

New Year's Day in Italy

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In Italy, New Year's Day is known as Capodanno, a day of celebration that is closely intertwined with New Year's Eve. It is celebrated on January 1, "*il primo gennaio*" of each year.

In 46 BC Julius Caesar ordered this date to be placed on the Julian calendar and the new year was associated with the celebrations for Janus, the god of beginnings and the month's namesake who had two faces, one facing the old year and the other the new, and who was the main divinity between December 31 and January 1.

Starting from 1582, with the introduction of the current calendar by Pope Gregory XIII, the New Year was set on January 1st as the first day of the year, and once the Gregorian calendar was adopted in the rest of the world there was total uniformity.

Most New Year's Day traditions are widespread in Italy, with some regions and cities having their own particular type of celebration.

Some special customs from the past in the smaller towns of Central and Southern Italy, had people throwing out old dishes, china, pots and pans and old items ("*buttare le cose vecchie*" - "throw out old things") from their windows to celebrate getting rid of the old and past unhappiness while ushering in the new. People also kiss under the mistletoe (*vischio*) at midnight, which symbolizes fertility, vitality, protecting love, and is the antithesis of death.

Another lesser known tradition is to light a candle shortly before midnight, and to let it burn out on New Year's Day, since fire represents purification and renewal. A green candle signifies wealth, while white and red candles symbolize love. Even lesser known but still practiced is the opening of a window in a dark room shortly before midnight, to get rid of evil spirits and negative energy for New Year's Day and beyond.

People often congregate in their piazzas after eating a big dinner (*cenone*) and party with friends, listen to open-air concerts, and, since the middle of the 17th century, watch fireworks, known as *botti*, which "scare the bad spirits away" all through the early hours of January 1.

It is a tradition throughout Italy to eat lentils (*lenticchie*) either before midnight, at midnight, or on New Year's Day, which is considered to bring good luck and prosperity since they symbolize gold coins. In Piemonte, rice, which represents coins, is also eaten on New Year's Day, because a small amount of dry rice produces a bigger yield when cooked, symbolizing prosperity. Some regions eat pomegranates, which symbolize longevity, fertility, and wealth.

One tradition is to eat twelve grapes (wealth) or raisins (good luck) at midnight, one for each month, and eaten on each hour strike of the clock. An old adage says: "*Chi mangia l'uva per*

Capodanno conta i quattrini tutto l'anno," which translates to "he who eats grapes for New Year's Day counts money all year round."

On the first day of January, meat is served (pork or lamb), with vegetables such as chard and chicory. These are foods that promote financial wealth, health and satisfaction. Fried vegetables and fish are other classics, as are potato pancakes in the North, and the typical crepes in the South.

The first course is often based on fish, such as seafood risotto or spaghetti alla marinara. In Piemonte, "agnolotti al plin", pasta stuffed with meat and served in broth, or the South Tyrolean large bread dumplings with cheese and speck, are served. Other great classics are stewed octopus with potatoes and fried cod, the latter mostly served in the South.

In addition, meals almost always include a salad of radicchio and lettuce, dried fruit, nuts, peanuts and almonds, and the desserts associated with Christmas - panettone, torrone, pandoro, and panforte, together with a bubbly prosecco.

I found a recipe for Italian Lentil Soup on the website *Cucina by Elena* at www.cucinabyelena.com, which also has a variety of Italian recipes available.

Italians will wish each other Buon Anno (a good year), Buon Inizio (a good beginning), Buon Capodanno (a good new year) or any phrase with well wishes for the new year.

My Italian immigrant family from Piemonte and Liguria in Northern Italy celebrated, and continues to celebrate New Year's with Asti Spumante and Risotto alla Milanese with saffron and mushrooms.

An interesting note.....One of the most ancient customs in Italy is to take note of the first person that you meet on the street on Capodanno. If you see an old person or (even better) a hunchback, the new year will be full of great surprises. If you meet a baby, a doctor or a priest, there might be some bad luck around the corner, according to tradition. The reasons for this are not known.

New Year's Day can be celebrated either on January 1 or a few days later at a lodge meeting or special function. Members can make traditional Capodanno recipes to share, can talk about customs, traditions, and superstitions from their hometown or family, can have younger members draw pictures of fireworks or people at table, can ask members to bring in pictures of Capodanno as it is celebrated in Italy, etc.