



Smithsonian Associates

Italy's Holiday Traditions

With Francine Segan

Wednesday, December 15, 2021 - 6:30 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. ET

Pandoro Christmas Tree Cake

Serves 10

A Natale con i tuoi e a Pasqua con chi vuoi

Christmas with your family, Easter with whomever you want

Pandoro, a tall star-shaped cake, has a delicious eggy brioche-like soft center, with a lovely vanilla-butter aroma. In Italy, pandoro is often served cut in horizontal slices that are restacked to look like a Christmas tree. It even comes boxed with a packet of confectioners' sugar to sprinkle on top.

In this recipe it's taken to another level and each layer is spread with mascarpone custard and decorated with mint leaves and candied cherries.

1/4 cup plus 1/2 cup granulated sugar

1/4 cup, plus 2 tablespoons, sweet liqueur, such as Cointreau, or rum

2 large egg yolks

14 ounces mascarpone cheese

1 cup heavy cream

1 Pandoro* cake, about 1 pound

Decorations such as: candied cherries, fresh mint leaves, silver confetti

Confectioners' sugar

In a saucepan combine 1/4 cup water with 1/4 cup of the sugar and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and stir in 1/4 cup of the Cointreau or rum. Reserve.

In a standing mixer combine the yolks and the remaining 1/2 cup of sugar and beat for 5 minutes until light yellow and fluffy. Beat in the remaining 2 tablespoons Cointreau or rum, and fold in the mascarpone.

In a separate bowl, beat the heavy cream until peaks form. Fold the mascarpone cream into the whipped cream.

Carefully, so as not to break the points, slice the pandoro horizontally into 6 slices. Brush the outsides of the slices, the golden colored baked section, with the reserved Cointreau syrup.

Place the largest pandoro slice onto a serving platter and spread with some of the mascarpone mixture.

Cover with the next largest slice, angling it so that the points of the star tips don't



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line up. Spread with some of the mascarpone mixture and repeat with the remaining layers, finishing with a dollop of mascarpone on top.

Decorate the points with candied cherries and mint leaves or candies. Sprinkle the entire cake with confectioners' sugar.

Cook's note: Pandoro is available in many supermarkets beginning in the late fall.

Variations:

You can spread the pandoro with anything creamy like ice cream, whipped cream, icing, pastry cream, or even zabaglione. And just like a gingerbread house, you can decorate it with anything festive including tiny candies, sprinkles or crushed candy canes.

Thanks to the natural yeast used in making pandoro, it lasts more than 6 months without refrigeration. You can use it any recipe that calls for pan di spagna or savoiardi cookies like zuppa inglese, tiramisu or zuccotto.



Struffoli: Neapolitan Honey Treats

Struffoli in Cestino di Croccante

Serves 10 to 12

Fritti sono buoni anche gli zampi delle sedie.

Fried, even chair legs are delicious.

Struffoli, traditional Carnevale and Christmas treats, are marble-sized fried dough balls dipped in honey, piled into a mound, and topped with colored sugar and candied fruit. It's a festive Italian communally shared dessert that's put out to encourage guests to stay at the table to chat and nibble.

Struffoli can be fried or baked and make a cheerful centerpiece just as they are, heaped onto a serving plate or, as ambitious home cooks in Naples do, you can serve them in an edible candy dish. Both the candy dish and the struffoli are actually fun and very easy to make.

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, plus more as needed

5 tablespoons granulated sugar, divided

1 1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 teaspoon salt

6 large eggs, separated

4 tablespoons butter, melted

3 tablespoons Cointreau or Limoncella

1 tablespoon vanilla

Zest of 2 lemons

Zest of 1 orange

Sunflower or other vegetables for frying

8 ounces honey, about 1 cup

For optional garnish: "diavolilli"—tiny colored sugar balls, candied cherries, confetti—assorted sugar coated nuts etc

In a large bowl and using an electric mixer, combine the flour, 3 tablespoons of the sugar, baking soda, salt, 4 whole eggs, 2 yolks, butter, Cointreau, vanilla, and the zests until a dough forms.

