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**Natale** is the most magical and memory-filled holiday of the year characterized by snow, warm lights, candles, and the timeless red and green colors. For thousands of years, Italians have celebrated the season with a variety of customs and traditions that are unique and are passed down from generation to generation. In Italy this holiday is closely tied to religious roots and traditions. It is a period of spending time with family (**famiglia**) and close friends (**amici**), celebrating religious traditions, and eating special foods.

Christmas in Italy is all about family and spending time with loved ones. Italians have a saying about it: '**Natale con i tuoi, capodanno con chi vuoi,**' which means that if you spend Christmas with your family (respecting tradition), you are allowed to meet up with whoever you want for **New Year's Eve!**

Given that it is a national holiday, schools are closed, and most people have time off from work. Children are out of school from a few days before Christmas until after the **Giorno della Befana**, Epiphany.

The Christmas holidays in Italy officially begin on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, **la Concezione Immacolata**, with the lighting of the Christmas tree and ends on January 6<sup>th</sup>, with the celebration of Epiphany, **Epifania/la Befana**. However, in some regions it begins even earlier on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, when Catholics celebrate **la festa di San Nicola**, Saint Nicholas. For example, in Puglia, it is celebrated with a traditional cake called **Pupi di Natale**, made of almond paste and chocolate.

The evening before Christmas, Italians celebrate Christmas Eve or **La Vigilia di Natale**. This is celebrated with an important holiday dinner, **Il Cenone della Vigilia**. In Southern Italy families gather to eat a traditional seven-course fish dinner, known as the Feast of the Seven Fishes, **Festa dei Sette Pesci**. After dinner, it's time to play **tombola**, exchange gifts and attend **la messa della Vigilia**, Christmas Eve mass. **Tombola** is the Italian version of the popular game Bingo and is all about the joy of friendly competition.

On the morning of December 25, **il giorno di Natale**, most Italians go to church to celebrate Christmas Mass. Afterward, they typically go home and have a big family dinner where they enjoy traditional dishes followed by special desserts enjoyed during this season.

One of the most popular Christmas traditions in Italy which has religious roots is setting up the **presepe or presepio**, Nativity Scene. The **presepe** is arranged in churches, public areas, and family homes. Often made of wood or clay, these hand-crafted pieces depict the birth of Jesus Christ, complete with the manger, shepherds, and wise men. For many Italians, the nativity scene is a treasured family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation. Families will gather around the **presepe** to remember Jesus' birth. Traditionally the figure of the baby Jesus does not get added to the **presepe** until Christmas Eve and those of the Three Wise Men do not get added until January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Italians will add to their collection of **presepe** figurines by shopping at **mercatini di Natale**, outdoor Christmas markets, which are typically held in town squares and churches. These Christmas **mercatini** feature vendors selling traditional handmade crafts and decorations.

Another unique way Italians celebrate Christmas is with the sound of bagpipe music played by musicians known as **zampognari**. These musicians, dressed in traditional shepherd clothing, play in town squares during the holiday season, symbolizing the shepherds who visited Jesus on the night of his birth.

In Italy, the day after Christmas Day is celebrated as **Santo Stefano**, St. Stephen, and is once again a national holiday. It is a day that commemorates the feast day of Saint

Stephen. Though the tradition only started in 1949, it is now widely celebrated as a day of rest and recovery from the previous day's feasting!

New Year's Eve, **Capodanno**, is known as **La Festa di San Silvestro** and is a time for celebration with family and friends. At midnight, Italians gather around the TV to watch **Il Concerto di Capodanno** – a televised music concert – and sing 'Auld Lang Syne'. Fireworks are often set off to commemorate the start of a new year.

As the Christmas season ends, Italians also have another important tradition which is the Epiphany or **La Festa dell'Epifania** on January 6th. During this holiday, people celebrate the visit of the Three Wise Men who brought gifts to baby Jesus. Children wait anxiously to see what **la Befana** will bring them.

For many Italians, **la Befana** is an essential part of the holiday season. Even though **Babbo Natale**, what Italian Children call Santa Claus, is becoming more popular in Italy for gift giving on Christmas Day, **La Befana** is the kindly old woman who brings gifts to children on Epiphany Eve. The tradition of **La Befana** dates to ancient Rome when it was believed that the goddess Janus bestowed gifts on those who had been good during the year. In medieval times, the story of **La Befana** became entwined with that of the Three Kings, and she came to be seen as a kind of magical guide who led them to the infant Jesus. Today, children leave out shoes or stockings for **la Befana** to fill with candy and small toys, and she is often depicted riding a broomstick through the night sky.

