

LA VIGILIA DI NATALE

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By: Marisa Ranalli

The Vigil/**La Vigilia** is held on Christmas Eve. This important Italian event sees families come together to share a feast. Some families will exchange gifts on La Vigilia, although these presents are generally only for the children, whose role on Christmas Eve is to recite poems for the guests. On this day family and friends greet each other with **Buona Vigilia di Natale**.

Christmas is the time to indulge and enjoy yourself to the fullest. In Italy the feasting starts on La Vigilia di Natale (Christmas Eve), December 24th. That day is a national holiday in Italy; all shops are closed; and public transportation is pretty much non-existent. Italians celebrate Christmas Eve with a large feast known as **il Cenone della Vigilia**.

Since Catholic tradition prohibits the consumption of meat on the evenings before religious holidays, traditionally Italian Christmas Eve dinner is a meat-free meal, only fish please! During the vigilia di natale, we eat a variety of fish dishes which vary from region to region or even from town to town. In some parts of Italy and in the Italian American celebration of Christmas Eve the tradition is a seven fish dinner. Some of these fish dishes include:

Appetizers: smoked salmon *crostini*, scallops au gratin, and octopus salad

Main dish: fried or stewed cod (**baccala**), roast sea bream (**orata al forno**) or stewed eel (**capitone in umido**). These dishes are often served with vegetables).

Pasta: spaghetti with clams (**spaghetti alle vongole**), *risotto* with a mix of seafood, squid ink spaghetti (**spaghetti al nero di seppia**), pasta con le sarde (**pasta with sardines**)

Desserts: **panettone** is a traditional sweet.

On Christmas Eve in Italy, bells ring out and families wrap up warm to attend Midnight Mass at their local churches. Services begin around 11:00 p.m. in many of Italy's most iconic cathedrals including il Duomo in Florence, Orvieto's Cathedral, the Basilica di San Marco in Venice and of course the local churches in small towns and other cities.

Christmas Eve, **La Vigilia**, is also when families get together and play **Tombola** after they eat and before they go to church. What is **Tombola**? It's the Italian version of Bingo. This Italian game has a long tradition, and it is the typical entertainment of the holidays. It is played on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Eve when everyone is together with family and friends.

Personal comments:

My family and I do follow the tradition of eating only fish on **La Vigilia**. We don't prepare seven fish, but we do prepare about four seafood dishes: spaghetti with lobster (recipe below), calamari, shrimp and **baccala** (salt cod). Because the family is growing and some of the in-laws don't eat fish, I have had to make some exceptions, but I only make spaghetti and meatballs, nothing fancy (ha ha)! My daughters love our traditions, and they are teaching their daughters these same traditions. We do allow opening one gift on Christmas Eve. For the rest, they must wait for Babbo Natale.

Who is **Babbo Natale**....? You will have to read my Christmas story...

My Lobster Sauce Recipe

- 6 to 8 Lobsters live. (depending how many people) (My husband takes care of preparing the lobsters.)
- Clean lobsters.
- When cleaned cut into pieces with the shell on.
- Dip them in your prepared tomato sauce.
- Simmer in sauce until the shell is orange and the sauce is flavored with Lobster.
- Prepare your sauce just like you would for a meat sauce, but substitute meat with lobsters.
- Serve the spaghetti as a separate course then serve the lobster and enjoy.
- Remember to use a BIB or in Italian **Bavaglino**...

Ideas for possible cultural activities pertaining to **La Vigilia di Natale**:

1. Celebrate with a Feast of the Seven Fishes meal at the lodge. Include some of the traditional dishes and desserts.
2. Serve panettone or other traditional Christmas treats for dessert at a meeting.
3. Learn and sing a traditional Italian Christmas song like "**Tu scendi dalle stelle**".
4. Teach children a simple Christmas poem and have them recite it for the members.
5. Members talk about their family's Italian Christmas Eve traditions.
6. Set up an Italian style **presepe**.
7. Make or buy Italian themed Christmas ornaments and decorate a tree.
8. Play **tombola** (bingo Italian style), calling the numbers in Italian and English and using tombola specific vocabulary/expressions.
9. Learn Italian vocabulary pertaining to Christmas. (See vocabulary list in the **Natale** report.) Create simple games using that vocabulary.