Refrigerate for 30 minutes.



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Take a small handful of the dough and roll it into a breadstick shape about 3/4 inches in diameter.

Cut the dough into hazelnut-sized sections about 1/2 inch thick and then you can either bake or fry them. (See below for baking instructions.) For frying, fill in a high-sided saucepan with 3 inches of oil and heat over medium-high flame. They will puff up and turn a lovely golden color within seconds. Remove them from the skillet and place them onto a paper towel lined plate.

Repeat with the remaining dough.

In a small saucepan combine the honey and the remaining 2 tablespoons of sugar and then heat until runny. Remove from the heat and stir in the fried balls, one small batch at a time until they are well coated in the honey mixture. Using a slotted spoon remove the coated balls and arrange them in a circle in a shallow bowl. Repeat with the remaining dough balls, adding them to form a tall mound. Pour any remaining honey over the top and decorate with a scattering of colored sugar balls, confetti and candied fruit.

Best if served within 24 hours of making them. The dessert is placed in the center of the table and guests help themselves with their fingers.

Cook's Note: If you prefer, you can bake the dough balls. Place the hazelnut-sized dough segment about an inch apart on a well-greased baking sheet and bake at 400 degrees for about 7 minutes. Turn the balls and bake on the other side for another 6 to 7 minutes or until light golden. They will not be as round or as nicely golden as the fried version, but the taste will be just as stupendous. You may like to try baking half the dough and frying half, giving your struffoli color gradations.



Edible candy dish:

Don't panic, this isn't hard to do. The candy dish is really just a big blob of almond brittle.

Vegetable or olive oil

1/4 cup corn syrup

2 1/4 cups sugar

2 cups, 7 ounces, sliced almonds

Lightly oil a large nonstick cookie sheet. Lightly oil the inside of a large pie pan, shallow bowl or mold.

Heat the corn syrup in a heavy bottom saucepan, over medium high heat until warm then stir in the sugar. At first the sugar just sort of sits there, but it will start to become translucent in about 3 or 4 minutes then turn ivory colored for another 3 minutes or so, and then finally darken and becomes liquidy.

Continue cooking the mixture, stirring occasionally with an oil-coated wooden spoon, until it becomes a rich golden color, about 12 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the almonds.

Carefully, as the sugar is scorching hot, pour the mixture onto the prepared cookie sheet. Using a rolling pin, gently flatten the mixture and roll it out into a large thin circle, at least 13 inches in diameter. Once it has cooled a little and seems firm, transfer it into the prepared mold.

Remove from the mold once it's completely cool and hardened.



Honey-Drenched "Roses"

Carteddate or Scartellate

Makes about 2 dozen, 3 1/2 inch treats

Figliuole e frittelle: quante piú se ne fa, piú vengon belle

Children and fried food: the more you make the better they look

This crunchy honey-drenched sweet is one of the most popular desserts of southern Italy, and is always served at Christmas and during Carnival season.

You'll get a kick out of making these, kind of like a combination arts and crafts project and cooking adventure. Long strips of pasta dough are twirled and pinched to form pretty rose shapes. It only takes making one or two to get the hang of it. Really a lot of fun to make!

16 ounces, about 3 1/4 cups, all-purpose flour
1/2 cup dry white wine, room temperature
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus more if frying
1 egg
1 cup honey
Mosto cotto* or vino cotto or vin santo, optional
Ground cinnamon
Ground cloves

Sift the flour into a large bowl, or onto a clean work surface. Make a well in the center of the flour, and fill with the wine, oil and egg. Incorporate the flour, a little at a time, working from the center out, until dough forms. If the dough is dry, add a few drips of warm water. Knead the dough until smooth and silky to the touch. Put into a plastic bag or wrap in plastic wrap and let rest for 15 minutes.

