

Italian Christmas Recipes



Christmas memories and traditions during the holiday have always meant a lot to me. My family had instilled in me many traditions for Christmas. Naturally, our Italian Catholic heritage plays a big part in these

traditions.

We would decorate our Christmas tree on Christmas Eve after all the children were asleep, which meant the tree went up and was decorated very late, practically into the wee small hours of the morning. When the children would awake on Christmas morn they would view with bewilderment a beautiful lighted and decorated evergreen with gift wrapped presents under the tree. Gee, how come they never wondered how Santa had time to do that?

It was a common requirement in Catholic law to abstain from eating meat on Christmas Eve. However, that practice was eliminated in 1983, but many Catholics still practice it today. Many varieties of fish and pasta are prepared on that day. My two favorites (*recipes and videos to follow*) are Baccalà' with Tomatoes and Black Olives and Aglio e Olio (*Garlic and Oil*) which my Mother prepared every Christmas Eve.

These dishes were so special to us; we only had them once a year on that day. The evening meal began with antipasto which included marinated artichoke hearts, sweet roasted peppers, mini mozzarella balls, olives, jumbo shrimp, crab legs and whatever you had on hand to make an attractive, tasty appetizer platter. This was followed by a pasta dish (usually Aglio e Olio) and the third course a fish dish (in some homes 7 types of fish were served) and we would complete the meal with a cup of espresso and Italian pastries.

Baccala is a dried, salted codfish that requires soaking in water for 24 to 48 hours to remove the salt. The water needs to be changed several times during soaking. During my childhood, dried baccala' was sold as a slab. Mom would purchase the cod at the fish market and soak it for days in a pot and she then changed the water several times to remove the salt. Nowadays, the fish is still dried but is sold in grocery stores in one pound wooden boxes.

The other dish Mom made and which I prepare every Christmas Eve, is Spaghetti Aglio e Olio. Its two main ingredients are garlic and extra virgin olive oil served over pasta, i.e. angel hair, linguine, or spaghetti. Mom added anchovies to the heated oil and for those who hate anchovies believe me you will not recognize the taste. The anchovies fuse with the hot oil thus giving the sauce a nutty flavor. This is the only way I will eat anchovies.

In addition to the anchovies, you can add pignolias (pine nuts), or olive slices, or walnuts. My Mother-in-law who was also of Italian heritage made this identical dish but she added walnuts. It's a toss-up in our household whether I will add walnuts or not.

I wish all of you a very Merry Christmas, a Happy and Healthy New Year, and good eats throughout your life!

Spaghetti Aglio e Olio

- 1 lb pasta (I prefer angel hair or vermicelli)
- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic finely minced or crushed
- 1 can flat anchovy fillets
- 3/4 cups water
- Coarse ground black pepper
- Red pepper flakes (optional)
- Freshly grated parmesan cheese (pass separately)

Directions:

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil.
2. While the water is boiling prepare the sauce.
3. Heat the olive oil in a saucepan, add garlic and heat until garlic turns golden.
4. Add the can of anchovies including the liquid. Add the black pepper (red pepper flakes if desired).
5. Stir until anchovies are dissolved. Do not overcook.



6. Carefully and slowly add the water.
7. Set aside.



8. Cook the pasta until al dente. Drain and toss with sauce until well coated.



Serve immediately with a good grind of black pepper and pass grated Parmesan cheese at the table.

Baccala with Black Olives and Tomatoes



Serves: 4

- 1 lb (baccala) salted cod filets (sold in wooden box)

- 3 tbs extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic finely minced or crushed
- 1 medium yellow onions sliced
- 1 green bell pepper chopped one inch pieces
- 2 stalks celery sliced one inch pieces
- 1 can large pitted black olives drained
- 2 28-oz can crushed tomatoes (I prefer San Marzano tomatoes)
- Red pepper flake (optional)
- 1 tbs parsley chopped
- Black pepper
- Salt (only at end if needed)

Directions:

1. In a large bowl cover dried cod completely with cold water. Place bowl in refrigerator and soak for 48 hours, change water at least twice daily. Taste a small piece after 1 day; if still salty soak one more day. You want it to be pleasantly salty but not overwhelming. Drain and set aside.



2. Heat oil in large saucepan and add onion, celery and bell pepper. Cook until tender, and then add garlic and black olives. Cook one minute and add tomatoes, black pepper and red pepper flakes (optional).
3. Stir well and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer

and cook about 30 minutes.

4. Add drained cod to sauce and simmer additional 15 to 20 minutes or until fish is tender and heated through.



Serve in bowls immediately along with sliced, crusty, and warm Italian bread. **Tip:** *Can be made in advance and reheated.*