

CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS IN VENICE

# Taste of Italy

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

DECEMBER 2014



## *Holiday Classics*

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DECEMBER 2014

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LA VIGILIA

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## Native Intel

**V**enice, often called La Serenissima, meaning the most serene republic in Italy, becomes especially quiet at Christmas time.

Tourist crowds wane, piazzas and quays turn silent, and Venice returns to the Venetians. Christmas concerts, markets and festivities burgeon. The Venetians start celebrating December 8 with the festivity of the Immaculate Conception (a national holiday) and continue through January 5 with the Epiphany. The biggest celebration takes place December 25, when almost every Venetian attends mass at Saint Mark's church, the Byzantine landmark that crowns the city's main square. It's a once-a-year event as they throw open their Grand Doors and light thousands of candles to celebrate.

great Italian musician's works were first performed.

But my favorite thing is the Mercatini di Natale, the artisan Christmas markets which open in early December and run through mid January. Each market showcases Venetian crafts made by hand. The largest one takes place in San Stefano. A colorful scene of stalls filled with vendors who sell their hand-made Italian toys, leather goods, jewelry, Venetian paper, Burano lace and hand-embroidered linen, Murano glass, and chocolate and coffee, spans the square.

This area of San Marco, along with the Rialto and the Merceria (a trio of tiny streets that interconnect) were once the center of day-to-day trade in Venice. Today this vibrant part of town, with San Stefano in the middle, keeps the merchants of Venice alive,

gifts, like cashmere scarves and hand-made Venetian paper and gilded jewelry. I keep my pace and try not to be distracted, as I am en route to the Caffè Florian to meet my friend Maria, a Venetian and local tour guide who knows Venice better than any tour book.

I arrive on time at the Caffè Florian, a difficult feat with the temptations along the way. Dating to 1720, this café is Venice's oldest. Set under the arcades of the Procuratie on San Marco's square, you can opt for indoor or outdoor seating. The café tables outside spill onto Saint Mark's square, making it a stage for people watching. I pull up a chair, order a cappuccino and plate of zaletti, traditional biscotti made with polenta, and watch the world go by. I am not alone; there are many Venetians nearby exchanging conversation in local sing-song dialect. Amidst all of this, the

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### THE SETTING SUN CASTS A GRAYISH BLUE LIGHT ON THE GRAND CANAL, AND I FEEL LIKE I AM WALKING THROUGH THE BRUSH STROKES OF MONET'S *SAN GIORGIO MAGGIORE AT DUSK*.

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Throughout the holiday season, families stroll quays, visit nativity scenes and attend church concerts. They'll hide away in cafés sipping cappuccino and hot chocolate accompanied by Pevarini (little pepper biscotti), biscottini di pasta frolla (butter cookies with citrus), and pandoro (a brioche bread), which are traditional Christmas sweets, while catching up on the past year. It's a peaceful time when visitors do not have to wait in long lines and the city returns to its natural rhythm. Although I have been to Venice many times in various seasons, this time of year is my favorite.

As I cross the Ponte dell'Accademia, the setting sun casts a grayish blue veil of light on the Grand Canal, and I feel like I am walking through the brush strokes of Claude Monet's *San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk*. Today I will venture to San Stefano for the Christmas market. Yesterday, I visited the Frari in San Polo, one of Venice's oldest churches and San Vidal in Campo San Stefano where a Car-paccio hangs on the altar. Tonight I will go to La Pietà on Riva degli Schiavone to hear a Vivaldi concert—it's the church where the

especially at Christmas time.

As the bustle of buyers and the decorations of Christmas enchant, the alluring smell of coffee tempts everyone each time a café door opens. My favorite is the Caffè Costarica, located just before the Ponte delle Guglie on Rio Terra San Leonardo. You will smell it before you see it, because its aroma pulls you in. Caffè Costarica is the last standing coffee roasting establishment in Venice.

