

Prior to 1982, before the Code of Canon Law eliminated fasting on Christmas Eve (before the Vigil Mass), traditional family celebrations had their roots in a liturgical calendar dating from the 4th Century. This was to distinguish between days when meat could be eaten, and magro or “lean” days when only fish was permitted. December 24 was a fast day, no meat could be eaten. This day was set aside, waiting for the birth of the Christ child. The wait for the birth of Christ was celebrated by a multi-course seafood feast.

Christmas Eve Fish Feast

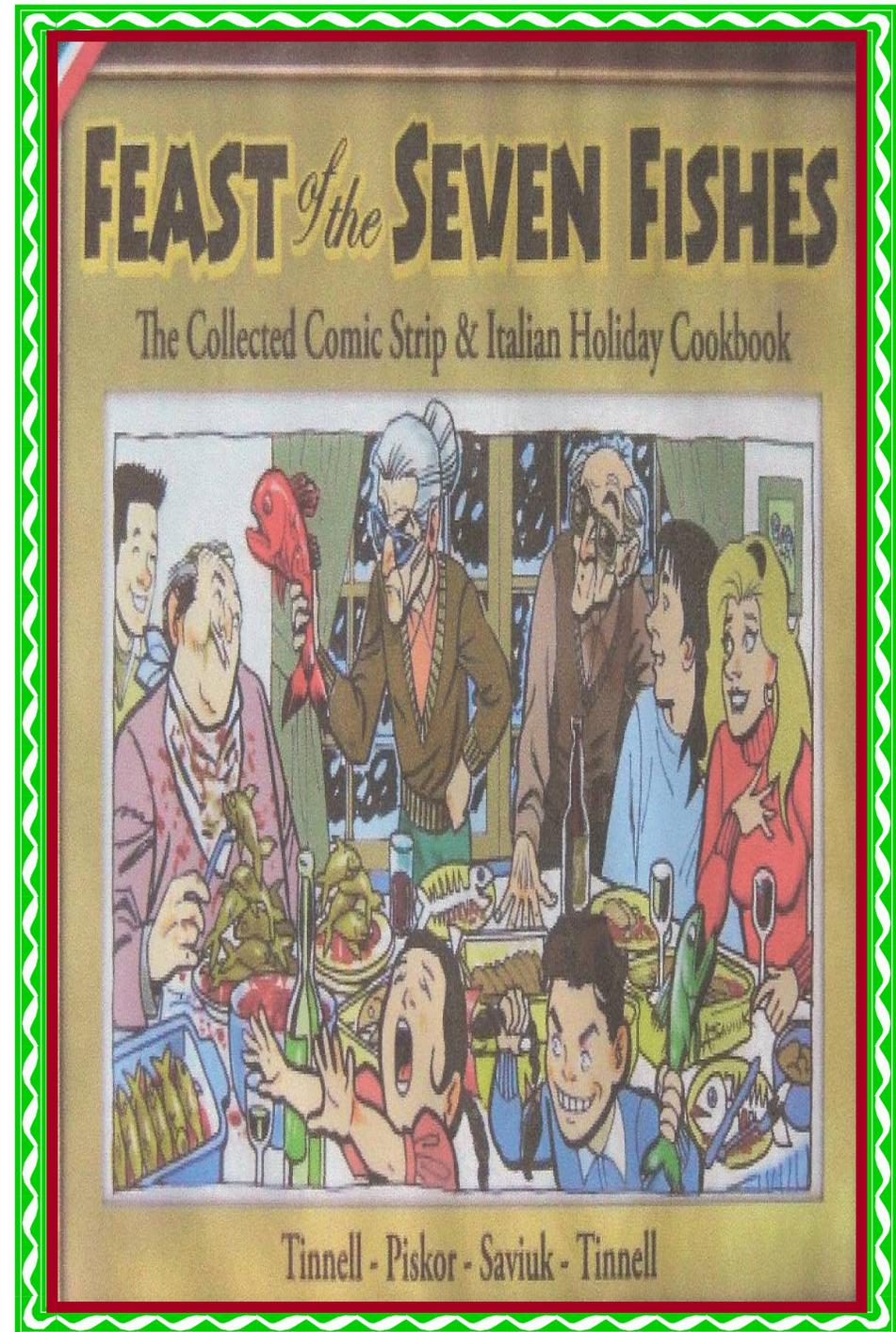
The Feast of the seven fishes reflects on the rich and varied history of Italian tradition. As with many customs, it has evolved with each generation. The Christmas Eve seven fish dinner is an important part of Italian culture. By keeping this tradition each Christmas Eve, Italians, remain close to their heritage. This age old custom of an all-fish Christmas Eve dinner is particularly meaningful to the many Italians from southern Italy, even to this day.