The special dishes prepared for Christmas vary from region to region. The traditional lunchtime Christmas meal is called the **pranzo di Natale**, a lavish feast shared with family.

Christmas dinner might include:

- **Antipasti**: cured meats, crostini, bruschette, and cheese plates)
- **Pastas**: ravioli, tortellini in brodo, agnolotti, lasagne, pasta al forno, spaghetti bolognese)
- **Meat and seafood dishes**: veal, roasted chicken, capon soup, roast pork, roast lamb, roasted whole fish with lemon sauce

Traditional desserts:

- **Panettone**, a sweet bread filled with candied fruit and raisins
- **Pandoro** a star-shaped sweet bread, sprinkled with sugar
- **Tiramisu**
- **Torrone** traditional Christmas nougat candy made with honey, egg whites, and sugar
- **Panforte**
- **Struffoli** a Sicilian dessert made by frying small balls of dough and coating them in honey

Drinks:

- **Mulled Wine** Mulled wine, or "vin brulé," a popular Christmas drink in northern Italy made with red wine, sugar, and spices such as cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg
- **Espresso**, served at the end of the meal
- **Prosecco**, a sparkling wine from Veneto popular in Italy during the holidays
- **Asti spumante, a sweet sparkling wine**
- **Limoncello**, a lemon liqueur that is traditionally served as a digestif after meals, or a variety of other digestifs like **Amaro**:

## **Christmas Vocabulary:**

*albero di natale* – Christmas tree

*addobbi natalizi* – Christmas decorations

*Babbo Natale* – Santa Claus

*canzoni di natale* – Christmas carols

*pranzo di natale* – Christmas lunch

*la messa della Vigilia* – midnight mass

*regali* – gifts

*presepe* – nativity scene

*i re magi* – the three wise kings

*il cenone della Vigilia* – Christmas Eve meal

*Buon Natale!* – Merry Christmas!

*Buone Feste!* – Happy Holidays!

*Ti auguro un Buon Natale* – I wish you a Merry Christmas

*Giorno dell'Epifania* – Epiphany Day

## **Personal comments:**

My tradition for Christmas is having dinner with my family and extended family. My sister-in-law and I take turns reuniting our families for Christmas, one year at my house and the following year at her house. At my home when I set my table, I place name tags that serve as place cards for each person attending and I make favors which include a lottery scratch ticket for each person. We always hope that someone wins BIG!

The main dishes I serve are the typical traditional foods listed above and for dessert I serve panettone and torrone. Also, I make Limoncello Tiramisu for my family. My recipe is below:

### **Limoncello Tiramisu:**

#### **Ingredients:**

1 Cup Limoncello Liqueur  
1 Cup Water  
1/2 Cup Sugar  
3/4 Cup Lemon Juice  
40 Savoiardi or Lady Finger Cookies (2 Packages)

#### **For The Mascarpone Cream:**

1 1/2 Cups Heavy Cream  
1/2 Cup Powdered Sugar  
16 Ounces Mascarpone Cream, Room Temperature  
1(10 Ounce) Jar Lemon Curd, divided

## Garnish:

Remaining Lemon Curd  
Lightly Toasted Sliced Almonds

## Directions:

1. In a small pan, heat the limoncello, water, sugar and lemon juice to a boil over medium high heat, then reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring often, until the sugar has completely dissolved. Set the syrup aside to cool to room temperature.
2. In one bowl beat the cream with an electric mixer on high until soft peaks form. Begin adding  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of the powdered sugar until blended.
3. In a separate bowl, beat the mascarpone with  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the jar of lemon curd until smooth, reserving the rest of the curd for the garnish.
4. Fold the cream mixture into the mascarpone mixture until blended.
5. Pour the cooled syrup into a bowl, and quickly dip each of the cookies into the mixture and lay them side by side in a 13 x 9 inch casserole dish. If you need to fill spaces you can cut the cookies.
6. When you have the first layer of cookies done, spoon over half of the mascarpone mixture.
7. Make another layer of dipped **savoardi** cookies on top of the mascarpone cream layer, then finish by topping the second layer with the remaining cream mixture.
8. Smooth the top of the cream with a knife or spatula, garnish with toasted almonds (optional).
9. Stir the remaining curd and then drizzle over the cream. Refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight. (I prefer refrigerating it overnight).