As I wander through San Stefano looking at the white lights, garland, Christmas trees and presepi (Christmas mangers), I'm taken by the beauty of the mangers, which are lit up and animated, depicting village scenes of times past. Hand-crafted people in miniature size fill scenes made of rock and moss and wood. There are bakers, cobblers, fishermen, traders, tailors, and always the Madonna and child. The characters move and sing and are almost real. From Dorsoduro to Cannaregio and even in a gondola, the pageantry of the presepi is hard to describe.

Bundled up and walking through this winter wonderland, I see store windows that shine with white lights and eye-catching

Florian's 10-piece orchestra plays *Cantique de Noël* (Holy Night).

Maria should be here soon, but she is usually fashionably late, like all Italians. I cannot wait to see her, because we always exchange recipes, she fills me in on the newest place to eat, and invites me to all the off-the-tourist track events around the Campo.

"Ciao, ciao," she arrives and greets me with a kiss on both cheeks. Her green eyes are bright and wide. "Buon Natale" we say to each other, and she quickly sits down and joins me for a sweet. She wears azzurro blue Armani eyeglasses with a matching blue cashmere scarf. As she takes her seat in the outside cold, I smell her Laura Biagiotti perfume. The waiter returns and Maria orders a cappuccino and a crema di mascarpone.

We begin talking about the holidays and she tells me about Christmas time in Venice.

"At home, Venetian Christmas menus consist of seafood: risotto de Pevarasse (Venetian clams with rice), branzino al forno (baked sea bass) and even anguilla (eel). Then on Christmas day we have cappelletti in brodo (ravioli in chicken broth) and capone



**A FESTIVE SEASON**

Espresso from Il Caffè di Venezia; gondolas along the canal; a Venetian Christmas mask; quiet canals at sunset.



## Native Intel

lesso (capon boiled in water with celery, herbs, parsley and onion). After the capon is cooked, we slice it and serve it on a bed of whipped potatoes with a side of spinach in a creamy mayonnaise and horseradish sauce. We boil salumi, too, but my favorite are the cappelletti. Of course, both yellow and white polenta is always served or it wouldn't be Christmas in Venice," she says.

A tall waiter dressed in a white tuxedo brings over a silver tray of macarons, placed on a lace doily and lined up according to color: pink, green, yellow and pink, green, yellow. "Compliments of the Chef," he says.

As we sample the macarons, Maria reflects further on the Venetian Christmas feast. "Culminating every Christmas dinner are dried fruits and nuts—walnuts, almonds, figs and dates. But then come the real desserts," Maria says. "The sugar-coated orange slices dipped in dark chocolate. Oh mamma mia, they melt my heart! We have sugar-glazed chestnuts, panettone and pandoro with mascarpone," she says.

Maria eats one macaron after another, dipping each one into her mascarpone. She tells me that, "Since the 15th century, Venetians have had to fast on the eve of Christmas due to the ordinance of the Catholic Church. They were only allowed to have a small lunch that consisted of bigoli con la sardela (Venetian pasta with sardines,) mandorlato (nougat) and a glass of wine—Venetians cannot be without their wine," she laughs.

We exchange recipes and order more caffè to help us finish all four flavors of macarons. The waiter arrives with two flutes of Prosecco. He winks, saying, "Buon Natale." Another great day in La Serenissima.

As my time in Venice passes, I spend almost all the days leading up to Christmas in Maria's kitchen learning how to make cappelletti, pandoro and torroncini con mandorle (semifreddo with almonds). On Christmas Day everyone toasts with Prosecco, and hours later we end with dessert. We sing Christmas carols, and after the long lunch take a walk through San Marco's square.

This is the magical Christmas in Venezia. Buon Natale wherever you may be.

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**QUIET NIGHT**

The Grand Canal at sunset reflects the peacefulness of the season.

