

Christmas is always a very special time of year for our family, and it is especially joyful (and a tad nutty!) when celebrating with the entire crew of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I have such wonderful memories of our gatherings over the years, and an important part of our celebration has always been the delicious food, pastries, and cookies.

Because our big celebration is on Christmas Eve, I have included our Christmas Eve brunch and the Feast of the Seven Fishes, as well as our Christmas morning brunch.

Perhaps this year you will incorporate some of our wonderful traditions into your own family's celebration!

Buon Natale!
Dena

CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING BRUNCH

Italian Sausage & Ricotta Frittata

8 eggs
1# whole milk ricotta
1# sweet Italian sausages, par-boiled, chilled, then cut into ¼" slices
Salt & pepper

Beat eggs in large bowl then add ricotta and mix until well blended. Fold in sliced Italian sausage. Pour mixture into lightly greased 9x13" glass baking dish then rearrange sausage, if necessary, so that it is evenly dispersed. Salt and pepper the top and bake at 350 degrees for 50-60 minutes.

Serve Frittata with Kolache Rolls and Pizzelles (see "Sweets" section on my website for recipes).

CHRISTMAS EVE

Our celebration always starts with some cocktails and appetizers. Though the appetizers can vary year to year, we usually include the following:

Shrimp cocktail
Jonah crab claws served with cocktail sauce
Celery stuffed with chive cream cheese
Lupine beans

Feast of the Seven Fishes

My sisters and I have vivid memories of being faced with squid soup—a thin watery tomato broth with tentacles floating around in it—served as the starter for the Feast of the Seven Fishes. To a child, it was a thoroughly repugnant dish, but sadly we were required to at least make an attempt to get some of it down. (Needless to say, this food has been discontinued from our Feast!) The soup was followed by calamari, and though today this is one of my favorites, it took years for my mom and aunt to perfect the recipe—during most of our childhood, the calamari was cut into thick rings, which when fried turned into what my sisters and I unapologetically called “rubber tires!” You chewed and chewed one of those buggers for ages before it got anywhere close to being the size of something that could be swallowed! But as the years went on and restaurants started serving calamari as an appetizer, our mom and aunt finally figured out the magic, and we all were ever so grateful.

When my husband and I moved our family to Maine in 1995, we discovered that the Feast of the Seven Fishes could be SO much better now that we had access to fresh seafood. Dishes with whiting and anchovies quickly went by the wayside when we realized we could incorporate fresh haddock and lobster into our meal.

Our current Feast includes the following:

The Seven Fishes:

Lobster & Shrimp

We keep it simple and purchase lobster meat and boiled shrimp—no one needs to be boiling and cracking lobster or deveining shrimp on Christmas Eve! Place lobster meat and shrimp into separate sauté pans over low heat with plenty of melted butter in each. Warm and serve!

Fried Calamari

As in my novel, this activity falls to the men in our family. A table is set up in the garage with all of the frying necessities, including an electric fry pan (or deep fryer), utensils, and a large bottle of bourbon or scotch (this last necessity first lures the men into the garage then ensures they won't abandon their task)!

Clean (a nasty job best relegated to a male in the family) and cut calamari bodies into ½” rings. Put into plastic bag with flour, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Shake bag to coat calamari. Remove small batches of calamari from bag, shaking off excess flour, and drop into hot oil.

Heat vegetable oil (do *not* use olive oil) to 375 degrees in electric fry pan. Throw calamari in oil briefly (2-3 minutes) and remove. Let drain on paper towel then place in warming oven until ready to serve.

Fried Smelt

Clean then dredge in flour, salt, and pepper. After calamari is cooked, use same vegetable oil to fry the smelt for 3-4 minutes and remove. Let drain on paper towel then place in warming oven until ready to serve.

Crab Cakes with Hollandaise Sauce

We always fried these, but with all the other fried foods we decided to try a healthier option of baking them. Everyone loved them this way, so this alternative has become a permanent change in our Feast. (Note: We still enjoy the Hollandaise sauce on them, so not too sure how much better they really are for us but at least they're a bit healthier!)

Baked Crab Cakes

This recipe makes 6 large cakes, but we have always doubled this recipe and made the cakes smaller since this is just one fish in our Feast!

1# crab meat
½ c bread crumbs
1 egg, beaten
½ c mayonnaise
1 T minced fresh parsley
2 t Worcestershire Sauce
1 t brown mustard
1 t salt
¼ t pepper

Mix all ingredients together *except* the crab meat. Fold in crab meat.

Crab Cake Coating

3 T butter
1 c panko bread crumbs

Melt the butter in a sauté pan over medium heat then add panko bread crumbs. Stir constantly until they are a rich golden brown. Season with salt and spread on a plate to cool. When cool, spoon crab mixture onto panko bread crumbs, pat down to form cakes, and sprinkle more crumbs on top.

Place crab cakes on a baking sheet that has been covered with non-stick foil and bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes, or until the cakes are hot all the way through. Use a wide spatula to remove cakes to a serving plate.

Hollandaise Sauce

This job is typically assigned to the woman (remember, all of the men are in the garage!) who is doing the least amount of work during dinner prep...and because this is a last-minute task, there are always panicked cries when it's go-time as the assignee hasn't prepped one single ingredient like a normal person would for this recipe!

4 egg yolks
2 T fresh lemon juice
1 T Dijon mustard
½ c butter, heated
2 T boiling water
½ t salt

Combine first three ingredients in blender and blend 30 seconds. Pour in sizzling hot butter and water and blend until thickened. Stir in salt. Pour into *warmed* dish or gravy boat and serve immediately!