Divide the dough in quarters. Start with one section, keeping the other 3 sections wrapped in plastic wrap. Using a pasta maker or rolling pin, roll the dough into a 1/8 inch thick rectangle, about 15 inches long and 6 or 7 inches wide. Using a knife, or preferably a curly edge ravioli cutter, cut strips about 1 1/4 inches wide and about 15 inches long.

To make one carteddate, take one of the strips and, beginning at one end, bring the edges of the dough together and pinch. Pinch again, 2 inches down, to create a little almond-shaped pocket. Make a few more pockets, and then begin coiling the dough around itself, connecting the coils by pinching the pockets together at the widest point. Keep pinching and coiling until you get to the end of the strip of dough, then pinch that against the coil to seal. This should produce a circle of about 3 1/2 inches in diameter. Repeat with all the remaining dough. Let them rest covered with a cotton cloth overnight.



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The carteddate can then be fried or baked. If you are frying them, heat about 1 inch of olive oil in a small high-sided frying pan until very hot, but not smoking. Fry them 1 or 2 at a time, turning them once one side is golden, about 20 seconds, then 10 seconds for the other side. Do NOT overcook. They should just be lightly golden. Drain them, rose side down, on paper towel and repeat.

If you are baking them put them onto a baking sheet that has been lightly coated in olive oil, and bake at 400 degrees for about 20 minutes, then turn them over, and continue baking for about 5 minutes more, or until golden.

Warm the honey in a small saucepan and dip each carteddate into the honey. Put them onto a serving plate and sprinkle with cinnamon and cloves to taste and mosto cotto or vino cotto or even vin santo, if you like. They are also terrific without honey, just sprinkled with sugar.



Fruit and Nut Christmas Eve Lasagne

Lasagne da fornèl

Serves 6

Seasoned with apples, dried fruit, poppy seeds and nuts, this is a savory pasta version of apple strudel. This specialty from the Dolomite area of northern Italy is traditionally served as a first course on Christmas Eve.

In Italy "lasagne," the plural of lasagna, is a term that refers to fresh egg pasta cut into wide strips, and the resulting dish is more free form than what we in the States usually imagine when we think of cheesy, red-sauce lasagna.

8 to 10 dried white Calimyrna figs, thinly sliced

1/2 cup dry white wine

1 cup golden raisins or dried cherries, or a combination

1 cup finely ground toasted walnuts

2 red delicious apples, grated

12 tablespoons melted butter, plus more for greasing the pan

1 pound fresh egg pasta lasagna sheets, cut into 2 1/2 to 3 inch wide strips, or any fresh wide-cut egg noodle

1 tablespoon poppy seeds

Preheat the oven to 350 F/180 C. Generously butter a 9-inch oven-proof serving dish or baking pan.

In a small saucepan combine the figs and wine and bring to a boil over high heat. Boil on high for a minute or two, then reduce the heat to low and simmer until all the wine is absorbed, about 2 minutes. In a bowl combine the figs, raisins, walnuts, grated apples and 5 tablespoons melted butter.

Cook the lasagna strips in boiling, salted water until al dente. Drain and toss with 5 tablespoons butter and the poppy seeds. In the prepared pan, put down a single layer of lasagna strips haphazardly (do not arrange the noodles end to end—just put them in a flat layer). Spread with 1/3 of the fruit mixture. Repeat for 2 more layers. Top with a final layer of noodles and drizzle on 2 tablespoons of melted butter. Bake about 20 minutes, until hot throughout. Serve.

Region: Veneto and Friuli-Venezia



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Christmas Eve Pasta Cooked in Almond Milk

Lasagnette all'ajada

Serves 4

Wide egg noodles cooked in almond milk are then tossed in a dense walnut-garlic pesto and topped with toasted breadcrumbs. Totally vegan, homey and comforting.

