts, and cauliflower. Nowadays, they add calamari and shrimp (and for the younger generation, not so hot for fish, they also serve cheese ravioli, fettuccine Alfredo, and spaghetti with butter).

Although it is a Neapolitan tradition, no eel is served on the Mele table for Christmas Eve. Why? Perhaps the Meles could not afford eel. The Oliver coal patch was not Millionaire Row in the early 20th century. Or perhaps they could not find eel. Shopping for the Italian palate was no easy matter in turn-of-the-century southwestern Pennsylvania. But the reason is more personal:
neither Caterina nor Giovanni liked eel! So, eel was out! The age-old tradition stopped with them. “Don’t like it,” is one of the biggest reasons traditions change.

This leads us to another way that Italian American customs changed through the years. Sometimes regional specialties become holiday fare all year long. The special Arab-inspired arancini—orange-colored rice balls filled with savory—are served in Sicily for Santa Lucia’s Day on December 13, but have become holiday fare all year long on Sicilian American tables for Christmas, Easter, birthdays, and other rites of passage. This makes arancini a true Sicilian American holiday tradition.

Sometimes giving up a tradition is painful. It takes great skill to solve the problem of integrating the family into different customs. Marcella Fiore of Maryton, Pa., who has Abruzzese and Calabrese parents, has created her own unique Easter bread which combines the ingredients of both family recipes.
One could say smelts are universal on Christmas Eve. They are universally fried, too. There are two types: the very tiny smelt, shorter and thinner than a French fry, floured, fried, and popped into the mouth, or the larger smelt that is slit, beheaded, gutted, floured, and fried.

But if there is one dish that epitomizes Christmas Eve, it is baccala, cured cod. Baccala and stoccafisso, stockfish, are the same fish. Baccala is salted and dried. Stoccafisso is unsalted and air-cured. Ironically, it is not a fish from the Italian waters, but from colder climates, harvested mainly by Norwegian fishermen.

The Meles make a Neapolitan baccala stew filled with potatoes, celery, onions, garlic, and chunks of baccala swimming in a tomato broth. David Ruggerio, the author of Little Italy Cookbook, serves a fish stew of squid, cod, halibut, shrimp, and sea scallops. No baccala at all. His baccala is prepared by his Aunt Mary in Brooklyn, who cooks it a number of ways, including his favorite with potatoes and green olives. Rizzi DeFabo’s Molise family have a baccala stew, too, with celery, peppers, garlic, cauliflower, mushrooms, baccala, tomatoes, basil, and parsley. A family from the Marches may prepare a rich stew of eight to ten different kinds of fish. They call this stew brodetto. In Liguria it is called ciuppin.

If your family’s Italian heritage has gotten lost through the generations, but you make baccala for Christmas in the form of a fritter that includes cabbage, your family may have an Italian Riveria connection, for this is typical of Liguria cooks from La Spezia. Perhaps you boil your baccala or stoccafisso, combine it with garlic and parsley, and then pound it into a paste until it looks like mashed potatoes. Or you make it with onion, parsley, garlic, anchovies, cinnamon, and Parmesan, simmered in milk and slow cooked and served with polenta. The first dish is baccala mantecato and the second is baccala alla vicentina or veneziana, both from the Veneto. Pittsburgh’s Lucy Simeoni remembers that her Friulian father and mother, Luigi and Emilia Meneghini Simeoni of Dignano al Tatrimento in the Province of Udine, in the far north of Italy, poached baccala with garlic and currants in a bath of milk and served it with bread or polenta. This is very similar to the Veneto specialty. In Venice, legend maintains, there are 30 different ways to cook baccala.

Christmas baccala in Rome means fried in a delicate batter, while in Basilicata, the region that sits in the arch of the boot, baccala con le patate al forno is a fish baked in olive oil with potatoes, oregano, garlic, and chili peppers. In Abruzzi, Christmas baccala is cooked with celery, pine nuts, golden raisins, black olives, and tomatoes—a dish screaming of Arab influence. That is how Mary Antonucci Moncini makes her baccala for Christmas Eve. Mary’s father and mother, Giovanni Battista and Maria Onesta Antonucci, come from Fossa in Abruzzi and a small coal patch near Brownsville in Fayette County. They once made their own raisins for this meal, but never used the black olives or the hot peppers.

Around Arezzo, baccala is the centerpiece of the traditional Christmas Eve, too! In the Parigi and Pelini homes, it is prepared three different ways: boiled and combined with olive oil and chickpeas, dredged in flour and fried. The former is a baccala salat, while the latter can be simmered in tomato sauce with either onions, or garlic and sage. It can also be combined with a sweet and sour sauce as their friend Sophia Poletini made it. There are only two fish on these tables, the baccala and fried smelts.