# Native Intel

## Venetian Butter Cookies

- Pinch of sea salt
- ½ vanilla bean or natural almond, lemon or orange flavoring, to taste
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup, plus 2 tablespoons butter
- 2¼ cups sugar
- Grated lemon zest, to taste
- 4 egg yolks, beaten
- Grated lemon zest

Start by adding the salt and vanilla to the flour and then place on a clean work surface. Form the flour into a mound and create a well at the center.

Add the butter, sugar and lemon zest to the well in the flour and begin working the butter and sugar together. Add the egg yolks, then slowly incorporate the flour. Knead the mixture just until the dough is smooth, without manipulating it too much, and form it into the shape of a ball.

Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and place in the refrigerator to chill for at least 1 hour before using.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Remove dough from the refrigerator. On a floured work surface, roll out with a rolling pin until it is about ¼ inch thick. Use Christmas cookie cutters to make your favorite shapes. Bake about 12 minutes or until they turn light golden brown. Cool the cookies on a wire rack. Decorate as desired or serve plain.

Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

Note: The number of cookies will depend on the size of the cutters.

## Pepper Biscotti

The name of these cookies comes from Venetian dialect, *pavare*, meaning pepper.

- ½ cup melted butter
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 large egg
- Pinch of sea salt
- ½ cup superfine sugar
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ cup thinly sliced almonds
- 1 tablespoon chopped hazelnuts

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Place the melted butter in a large bowl. Add the honey, pepper and spices, then whisk in the egg with the salt. Add the two types of sugar and whisk well. Add the flour, cocoa, baking powder, almonds and hazelnuts and work the dough with your hands until it molds into a round ball.

Using your hands, pull off little pieces of dough and roll into small balls. Flatten the balls slightly with the palm of your hand and place

them on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake about 15 minutes. Let the cookies cool a couple of minutes before transferring them to a wire rack. Store in an airtight container. Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

## Mascarpone Cream

- 4 large eggs
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons Marsala
- 1 cup mascarpone
- Cocoa powder for sprinkling

Mascarpone cream requires fresh quality ingredients. Start by separating the egg whites from the yolks and place the yolks in a bowl. Add the sugar and beat the ingredients with a whisk until the mixture is light and fluffy. Put to the side.

In a separate bowl, beat the marsala and the mascarpone until smooth, then add to the egg yolks and mix well. In another clean bowl, whip the egg whites until they reach the soft peak stage. Add the egg whites to the mascarpone mixture, folding gently in the same direction with a spatula from the bottom.

Serve the cream mixture in small glasses and sprinkle with cocoa powder.

Makes 4 servings.

## Caramelized Almond Semifreddo

For the caramelized almonds:

- 2½ cups almonds
- 2½ cups sugar
- 1 tablespoon water

For the semifreddo:

- 3 large eggs, separated
- 1¼ cups sugar, divided
- 2½ cups mascarpone
- 2½ cups whipped cream

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

For the caramelized almonds:

In a baking pan, toast the almonds in the oven for about 7 to 8 minutes until lightly browned.

In a pan over low heat, mix the sugar with the water. Allow the sugar to caramelize. When the sugar mixture has turned a very light brown, add the toasted almonds to the pan and toss. Let cook 4 to 5 minutes, then remove from heat and allow to cool. Once cool, crush into small pieces.

For the semifreddo:

Mix the egg yolks with 1 cup of sugar. When creamy, add mascarpone and mix for 10 seconds. Fold in the whipped cream and crushed caramelized almonds to the mascarpone mixture.

In a separate bowl, whip the egg whites with the remaining sugar until they form stiff peaks. Add the egg whites to the mascarpone mixture, folding gently.

Spoon into serving dishes or glasses and chill in the freezer for at least 1 day. Take the semifreddo out of the freezer at least 20 minutes before serving.

Makes 12 servings.





**HOLIDAY FEAST**  
Grilled polenta is part  
of the Christmas feast  
in Venice.



**BUTTER COOKIES**  
Perfect for dipping,  
gifting, or enjoying on  
their own.