*(excerpted from www.suite101.com)

AN OLD ITALIAN FAVORITE: CIOPPINO (FISH STEW)



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An Italian Christmas Eve Tradition

*The Christmas Eve fish dinner represents a centuries old tradition for many Italian families both in Italy and America.

Many Italian families follow the tradition based on *La Vigilia di Natale*, the vigil of the holy night, and do not eat meat on Christmas Eve, the night of the birth of Christ. Because the day is sacred, no meat is consumed, so the typical dinner includes fish. For many Italians, especially those from the southern regions of Italy, the Christmas Eve dinner includes at least seven fishes; but some follow a custom of serving nine, eleven, thirteen, or as many as twenty-one fish dishes.

Fish on Christmas Eve

Each number of fish dishes prepared has a reason-nine dishes are in honor of the Holy Trinity, times three; or, for the number of months Mary was with child. Eleven dishes prepared represent the Apostles without Judas, and thirteen represent the Apostles with Jesus. Fish dishes prepared and served by large families and restaurants will sometimes number twenty-one, a derivative of seven.

The Tradition of Seven Fishes

Seven fish dishes is the most common, and the reasons are numerous. The most popular explanation for seven fishes is based on the seven sacraments-Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion (Eucharist), Confession (Penance), Marriage, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick. The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Seven Utterances are also commonly cited. The Seven Gifts are counsel, fortitude, knowledge, understanding, piety, wisdom, and fear of the Lord. The Seven Utterances were the words that Jesus spoke on the cross.

Other reasons for seven fishes are the Seven Hills of Rome, the seven pilgrimage churches in Rome, the Seven Wonders of the World, the seven days that Mary and Joseph traveled to reach Bethlehem, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues, and seven days in the week.

Traditional Italian Fish Dinner

The menu of fish served varies, depending on what is available. In Italy, the custom is mostly followed in the south, although some northern regions do observe; so the types of fish served and the preparations are as diversified as each province. In America, the custom is observed throughout the country, but family traditions-many handed down from the old country-will dictate the menu.

Most traditional menus include baccala (dried cod), calamari, eel, scungilli, and smelts. More common types of dishes include anchovies, clams, mussels, shrimp, and lobster. The fish can be prepared in numerous ways, based on family traditions and according to preferences; and the dishes can be served either as separate courses or all at once. Many families today combine various types of fish into one dish. Cioppino (Italian fish stew), is a popular choice, as are large platters containing several different kinds of fish, either fried or broiled. Other common options are seafood salad-either with or without pasta-and stuffed seafood.

On December 24, most Italian families will sit down to a feast dominated by seafood. In a typical home on Sicily's west coast, they typically start with an array of *antipasti*, among them marinated octopus and squid salad, smoked swordfish and thin slices of cured tuna called *bresaola di tonno*. And, that's just the beginning. You will also find:

Baccala....	Crab....
Calamari...	Whitefish....
Shrimp...	Mussels.....
Clams.....	Lobster.....

What you eat depends on the family. Some families with young children make a little fun and have a lobster race. The lobsters are lined up and the one who wins the race is the last to go into the pot. As lobsters are as slow as turtles, this could take some time. It is even more fun if the youngsters name the lobsters and cheer them on. (This is probably not a well known tradition).