Calamari is another Christmas Eve fish. The Mele stuff calamari with a bread, onion, celery, and walnuts, or they cut it into rings, bread it, roll it in eggs, cornmeal, and Roman cheese, and then fry it. Another Neapolitan way of cooking calamari is to stew it with tomato, currants, pine nuts, and olives. The Camarda and Balestri family make their calamari that way, but without the olives. And they don’t fry the stuffed squid, they bake it.
AND MORE FISH

So how about snails? In Lombard and Venice, snails must be eaten on Christmas Eve. The Venetians enjoy snails with olive oil, garlic, and parsley. Snails also appeared on the Christmas Eve table of the Plaitano family of Jeannette. Joan Daigle, their granddaughter, remembers eating snails along with fried smelts and fried baccala. The family also enjoyed crab claws in tomato sauce and each Christmas recalls the time that one of the uncles broke the legs with such gusto that when he was done eating spaghetti sauce dotted the ceiling.

But the variety of fish prepared on Christmas Eve may never be as abundant as it was in the Camarda home. Fishermen in Sicily and hucksters of fruits and vegetables in Pittsburgh’s Strip, they cooked up a Christmas Eve meal of every fish they could find. They saved their pasta con le sardi for Saint Joseph’s Day and on Christmas Eve they made the fish into salads, into stews, baked them, fried them, and boiled them. They enjoyed crab, cuttlefish, steamed or boiled octopus or sea urchins, and fried or stuffed calamari. Giuseppe’s grandson, Tom Camarda, tells us that if they wanted sea urchins, they had to buy 50 pounds at a time. That’s a lot of sea urchin.

RIZZI DE FABO’S MOLISE-STYLE BACCALA STEW

Rizzi and his family own Rizzo’s Malabar Inn, in Crabtree, Westmoreland County. (The family graciously offered the Malabar dining room as the setting to photograph the dishes prepared for this article, and also provided all serving pieces and table accoutrements. Chef Rizzi also prepared the baccala stew shown on page 165.) Each year on Saint Joseph’s Day, Rizzi’s restaurant provides a Saint Joseph’s Day menu.

1 cup olive oil
1/4 stick butter or margarine
2 cups chopped celery with leaves
2 medium sweet bell peppers, diced
2 heaping tablespoons finely chopped garlic
1 1/2 heads cauliflower, blanched and cooled
4 cups sliced thick fresh mushrooms
3 pounds baccala soaked for two days to remove salt
3, 28 oz. cans stewed tomatoes
3, 28 oz. cans tomato sauce
2, 28 oz. cans tomato puree
4 cups diced basil
2 cups chopped parsley

Add oil and butter to a large stock pot. Combine the celery, peppers, and garlic. Sauté. Place baccala into boiling water, bring back to boil, drain immediately. Add to stock pot. Once baccala has been added to stock pot, add stewed tomatoes, tomato sauce and tomato puree. Simmer for an hour. Break the cooked cauliflower into pieces. Place the mushrooms in a little olive oil, add pepper and cook until soft. Add cauliflower, mushrooms, basil, and parsley to simmering stew. Cook an additional 15 minutes. If too thick, add water.
In her remarkable book Celebrating Italy, Carol Field exclaims caponata di pesce, fish salad, should be eaten daily from Christmas to Epiphany in Campania homes. It is called a rinforzo, for it is reinforced each day with fresh ingredients as its quantity diminishes. The Meles of Oliver agree. Their caponata di pesce is filled with 1 can each of smoked oysters, smoked mussels, smoked clams, and shrimp, ½ pound each of black and green olives, artichoke hearts, baby ears of corn, hot pepper flakes, olive oil, and garlic. Rita Mele believes that the oysters, mussels, and clams were probably fresh at one time, but affordability or availability turned the fresh fish to preserved fish.

The traditional Sicilian caponata, also a must at Christmas, is really a pickled vegetable dish with a variety of ingredients. The most traditional includes eggplant, onions, tomatoes, celery, anchovies, pine nuts, olives, capers, sugar, vinegar, and oil, but zucchini, cauliflower, and any other vegetable may be added.

The winter vegetables of radicchio, cauliflower, broccoli, and Savoy cabbage complete the Christmas Eve meal. The Mele Christmas Eve feast is rounded off with fennel in aglio e olio, fried cauliflower, lupini beans, and fresh and dried fruit. In the home of Francesco and Louise Mash (Mas-
DIGESTIVO

So if you are not of Italian heritage and are invited to an Italian American home for Christmas Eve, and expect to eat a mythical number of dishes, you may be disappointed. If you expect pasta, you may get soup. If you are anxious to taste eel, it may not be there. You may have a sit-down dinner, but you could also have a buffet.

What you can expect is an appetizer, a soup or pasta dish or two, a fish dish or two (or seven or 13), lots of vegetables, and good bread. If you want to learn something about Italian American food and the family you are visiting, the question will not only be what is prepared, but how it is prepared. That may well be the most telling clue to your hosts' heritage.

LOOK FOR PART 2 NEXT YEAR IN THE WINTER 2000-01 ISSUE: CHRISTMAS DAY AND ITS RECIPES
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