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# the Traditions of Pico

In this hilltop location south of Rome, long a strategic location for armies, the people celebrate the four seasons with an array of food, wine, song and festivals throughout the year. The most important festival takes place on Christmas Eve.

*By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*

**H**e was named after Saint Costanzo, the patron saint of lovers. His name was Costanzo Caparrelli. He was my great-grandfather and he was born in Pico, a medieval village that sits on a high hilltop in Lazio, just one hour south of Rome. Pico translates to peak or high point. Costanzo left Italy at the turn of the century and sailed to America, like most Italians who wanted a better life. Without money, nor knowing English, he landed on Ellis Island and made his way to Rhode Island. He made a living by farming and producing milk and cheese. He was a contadino, farmer, like all the people of Pico. He eventually bought a piece of land and worked its soil in the rhythm of the four seasons. He ate what he grew and preserved what he could. He and my great-grandmother Antonia had a big family of 19 children, and lived a long happy life. He never returned to Pico; however, his story is remembered by all of us, including those in his small mountain town.

"Your great-grandfather left because times were difficult. We had only

our land," says Carolina Caparrelli, Costanzo's niece, better known as Lina. She is 90 years old and lives in the house that my great-grandfather built. Black and white photos surround her as she tells the story of our family. We drink a caffè and nibble on her homemade tozzetti on a table by a big window that overlooks the picturesque paese untouched by time.

Pico is not marked on most maps and it's not on the tourist track. However, it has long been a strategic place for armies, from the ancient Romans to the Americans during World War II. Nestled at the foot of what is now the National Park in the Aurunci Mountains, it was once part of Campania. Today it's in the province of Frosinone and is called Ciociaria in local dialect.

The ancient Romans had written about Pico thousands of years ago. They noted that the salted sea air that jetted in from Sperlonga touched the wild green grass on Pico's slopes and created air with "pure oxygen." The Romans had documented this as a recipe for longevity. In fact, the average local Picani lives to be well over 100 years old. Scientists and



researchers also confirm the longevity of the Picani, crediting the combination of air and salt, spring water, the slow pace of life and the Mediterranean diet.

From its green hills you can almost reach out and touch the Abbey of Montecassino. Once inside the village there is a small world to discover, including the Borgo, a medieval castle and bell tower that date to the eleventh century. Three churches include the tenth century San Antonino, the eleventh century Santa Maria, and the sixteenth century San Rocco.

Tommaso Landolfi, the great Italian writer, lived in Pico. The street where he once lived is now called Via Landolfi, and a white marble plaque records his life on earth, 1908 to 1979. He wrote the famous *An Autumn Story*, a World War II novel.

Landmarks blend with Pico's simple Ciociara cuisine and DOP Itri olives, porcini mushrooms, salumi and Marzolina, local cheese made from 100 percent goat's milk. Goats graze freely on the sweet spring grass of March, and that's how it gets its name—Marzo translates to March.

This gorgeous little village, still laced with ancient stone houses and worn-out footpaths, celebrates the four seasons with an array of food, wine, song and festivals throughout the year. The most important one is the Antichi Artigiani, artisans of times past. It is hosted in the cantina of the Borgo on Christmas Eve.

"At midnight on Christmas Eve, the celebration begins in the cantina and we recreate the scenes of artigiani, the workers of the past. The bakers, wine makers, cheese artisans, farmers, carpenters, cobblers and wool spinners display their original tools that were once used. It's a time for people to get together and celebrate with the traditional food of the holiday season," tells Signor Carlo, a food and wine lover who lives next door to the Caparrelli family.

"During the week leading up to Christmas, there is one traditional food that every family makes in their kitchen and that is le pizze fritte Ciociare. It's not Christmas without le pizze fritte. The homemade pizza dough is stretched into flat rounds then flash fried to a golden crisp and sprinkled with sugar. We eat them throughout the week and reheat them alla brace, on the fireplace. The best part is when you warm them up the second time, they become crunchy. It's a genuine typical Christmas tradition," he says.

"Another Christmas classic is Peperoni alla Vinaccia Ripieni, red peppers which are first bottled in glass jars with vino e vinaccia, wine with the pulp and grape skins left over from the wine making harvest. Then at Christmas time, we remove the peppers from the bottle, make a stuffing of bread, olives, capers, sea salt, and stuff the peppers with the mixture. There is no



### NATURE'S BOUNTY:

Above, brightly colored candy flowers made from sugar are part of the celebration for the festa in Pico, an ancient village south of Rome. Villagers celebrate the four seasons with a variety of festivals. Left, a typical scene looking at the ascending hills that lead to Pico, with rolls of cut wheat from the harvest. Ancient Romans wrote about Pico thousands of years ago, describing its pure air and healthful elevation as part of a recipe for longevity.





