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Christmas in Florence

Family feasts celebrate the season

Celebrating in Florence

This classic Italian city revels in the joy of Christmas with glowing lights, festive celebrations, and sumptuous food.

by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli





THE BASILICA OF SANTA CROCE in Florence is illuminated against the night sky.

HOLIDAYS

Florence—Firenze—lights up at Christmas time like a twinkling Nativity scene. Even though tourist lines wane, it's a time when Florentines fill piazzas, museums and churches, celebrating the holiday season with food, music and tradition.

It's a winter wonderland with evergreens, Christmas trees and braids of green holly wrapped around palazzos, along piazzas and even on the Ponte Vecchio over the Arno. Christmas concerts, outside markets and fairs fill the calendar, offering something for everyone. The Nativity scenes of Florence, in every shape, color and size, sparkle from Santa Croce to il Duomo, with life-size statues made in terracotta depicting the Holy Family.

The Christmas season in Italy starts on Dec. 8 with the celebration of the Immaculate Conception: it's a national holiday and everyone has the day off. It's also the day when the giant Christmas tree goes up in the Piazza del Duomo and caroling starts at Oltrarno. The days that follow are filled with festivities, including Midnight Mass on Dec. 24 and masses throughout the day on Dec. 25. Special events continue on to Jan. 6 with the Epiphany.

Throughout the month, Florentines stroll the streets and fill cafés, sipping hot chocolate, tea and vino cotto, warm mulled spiced wine. Pastry shop windows are decked with Babbo Natale, golden-winged angels and Pinocchio, while pandoro, a brioche bread, cantucci, almond cookies, and panforte, a Tuscan spice cake, are baked by the best artisan pastry makers in the city.

As I walk across the Piazza Santa Croce in the golden light of the setting sun, the scent of wine wafts over from Il Vino Nobile wine bar, an institution in Florence. You could even call it a landmark because it's probably been open for over one hundred years.

Every fixture seems to have remained the same, including the eight small square wooden café tables that spill onto the sidewalk, always filled with people sipping vino and grazing on salumi and pecorino laid out on round wooden cutting boards. An old blackboard hangs crookedly, the daily specials handwritten in white chalk: taglieri di salumi e formaggio, taglieri di crostini misti, selezione di formaggi con mostarde e insalata mista and cantucci e vin santo. It's a banquet in the street on Borgo dei Greci, and I can't help but take a seat and join the party.

I call Signor Luca, my friend and art historian, guide, and food lover, and tell him I am at Il Note di Vino. After all, it's almost 4 p.m. and aperitivo time. He quickly confirms with a heavy Florentine accent, "Si sì...subito,"





THE CATHEDRAL of St. Mary of the Flower is commonly known as Il Duomo di Firenze.

HOLIDAYS

and tells me he is on his way. I take a table for three, and just in time, because my husband, Rino, arrives, and a few moments later, Luca. Everyone embraces one another with a “Ciao, ciao” and a kiss on each cheek.

Luca is a true Florentine. He’s tall, confident, and talks in Dante’s language, with an accent different from ours. My husband and I are from Campania. However, like everywhere in Italy, wine is quickly poured and the conversation soars about food, wine, more food and the best places to dine in Florence.

“What can we expect during Christmas time in Florence, Luca?” I ask. “It’s a time to be with family. It’s a time for traditional foods, like lasagne and cannelloni,” he says.

Luca sips his *Vino Nobile* and continues. “Lasagne is the official food that everyone makes for the Christmas holiday. It’s the real Italian tradition. Some people prepare cannelloni—it’s the same pasta, but the stuffing is different. Lasagne is stuffed with meat sauce and ragù and topped with mozzarella cheese,” he says. Cannelloni are stuffed with ricotta cheese and spinach and covered with plain tomato sauce. Christmas lasagne includes mushrooms and porcini mushrooms, because they are in season. These are the most typical pastas,” Luca says.

“In Tuscany, December is the season of the pork preparation, and every family and artisan producer cures their pork with their secret recipe,” he adds. Making pasta and baking is the females’ business, while curing the meat is the males’. That is the tradition,”

he explains.

Luca tells us about Florence’s ancient outdoor market, Sant’Ambrosia, which first opened in 1873. “In December, the mercato teems with seasonal delicacies—winter fruits such as figs and pomegranates, nuts, and vegetables like broccoli and minestra, as well as artisan cheeses. But most of all, it showcases the talent of the butchers because it’s the season for curing all kinds of meat and poultry, so the market is extraordinary. This leads me to the famous Florentine main course served at Christmas called *arista al forno*, roasted pork loin, and I am already hungry,” he says.