Baked Haddock

Melt butter in large glass baking dish. Place haddock into dish, turning to coat. Sprinkle bread crumbs, Lawry's Seasoned Salt, and your favorite seasoning (we like the Harbor Fish soFIShticated SEASONINGS) over the fish and bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes.

Baccalà Salad

Salt cod

Extra virgin olive oil

3 cloves garlic, chopped

Fresh parsley, chopped

Rinse the salt cod, then cover the cod with cold water in a large bowl. Cover the bowl and place it in the refrigerator for 24 to 48 hours (depending on thickness), changing the water 2-3 times per day. Rinse salt cod well after soaking. Place the fish in a pot of cold water and bring to a boil. Cook 4-5 minutes (longer if the fish is thick so it is cooked through). Remove the cod and drain well. When cool, break into bite-sized pieces and place in a bowl. Drizzle with generous amount of olive oil, then sprinkle with garlic and parsley and toss gently.

Sides:

Pierogi

This dish is a nod to our ancestors from Poland and Slovakia! (Note: We make the pierogi before Christmas and freeze them because who has time to do all of this on Christmas Eve?!)

Dough

3 ½ c flour

2 t baking powder

1 t salt

2 eggs, beaten

1 c+/- water

Filling

Mashed potato (4-5 potatoes) with ½ c shredded cheddar cheese, 2 T butter, salt and pepper to taste.

Mix ingredients for dough, knead 2-3 minutes. Let dough rest 15 minutes. Then pull a section of dough and roll it into a large circle. Cut dough into 3-3½" circles (we use a highball glass!). Place potato mixture in the center of each circle and fold in half. Wet the edge of the dough and pinch to seal. Repeat process with remaining dough. At this point, you can place the pierogi on a baking sheet and put them into the freezer—when they are frozen, bag them up and keep in freezer until Christmas Eve.

On Christmas Eve day, cook the frozen pierogi in boiling water until they float then an additional 4-5 minutes. Drain pierogi, place them in a skillet with butter and chopped onion, and sauté. (I usually do this earlier in the day and then just warm them in the oven when preparing the Feast.)

Serve pierogi with sour cream. (Variation: We have also served these with sauerkraut and chopped onion that have been drizzled with oil and baked together until browned.)

Mushrooms

We usually use 5# of baby bella mushrooms because they cook down! Clean the mushrooms, make sure they are dry, then slice. Melt 2 sticks of butter in large pot over medium heat. Place mushrooms into pot and mix well with butter, add salt and pepper to taste, and begin to sauté, mixing frequently. Cook mushrooms until dark in color and beginning to brown—this can take approximately 2+ hours. Because of the time needed, I make these Christmas Eve morning and then place the cooked mushrooms in a bowl that can be heated when the Feast is almost ready!

Asparagus

We sauté the asparagus in olive oil with chopped garlic, and salt and pepper to taste.

Serving suggestion: This asparagus is especially delicious when topped with the Hollandaise Sauce made for the crab cakes!

Note: For an additional veggie, we have also made steamed broccoli with butter, and salt and pepper to taste.

Pitolides

We have streamlined this recipe by purchasing frozen sweet bread dough rolls! Approximately 3 hours before the Feast, place rolls on a greased tray, spray saran wrap with cooking spray to cover the rolls, then let rise. When preparing dinner, heat corn oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Stretch each dough roll into 5" circle and drop into hot oil. Fry until bottom side golden then flip each roll and repeat. Remove to paper towels to drain. Keep hot in warming oven until ready to serve.

Sprinkled with sugar, these are enjoyed by all, especially the kiddos in the family! When my sisters and I were young, this was about the only thing we ate with gusto during the Feast! And fyi, this is served as part of dinner, though it may appear to be a dessert!

Our celebration always ends with dessert and aperitifs. We usually include the following:

Stuffed Dates: stuff dates with whole almonds and roll in powdered sugar.

Pastries and Cookies: see "Sweets" section on my website for recipes!

Clementines

In-shell Mixed Nuts

And...

Rattavia!

This is a tasty aperitif with delicious cherries that we make every year to enjoy during Christmas... and to warm ourselves all through the cold winter months in front of a fire! It has been a well-guarded recipe for many years, but here it is for your enjoyment:

1 gallon Zinfandel

1/5 Seagram's Whiskey

1 pint...

You know, I just can't do it! So sorry! ☺

CHRISTMAS MORNING BRUNCH

After an early morning of opening presents, my mom always made a delicious brunch before we'd head off to noon Mass. My husband and I have continued this tradition with some tweaks!

Skiers French Toast

8 slices of Italian bread loaf 3/4" thick

4 eggs

1 c milk

2 T peach schnapps (the original recipe called for Grand Marnier or OJ)

1 T sugar

1/2 t vanilla

1/4 t salt

2 T butter

Maine Maple Syrup (or your preferred maple syrup...but Maine's is really the best!)

Arrange bread in single layer in 10x14" glass baking dish. In medium bowl beat eggs, then add milk, schnapps, sugar, vanilla, and salt and mix until well blended. Pour mixture over bread slices and turn slices to coat evenly. Refrigerate overnight.

Grill slices in hot butter on skillet and cook until golden, approximately 4 minutes each side.

Top with butter and Maine Maple Syrup and enjoy! We have also sprinkled the delicious slices with raspberries and then maple syrup...but do whatever your heart (or stomach) desires! And a suggested side dish: baked prosciutto—the saltiness of the meat offsets the sweetness of the French toast!

Baked Prosciutto

Place prosciutto on large tray and bake at 350 degrees for approximately 10 minutes, turning after 5 minutes, or cook to desired crispiness!