



Holy Fish! Cooking “Cenone di Natale”... with Nonna!

Gabrielle Pati (December 03, 2009)



Rossella Rago’s online-based show “Cooking with Nonna” hosted a special event at the Astor Center this Monday, November 30th. At “Cenone di Natale”, traditional holiday seafood from the Puglia region was prepared live and served to a few dozen lucky spectators. Two nonne accompanied Rossella and shared their knowledge and joy of cooking typical Christmas fare from Puglia

“Cooking with Nonna” host Rossella Rago welcomed in the cooking frenzy of the holiday season when she hosted the special “Cenone di Natale” (big Christmas dinner) on November 30th at the [Astor Center](#) [2] in Manhattan. The holiday season is often connected with seafood in Italian American homes. We have the nebulous traditional of the seven fishes on Christmas Eve which both the religious and the secular equally enjoy. In the south of Italy, the different regions like Campania, Puglia, and Basilicata for example, all have varying typical dishes depending on the availability of



fish. Puglia’s nuances were literally brought to the table on this occasion.

One thing that made the event extra special was that each course of the meal was paired with beautiful wines from the [Borghese di Castello](#) [3] vineyard on the Northeastern fork of Long Island. The owners explained the individual nature of each wine, giving us a glimpse into the world of viniculture while pleasing the palette with a versatile “Fleurette” Rosè, a Riesling, and a stunning Barrel Fermented Chardonnay.

Enthusiasts of seafood and Italian cooking were present at the “Cenone di Natale”, and were delighted at the simple yet delicate dishes prepared. Rossella’s own nonna, Romana, along with another Pugliese, nonna Anna, captivated the audience from the countertop chopping and measuring, to the finished products of each course.

For an antipasto, they served Merluzzi Fritti con Fritelle di verdure, which is fried and marinated whiting and mixed, fried and battered vegetables. These treats were accompanied by Focaccia Barese. The first course consisted of a dish of small pasta with white beans and mussels. Although simple ingredients are called for here, the combination of ingredients in this recipe created a soothing and warm aroma perfect for a cold December night. The main dish boasted oven-baked striped sea bass in a light tomato sauce and herbs, filling but not as heavy as meat dishes. As a side dish, the dandelions and potatoes in broth tasted fresh and earthy.

The Puglia region of Italy is known for its seafood. Hence it was enlightening to learn of Puglia’s typical dishes while realizing that it is also very feasible to prepare this food in New York, where the availability of quality food products is endless. Rossella and the nonne also gave some pointers about brands they prefer to use in their cooking.

Perhaps the most particular and memorable recipe prepared at the Cenone was the dessert. Cartellate, fried dough pastries made by hand, were filled with either “vin cotto”, a thick, cooked fig juice; or honey. After all the food it was still impossible to resist the two cartellate on my plate, due to their crispy and mildly sweet allure. These dolci di Natale really took center stage.

This holiday special of Cooking with Nonna signifies so many things. Traditional cooking from Puglia, an often-overlooked region of Italy, was passionately celebrated and brought forth to the public. Rossella and the two nonne, three women from Mola di Bari whose joy of their land showed when they broke into a song, recounting the tradition of the youngest child in the home carrying baby Jesus around the house at midnight on Christmas Eve.

Members of [Slow Food USA New York Chapter](#) [4] were present at the Cenone as supporters of the event. The Slow Food presence highlighted the importance of slowing down to enjoy our food during the holiday season. After all that cooking, we need to savor the food we work so hard to prepare, so remember to slow down and thank your nonna or household cook this holiday.

The star of the night, Rossella Rago, has great enthusiasm and an attractive sense of humor, making her an entertaining host and chef-in-training. All of the recipes prepared on the show are available for the public on the website, so if curiosity calls, don’t resist: there are tons of unique recipes to be found on the site. There is some rumor about Rossella launching her own cooking show next year, so stay tuned to www.cookingwithnonna.com [5] for more details. All the nonne, including Rossella’s nonna, Romana, have a lot to teach Rossella. The work will be fun for all to watch!

Related Links: <http://www.slowfoodnyc.org> [4]
<http://www.cookingwithnonna.com> [6]

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