**ABOVE:** Signor Carlo, food lover and winemaker, who heads up the Nonna's Cucina In The Roman countryside tour. Below is a shot of a crackling fire in his fireplace at home. At right is the Caparrelli home in Pico, made of local stone. Below right is a photo of the author's great-grandparents, Costanzo and Antonia Caparrelli, parents of 19 children.



particular recipe for the stuffing. The peppers are slow cooked over a low heat until they are soft. The sweet red peppers with the pulp of the grape create a sweet and sour taste. The red peppers from this region are typical and DOP!" says Signor Carlo.

On Christmas Day everyone eats potato Gnocchi con le Spuntature di Maiale, pasta dumplings served in a slow-cooked red tomato sauce with pork. "No one can wait until Christmas to eat the plump little hand-made dumplings. It's a Christmas tradition. Also on the menu is Agnello al Forno, oven roasted lamb cooked with white wine and garlic, and Cernia al Forno su Crostata di Patate, local white fish baked with an encasing of potato," he says.

"Natale is not Christmas until il dolce, sweet cakes and biscotti, are served," Carlo exclaims. Ciambelline al Vino, Tozzetti and Susamielli are the typical Christmas cakes and biscotti secchi on our table," he adds. The dry method of making biscotti dates to the days when refrigerators did not exist, and the bis means twice baked, coming from Latin. The cookies are baked, sliced, and re-baked a second time, giving them a crunchy texture.

Pico is well known for its nativity scene, or presepe, depicting the three wise men, Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus. This nativity scene displays some of the oldest statues and costumes in Italy. It's on display from December 8, the Immaculate Conception, to January 6, the Epiphany.

"This is our story of the simple gastronomy and Christmas traditions of Pico," Carlo says.

Ciociara cuisine includes fresh pasta such as fettuccine and gnocchi served with wild mushrooms or asparagus sauce, along with polenta and sausage, tripe in red sauce, grilled sausage, lamb, and wild pork, to name a few. It's the Casereccia Ciociara cuisine, and you will only find it in Pico.

If you're in the region at Christmas time, join us for Christmas traditions in Pico with Carlo and the Caparrelli family and taste the food, music and art of the season. Carlo leads hands-on cooking classes with antique recipes, genuine products and peasant food of the four seasons at Nonna's Cucina In The Roman Countryside, Chef Valentina's 6-Day tour. See [cooking-vacations.com](http://cooking-vacations.com) for details.

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### Gnocchi with Pork Ribs

- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 carrot, sliced
- ½ onion, diced
- 4 meaty pork ribs
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup red wine
- 2 cups tomato sauce
- 16 ounces store-bought gnocchi
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Freshly grated Parmesan Cheese

In a pan, heat oil and add garlic, carrot and diced onion. Sauté briefly. Add the ribs, browning on both sides with salt and a splash of red wine. Add the tomato sauce. Add water as needed so the liquid doesn't dry out in the pan. Cook on low until the meat falls off the bone. Remove from the heat and chop the meat.

Cook the gnocchi in salted water and serve with the sauce and meat. Add salt, pepper and Parmesan cheese to taste.

Makes 4 servings.





## Tozzetti

Tozzetti, or biscuits with almonds, is one of the traditional sweets served at Christmastime in Pico.

- 3 large eggs**
- 1 cup sugar**
- Grated lemon or orange zest, as desired**
- 10½ tablespoons butter, melted**
- 4½ teaspoons baking powder**
- 2 cups almonds with the skin**
- flour as needed**

Preheat oven to 180°F. Beat the eggs with the sugar, add the lemon zest, butter, baking powder, almonds, and flour a little at a time. Mix with hands until a soft dough forms. Shape the dough into two large logs and place on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper, well spaced. Bake in the oven until it is thoroughly cooked. Allow to cool and slice into small shapes and return them to the oven for a few more minutes until toasted.

Makes 12 servings.

## Fried Pizzette

- 2 cups all-purpose flour**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- 1 tablespoon olive oil**
- 1 teaspoon dried yeast**
- Warm water (110°F), as needed**
- Vegetable oil, for frying**

Pour the flour on a clean, flat surface and shape into a mound. Add salt, olive oil, and dried yeast to the flour and mix. Add warm water, a little at a time, working until you get a smooth, soft dough that is very elastic. Transfer the

dough to a bowl and place it in a warm spot to let it rise.

When the dough has doubled in volume, heat a large pan with plenty of vegetable oil. Form balls of dough into small flattened shapes with your hands or using a rolling pin. Plunge into hot oil, browning them on both sides. After cooking, drain on paper towels.

Add a sprinkle of kosher salt and a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese and chopped rosemary. Serve warm.