Delicious any time of year, this dish is traditionally served on Christmas Eve. *Lasagnette all'ajada* gets its name by how the pasta are cut, *ajada* style: about 2 inches wide, meant to be evocative of a baby's swaddling.

2 slices white bread, crusts removed
1 quart almond milk
1 pound lasagnette or other wide egg noodles
1/2 cup chopped toasted walnuts
2 garlic cloves
Extra virgin olive oil
Salt
1/2 cup fresh coarse breadcrumbs

Soak the bread in a few tablespoons of almond milk until very soft. Bring the rest of the almond milk and a little salt to a boil and cook the noodles until al dente. Drain.

Meanwhile, grind the walnuts and garlic in a mortar and pestle or small food processor until fine. Squeeze some of the excess liquid from the bread and grind into the mixture. With the processor still running, slowly drizzle in a few tablespoons of olive oil, until the mixture is dense and creamy.

Heat a tablespoon or two of oil in a pan and add the breadcrumbs; toast until crisp. Be sure to use coarse, not finely ground, breadcrumbs.

Toss the pasta with the pesto until well combined and serve topped with breadcrumbs.

Region: Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria



Everything but the Kitchen Sink Christmas Tortelli

Tortelli Cremaschi

Serves 6 to 8

“My mother and grandmother made these tortelli every year with us children each assigned a different task,” recalls Matilda, the gracious home cook from Lombardy who taught me this recipe. “I still remember our shock at seeing so many disparate ingredients end up in the filling. But the biggest surprise came at the end, when our mother would add a crushed mint candy into the filling! She’d stress, whispering, that it was our secret ingredient and not to tell anyone.”

Well, as it turns out, virtually every family in Lombardy who I interviewed added a mint candy as their “secret” ingredient! Yet despite all the sweet ingredients, these tortelli are not a dessert—they are eaten as a festive, unusual, and tasty first course for weddings and during the holidays.

For the filling:

Butter

1/2 cup finely ground fresh breadcrumbs

1 2/3 cups crushed amaretti cookies

1 cup grated grana padana or Parmesan cheese, plus more to garnish

1/2 cup raisins

1/2 cup mostarda (candied fruit compote in spicy mustard syrup), finely minced

1 mostaccino cookie or a few crisp ginger snap cookies, crushed

Zest of 1 lemon

1 small pear, peeled, cored, and diced

1 hard mint candy, crushed

Nutmeg

1 Egg

1/2 cup sweet Marsala wine

For the tortelli dough:

About 4 1/4 cups all-purpose or 0 flour

3 eggs

For the filling:

Melt 3 tablespoons of butter in a small frying pan over medium high heat and toast the breadcrumbs until crunchy.



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In a large bowl combine the breadcrumbs, amaretti crumbs, grated cheese, raisins, minced mostarda, mostaccino cookie crumbs, zest, pear, mint candy and freshly grated nutmeg to taste. Add the egg and Marsala and mix until well combined. If it is too dry add a few tablespoons more of Marsala or water. Cover and refrigerate for 24 hours so the flavors can meld.

For the dough:

Put the flour into a bowl, make a well in the center, and beat the eggs and 1/4 cup warm water in the well. Slowly incorporate the flour into the egg mixture, adding a little more water, if needed, until dough forms. Knead until smooth. Form into a ball, cover with plastic wrap, and let rest for about 1 hour.

Roll out the dough into a thin sheet, either with a pasta maker or rolling pin. Using a cookie or ravioli cutter or very sharp knife, cut the pasta sheets into 2 1/2 or 3 inch squares. Put a teaspoonful of filling in the center of each square and fold diagonally to make a triangle, pressing the edges closed, then pinch the sealed sides to make three pleats (one at the point, and one on each side).

Cook the tortelli in plenty of boiling, salted water. Toss with 4 tablespoons butter and serve topped with grated cheese.

Region: Lombardy, especially Cremona