Arista al forno dates to the 15th century when the Council between the Roman and the Greek Church served pork loin during a sumptuous banquet for the Greek Cardinal Bessarione. While the Cardinal was eating the pork loin, he exclaimed “*aristos*” in Greek, meaning good or best. The Florentines thought he had called the meat by its name, and since then *arista* became the name of the pork loin.

Luca shares his recipe on how to make authentic *arista*. “When making *arista*, the first step is to chop the rosemary, sage leaves and garlic, then mix with sea salt and pepper. Next carefully separate the ribs from the loin using a sharp knife and rub the herb mixture on the surface of the meat. Tie the seasoned meat back on the ribs and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil. Put the meat in a baking pan and roast for about one hour. When the delicate scent of the meat and herbs starts to





CANTUCCI is often
enjoyed with Vin Santo.

waft around in your kitchen and the meat is crispy on all sides, splash it with white wine and continue to cook until the wine has evaporated. Remove the pan from the oven, let it cool and serve with its own juices. *Buonissimo!* This is the traditional Florentine Christmas pork loin roast,” he says.

Our waiter returns to the table, fills our goblets with another round of vino and places a wooden cutting board laden with slices of Tuscan pecorino, caprino and salumi served with a pumpkin ginger jam for dipping. The cheese and jam fuse for a heavenly salted and sweet taste.

As we sip our wine and converse about our favorite Florentine spots, Rino explains his love for Giotto’s Bell Tower. “I love to climb the over 400 stairs up in the Campanile di Giotto at the Duomo and Baptistery. Its structure mesmerizes me. Imagine—it was built by Giotto in 1334. At about 400 feet high, it offers the best aerial view of Florence.”

Luca agrees. “Climb the Giotto Bell Tower during your stay at dusk and you will see Florence with twinkling Christmas lights and festive ornaments for a magical view.”

Luca also tells us about Caffè Gilli, the most famous place in Florence for caffè e dolce, espresso and desserts. “It’s a landmark overlooking the Piazza della Repubblica by the Savoy Hotel. Its elegant Liberty style, Murano lamps, and gorgeous frescoed ceilings preserve the 1900s turn-of-the-century feeling. Aside from its beauty, Caffè Gilli has been steaming up the city’s creamiest cappuccino ever since it first opened in 1733,” he says.

Although Caffè Gilli is noted for its morning *corretti*, cioccolato caldo, hot chocolate, wine and aperitivi, it first became famous for its chocolate—and the Florentines always appreciated its chocolate. The Sacher cake, profiteroles, chocolate covered fruit, chocolate ganache and pralines were some of the first chocolate sweets the chocolatiers made at Caffè Gilli and they are still served today.

“After the Medici family fell from ruling Florence, and when the Imperial family Habsburg ruled, they brought with them their chocolate cakes and the Zuppa Inglese. These types of sweets and cakes come

IN ADDITION to its wide selection of wines, Note di Vino in Florence gets high ratings for its friendly atmosphere.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



FOR MANY ITALIANS, it wouldn't be Christmas without lasagne, which varies by cook, but always includes a topping of savory melted cheese.



LEFT: Signor Luca, art historian, guide, and food lover. Chef Barbara prepares a meal for her guests in Florence.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

from the French side of Switzerland and are not Florentine at all,” Luca says.

Another favorite café is Scuderia near the Piazza Duomo, and also the Rivoire on the Piazza della Signoria. It appears that all the pastry made in the tradition of these famous Florentine cafes originated in the French side of Switzerland. These sweets are served at Christmas time along with true Florentine ones like panettone, a sweet bread brioche; pandoro, also a sweet bread; torrone, a nougat candy made with honey, almonds and egg whites; panforte, a fruit cake made with nuts, dried fruit, honey and spices; and ricciarelli, 14th-century biscotti served with Vin Santo or Moscadello di Montalcino.

It’s difficult to say no to these glorious traditional sweets, cakes and biscotti that we see

only at Christmas time. So it’s easy to put on a few extra kilos as well. We are fortunate that Florence is a walking city so we get to work it off attending all of the holiday events. My favorite event is the competition at the Duomo with a live presepe and pageantry. The festivities continue to January 6 with La Befana. Families gather, children wait for their shoes to be filled with fruit, chocolate and coins in honor of the Magi. And this is the last time of the season we are able to taste the delicious Christmas sweets, until next year.

“Who counts calories anyway at this time of year?” says Luca, as he dips his cantucci in Vin Santo, holy wine, a straw-colored dessert wine that dates to the Renaissance.

Our aperitivo runs into dinnertime, with conversation in two different dialects: Luca

in that of Dante, and Rino in that of King Charles I of Sicily. The accents collide and some words are even different; however, the Christmas camaraderie continues. Like all Italian get-togethers, the night continues at our favorite trattoria, in this case Cammillo on the Borgo San Jacopo, just across the Arno. And we order cannelloni and arista.

