

Torrone. It is Not Holiday Without You

N. L. (December 20, 2013)



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Growing up in Italy, you can always count on an uncle, a classmate or your father's coworker to sooner or later present you with torrone. You can enjoy it all by yourself, share it with a loved one or leave it out for Santa so he can have a midnight snack. This most popular Italian nougat candy—which, together with pandoro and panettone, has become a symbol of an Italian Christmas—is basically made of honey, sugar, and egg whites, filled with toasted almonds or other nuts, covered in edible rice paper, and usually shaped into a rectangular tablet.

According to some, its story goes back to the Roman Empire. A sweet candy made of honey, egg whites, and almonds is mentioned in *De re culinaria*, a collection of Roman cookery recipes thought to have been compiled in the late 4th or early 5th century AD by Marco Gavio "Apicio" (Aupicius). Yet there are other hypotheses. One of the most plausible is that torrone has Middle Eastern origins and was imported by the Venetians, who had intense commercial exchanges throughout the



Mediterranean. This mixture of almonds, honey, sugar and oriental spices became popular in the Middle Ages. Between 1100 and 1150 Geraldo da Cremona translated a book by Abdul Mutarrif, a doctor from Cordoba, which extolls the benefits of honey and mentions an Arabian sweet named “turun.”

But enough of theories—Italian torrone has a very specific date and place of origin. On October 25, 1441, Bianca Maria Visconti and Francesco Sforza celebrated their wedding in Cremona (Lombardy). For the grand reception, the court pastry chefs prepared a sweet called torrazzo whose shape represented the town’s tower (in Cremonese dialect torrione).

Today torrone is considered a national sweet in Italy and almost every town has its own recipe. So obviously there are many varieties.

The first and biggest difference is between hard (friabile) and soft (morbido) torrone. The different textures are the result of several factors. First, the length and temperature of cooking. Hard torrone cooks for a longer period of time, sometimes as long as ten hours, especially for some traditional recipes. Equally important is the amount of candied fruit added, the ratio of honey and sugar, and the quantity of egg whites in the mixture. Soft torrone, on the other hand, is cooked for no more than three hours. That results in a higher concentration of water that, combined with a greater percentage of glucose, yields a softer dough.

Other differences have to do with ingredients. Since all torrone makers add their local products to the mix, the ingredients change from region to region. In Sardinia, for example, myrtle and arbutus berries are added; in Lombardy they produce chocolate-covered torrone; in Abruzzo, brown torrone with chocolate and hazelnuts; in Veneto, torrone with dried almonds; in Sicily, torrone with pistachios; and in Campania (typically in Benevento) they make a crumbly version of torrone with hazelnut.

Torrone is easy to make at home, so easy that kids can prepare it with their grandmothers as part of their family Christmas tradition, and the recipe can be adapted to suit just about anyone’s taste. It is best made in the winter, when temperatures are cool and dry. If made on a warm, humid day, the mix may get sticky and not set properly. Until recent years torrone was available from October through January, but today it is sold throughout the year. Keep in mind however that torrone is highly caloric and it is better not to overdo it. Yet exceptions can always be made for Christmas. Even Santa can’t say no to a chunk of torrone on his nightshift!.

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