

Pandoro or Panettone? Christmas at a Tuscan Table



Christmas is a time for celebration in households everywhere, when families get together to celebrate their wellbeing and a successful year. What better way to celebrate than with tasty food? Traditionally, for religious reasons meat is not eaten in many Italian homes on Christmas Eve, instead many feast on fish and seafood dishes the 24th of December. However, on Christmas day, there is usually plenty of meat on the table in Tuscany and lunch is kicked off with *crostini* or *bruschetta* with chicken liver pâté, and a variety of cheeses and cold cuts as antipasti. This is often followed by *tortellini in brodo*, ravioli-like pasta capsules in a meat or vegetable broth. After the pasta, an *arrosto* or mixed roasted meats flavoured with herbs are placed on the table.

Whilst in the U.K. the Christmas pudding is undisputedly the must-have dessert for Christmas day, there are two main options for dessert in most homes in Italy: *Pandoro* and *Panettone*. Anyone who walks through an Italian supermarket in the weeks approaching Christmas will notice the mountains of boxes of these bread-like cakes lining the aisles. Pandoro is the sweetest of the two and is coated with icing sugar. It takes its name from *pan d'oro*, golden



bread, due to its pure yellow interior. Panettone, on the other hand, simply means large bread, and is filled with raisins and candied citrus fruits. There is a rivalry between these two cakes as to which is the true king of Christmas, and because everyone has their preference, there is often a lot of debate in the run-up to the big day as to which is best. The compromise is to offer both cakes. If you're interested in trying something a little more traditional for dessert, then the fruit and nut-based *panforte* of Siena is a good bet. Its name, meaning strong bread, refers to its slightly spicy kick and chewy texture.

The typical British Christmas lunch of turkey and vegetables followed by Christmas pudding is somewhat consistent throughout the U.K., but in Italy, what consists of a proper Christmas lunch varies massively from region to region, town to town, and even from home to home. *Polenta* is not uncommon in the Tuscan plains at Christmas, while in Livorno the traditional *Cacciucco* fish soup is often served at Christmas, with the best cuts of fish rather than the usual scraps that go into the soup. And in Monte Amiata near Siena, snails are considered a festive delicacy.



There's room to be creative when thinking about what to prepare for Christmas in Tuscany. Every family has its own traditions, making the festive get-togethers unique.

– by Joel K. Swail
Liceo A. Vallisneri