

A Neapolitan Easter

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In other words, what people (dare to) eat in Naples from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday

Since I have been living in New York for almost 2 years, I often look back at my life in Naples, my hometown.

I found in Easter a great moment to re-discover old traditions I used to follow before, and that now seem to be so far from me...

They often are a little weird, sometimes magic... but, as for everything in Naples, they are full of symbolism and...recipes!!!

According to the Church, Easter is the most important festivity for a Christian. If at Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Messiah, on Easter we commemorate his death and Resurrection. So, how to celebrate this special moment of the year? Church, masses, and adorations of course are not enough for Southern Italy people... We follow a full range of traditions that bring us to the stove and to the table starting from Holy Thursday.

The feast of Maundy (or Holy) Thursday solemnly commemorates the institution of the Eucharist and



is the oldest of the observances peculiar to Holy Week. If Holy Thursday was taken up with a succession of ceremonies of a joyful character (the baptism of neophytes, the reconciliation of penitents, the consecration of the holy oils, the washing of the feet, and commemoration of the Blessed Eucharist), in Naples it is characterized by the *grande mangiata di zuppa di cozze*: every member of the family sits before a full bowl of mussels and dry bread called *fresella*.

This is the way they get themselves ready to the Good Friday's fasting...

Looking at the face of a Neapolitan on Good Friday is an experience you can never forget. The suffering and pain from hunger mould his features; his mouth is shaped in a grimace; his hair are more uncombed than usual... He is pale, his eyes are livid, his nose red... he looks like he has not eaten for more than a year.

After a whole day of penitence, Neapolitans generally decide that they can't take it anymore: if they really can't eat food, at least they want the consolation of staring at it; playing with it; working on it.

So here they go: they open the fridge, start the stove, and get ready to begin the long culinary process that leads to the final result of **PASTIERA**, the traditional local Easter cake.

There are different stories about the origins of the *Pastiera Napoletana*. Some people say that this cake (or maybe I should call it "pie") derives from the pagan spring ritual of the eggs, long before the birth of Christ. Another story tells of how this pie was part of the ritual breads widely used during the period of Constantine by the Christians hidden in the catacombs.

But the most probable is the one about some nuns in a monastery, San Gregorio Armeno, Naples. They desired to create a dish that represented the resurrection of Christ. To the white ricotta, symbolizing purity, they added wheat grains that buried in the earth grow in the coming season; the eggs, a symbol of new life; and finally the extract of wild flowers that represents the perfume of spring.

Sometimes preparing this cake becomes an experience for the entire family, from the cooking of the grain to the preparation of the yellow cream made of eggs, milk, flour, and vanilla and orange scent. The rolling out of the dough and the stuffing process requires a lot of attention and care, because the *Pastiera* doesn't rise in the oven, it doesn't change shape. So, if it comes out ugly IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT! And since it takes more than 2 hours, about 14 eggs, and more than a pound of grain to make ONE CAKE, you really want to beat the other women of the group, and make the most beautiful cake...IT'S A QUESTION OF HONOR!

Going to bed with the *Pastiera's* aroma in your nose and mind after a full day of starving is really a challenge, a penitence. But Holy Saturday is coming up, and with it... the **CASATIELLO**. *Casatiello* is full of symbolism both religious and cultural. The dough is rolled around salami and cheeses while laces of bread embrace whole eggs. The salami represents an antique pagan ritual where pigs were sacrificed in exchange for fertility of women and the land. Pecorino cheese represents the milk of the lamb or the innocence of Christ.

Tradition wants that people, friends, families, get together on Holy Saturday to have a meal consisting of just three elements (consumed in enormous quantities!): *casatiello*, fava beans, and red wine.

Casatiello is something VERY hard to make. If you don't use good lard for the dough, you don't cook it properly, or put too much salt and pepper, all you'll come up with is a hard salty indigestible piece of stone. So, if you're not sure about your Neapolitan culinary skills, don't even dare to start the oven and intoxicate your guests! (I am saying this because there are people egoist enough that still do it)

Those who are lucky enough to own a countryside villa or a beach house generally invite their friends to join them there. Their brick oven will better serve the purpose of making the "perfect *casatiello*", and the terrace/garden will allow everybody to spend sometime in the fresh air, play, and get visibly drunk with that strong homemade wine...

Casatiello is also part of the AT-LEAST-FIVE-COURSES big (huge) Easter lunch consumed the day after. The Italian Moto "Natale con I tuoi, e Pasqua con chi vuoi" (Christmas with the family, Easter with whoever you like to spend it with) doesn't apply to the Neapolitan way to live this holiday. Some do leave for short trips, but most of the people stay at home with the family (at least 15 people between cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so on).



After mass they go home where most probably the poor “mistress” of the household has already spent 5 hours cooking and cleaning... while most of us just sit and relax.

The huge “abboffata” (the binge) is preceded by two rituals: the exchange of the Easter Chocolate Eggs, symbol of new birth (and greediness); and the blessing of the table with the Olive branches (collected at church on Palm Sunday) and the Blessed Water (that the Church gives to the faithfuls on Easter Sunday).

The sacred and the profane are always mixed together as you can see...

The role that most of the families follow when organizing the Easter Lunch is the following: have everything you couldn't eat during Lent, plus the traditional symbolic dishes that is “mandatory” to have on Easter.

In a few words, here is an example of what people dare to eat in one only meal:

Appetizer:

Ricotta Salata (Salty Ricotta); Capicollo; Prosciutto; Mozzarella; Mixed Vegetables in Oil; Casatiello
First Course:

Pasta Primavera: Pasta with artichokes, fava beans, zucchini, and (sometimes) other fresh seasonal vaggies; Or Lasagna; Or Cannelloni;

Second Course:

Lamb with Potatoes (being the lamb a symbol of new birth and innocence, this is the most symbolic and traditional part of the meal)

2° Second Course:

Grilled Stuffed Scamorza Cheese with Salad

Fennels TO “CLEAN” THE MOUTH:

Dessert:

Fruit Salad; Pastiera ; Colomba (A Traditional white cake with candied fruits and raisins covered with an almond and sugar crust); Chocolate Easter Eggs

Are you there or did you faint already??

Wake up! I am not finished yet!

While in America everybody is back to work on Monday, in Italy they have another holiday called “Lunedì in Albis” (Monday in White), or LittleEaster.

On that day, people organize the first picnic of the year, and head to the most beautiful locations of the area, including Sorrento, Amalfi, and Ravello. Those who like the countryside or the mountains choose Caserta or move a little bit northern to Terni, where the famous waterfalls are.

Needless to say that those who get ready for long walks and some sport, also make sure that they have their baskets full of goodies.

Organizing a picnic with Neapolitan friends is never easy. Each one of the participants makes sure he brings only the best of the best of the leftovers from the Easter Lunch: he has to show that his mom, or himself, cooks better than any other in the group.

There is only one dish that is made purposely for the occasion: the **PIZZA DI MACCHERONI**, two layers of spaghetti baked in the oven with mozzarella and ham.

So, it's a feast again, and the enormous amount of food consumed actually prevents everybody to move a finger for at least a couple of hours after the banquet. Scenes of people laid down under a tree, with a hand on the stomach and the other of the forefront, are extremely common.

The sunset reminds everybody that it is time to go home and jump in bed... a good rest from eating before going back to work the day after...

Of course, a good work day starts from a good breakfast... and if that involves some leftover pastiera or colomba, what else could a genuinely Neapolitan fellow ask for??



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