Enjoy your own Christmas in Florence with these recipes from Chef Barbara of Florence’s cooking class program, available through Cooking-Vacations.com. Buon Natale!

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The Recipes

Lasagne

For the meat sauce:

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 1 medium carrot, minced
- 1 medium celery stalk, minced
- 1 medium onion, minced
- 2 pounds ground beef
- 7 ounces ground pork
- ¼ teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 cup water
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 (16-oz.) can plum tomatoes

For the Bechamel:

- 4 tablespoons of butter
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- ⅛ teaspoon sea salt, or to taste
- ¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg, or to taste

- 1 pound dried lasagne
- 8 ounces grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

For the meat sauce:

Heat the extra virgin olive oil in a large pan. Add the garlic and cook over moderate heat until lightly browned, about 1 minute, then discard. Add the carrots, celery and onion and cook, stirring, until softened, about 10 minutes. Add the ground beef and pork, and season with salt and pepper. Break up the meat with a wooden spoon and cook over high heat until meat is browned. Add a cup of water and the bay leaf; simmer for about 45 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook another 45 minutes until the sauce has thickened. Discard the bay leaf.

For the Béchamel:

Melt the butter in a pan over a low heat. Add the flour and stir continuously for 2 to 3 minutes until it has thickened. Heat the milk in another pan and slowly add to the flour mixture whisking continuously until smooth. Salt to taste and add grated nutmeg. Simmer over low heat until the béchamel has thickened. Remove from heat and allow to cool.

For the pasta:

Cook the sheets of lasagne in a pot of salted boiling water until they are cooked al dente. Drain, rinse under cold water and lay on clean tea towels.

Assemble the lasagne:

Prepare a 9 x 13-inch rectangular nonstick baking dish. Spread a thin layer of béchamel over the bottom, add a layer of pasta, followed by a layer of meat sauce, another layer of béchamel and a generous sprinkling of Parmesan cheese. Continue in this way until you have used all the ingredients. End with a

layer of pasta covered with a little meat sauce and a good dusting of Parmesan cheese. Bake for about 30 minutes until golden brown. Let rest for at least 10 minutes before serving.

Makes 6 servings.

Arista al Forno

In Florence, arista is the name given to the pork loin, cut in a single piece. The origin of this name goes back to the fifteenth century when the Council between the Roman and the Greek Church was transferred to Florence in 1430. This solemn occasion with its magnificence and luxury is well described in the frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli in the Medici Riccardi palace in Florence. During one of the sumptuous banquets, roasted pork loin was offered to the Greek bishops, who exclaimed “arista,” which in Greek meant “good.” Here is how Florentines make arista.

- 1 clove garlic
- 2 sprigs of rosemary
- 2 to 3 sage leaves
- ½ teaspoon sea salt, or to taste
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper, or to taste
- 2 pounds pork loin with ribs
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling
- ½ cup white wine

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Finely chop the garlic, rosemary, and sage leaves. Mix together with salt and pepper.

Separate the ribs from the loin with a sharp knife, then spread the chopped herb mixture over the surface of the meat. Tie the seasoned meat back on the ribs and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil. Place the meat in a baking pan and roast about one hour.

When the meat is crispy, add the white wine to the pan and cook until the wine has evaporated. Remove the meat from the oven. Once cool, separate the meat from the bone and slice. Serve the pork with the juices from the pan.

Makes 6 servings.

Crostini Toscani

- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 3 tablespoon olive oil
- 7 ounces chicken livers
- 2 tablespoons capers, drained
- 2 or 3 sage leaves
- ¼ cup white wine
- Sea salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 loaf thinly sliced Italian bread, toasted

In a pan, sauté the onion in olive oil until golden. Add the chicken livers and cook for

about 10 minutes over a low-medium heat. Add the capers and sage leaves and sprinkle with sea salt and pepper.

Remove from the heat and, using a sharp knife, chop the livers into strips and return to the pan. Put the pan back over medium heat and drizzle with the white wine. Continue cooking for approximately 15 minutes. Serve livers on freshly toasted crostini.

Makes 4 servings.

Cantucci

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 3½ tablespoons butter or olive oil
- 2 large eggs
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons of baking powder
- ¾ cup almonds
- ⅛ cup vin santo or milk, if needed

Preheat oven to 400°F.

On a clean work surface make a well with the flour and mix all the ingredients together, adding the almonds last. If necessary, add a few drops of vin santo or milk to obtain a smooth but not sticky dough.

Line a baking pan with parchment paper and form flattened logs of dough about 1½ inches wide and ½ inch tall (length depends on your baking pan). Bake about 20 minutes until the logs are golden brown. Remove from the oven and allow to cool for 3 to 5 minutes. Slice diagonally. Allow to cool and store in an air-tight container.

Makes 36 cookies.

