

Food & Faith: Cugine Style

Johnny DeCarlo (April 01, 2010)



GRANDMA (EASTER, 1989)

Keep the Peeps, pass the Easter pies

The warm weather is so close I can taste it. That also means it's time to taste the meaty pleasures of



the indulgent Italian Easter pies, along with lots of other goodies. With the colorful flowers in bloom, the change in season is officially underway. Palm Sunday kicked off Holy Week, which all leads up to the most important religious feast of the Liturgical calendar for my fellow Roman-Catholics, and all those who celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I'm not an expert in botanical crafting, but all those years of Catholic school paid off—I learned how to create a perfect cross out of palms, another very important display in this spring rebirth. I used to make a ton when I was young for everybody...one for in the car, one for in the kitchen, one for down in the basement...I had the house covered.

We each have our own traditions and customs, and in my home, the food was once again, a huge part of the Pasqua festivities. I always found it fascinating how religious views and ideas, mixed with our cultural routines, often get intertwined and altered more and more with each generation—while also infusing with other regional influences—and thus making this all a bit confusing (to an outsider anyway) when the faith and the East Coast Italian-Americana blend.

I call those living in this certain ethnic amalgamation, a person who is “I-TABANAR” (Identifiable-Through-A-Birthplace-A-Nationality-And-Religion). The application of all these combined characteristics is often seen in period movies which are filmed in a purposely and distinctly recognizable place, where the time era and setting play as integral characters (think “Rocky,” or “Moonstruck” which both embody all of those factors to a T). In real life, the current decade is irrelevant. Even though some of the styles evolve a bit, those with the old-school mentality like me who perpetuate such conventional practices (in the best ways we can), genuinely carry things on for one big reason—which is the constant in everything—the culinary aspect. Why? Because that links us back to where things all began. As I said last week, that's the foundation of the true cugine way—and nothing brings out all of the aforementioned components like the holidays.

For me, year after year, it would be all about the lamb on Easter—if not a whole baby on the spit, a roasted one in the oven. It was quite literally the sacrificial lamb for my mother and her five siblings growing up, as my grandfather raised a live one in the yard as the family pet right up until the holiday. That's real old school. My mother never hunted for eggs or believed in Peter Cottontail, this was the Americanized practice that was incorporated into my upbringing. Of course, those giant wrapped Perugina chocolate ones with the prizes inside are lots of fun, even though one person should never attempt at consuming it by themselves. Maybe your dentist will be in his glory, but I'd recommend just a few [Baci](#) [2] candies if you must satisfy your sweet tooth.

However, my favorite thing of all to mangia is the “casatiell” (casatiello), or “ga-zia-dell” as my family dialect pronounces it. This was always an Easter staple when I was growing up just like calamari (“ga-la-ma”) and the other six fishes on Christmas Eve. And as that story goes, the seven fish are eaten to represent the seven sacraments—with never any meat present as a sign of respect for the animals surrounding the manger of baby Jesus. But, that's for a whole other discussion, as there's many schools of thought by those in our heritage who choose to believe in the legend of La Vagilia and the reasoning behind it. Though, I am pretty sure no one can dispute sheep were near Jesus back then...pretty ironic we eat lamb on Easter as a sign of good luck...

Anyway, I also learned the casatiell can be called tortano if you are of Tuscan background, or “pane-del,” (shortened from pane del SOMETHING—I guess meat?) These words are all grouped into that meat pie category, just like pizza rustica, aka: “pizza-chiena,” and probably a few more I'm forgetting. It seems that any Easter bread with any kind of meat can be considered a “meat pie” and it's quite interesting to me how this savory delight is interoperated so differently amongst Italians and Italian-Americans (naturally, this is so with many foods, but this one in particular I found lots of pictures and deviating recipes for.) I mean, if you strictly talk pane alone, there are hundreds of types in Italy—then start filling them and shaping them, and do the math. Well, I think you get the point. I guess these are eaten simply because of the idea that one is making up for fasting from meat every Friday during Lent, and they are a very rich and filling.

I will admit, my cookbook and internet search was very difficult when I was trying to find the exact formal name of this particular dish...let alone one concrete recipe—this evidently greatly varies depending on region of Italy, I think more than anything else. Some called for ham (even pancetta), some salami, some prosciutto...some call for the use of only provolone or fontinella, others for mozzarella and ricotta (although not to be confused with a ricotta, or grain pie). The version that I



grew up eating is the one that I will talk about here, which was very simple, but amazingly satisfying. My grandmother made lots of exceptional dishes—from her pillow soft hand-rolled gnocchi, to absolutely amazing meatballs, and mmmm—struffoli, just to name a few. But this is one of those real special treats.

Now, I'm not talking about the sweet, braided bread that usually has a few colored eggs inside—which were always around as well—they apparently also go by several different names and are enjoyed by many cultures. To me, those always reminded me of the Pasqua version of the Panettone, as they'd be passed from relative to relative, but they were also given to our family by our Greek and Yugoslavian neighbors, too (the true Italian version should be shaped like a dove, called "La Colomba.") The ones I used to see in my old neighborhood were more like some form of challah, which intriguingly has Jewish roots. I also always celebrated Easter twice growing up with our Greek friends, who had a huge feast a week later—where we once again had lamb, along with grape leaves and spanokopita (spinach pie). Ok, back to the casatiell...

The way Grandma makes it is very specific, I'm not sure if it's her own particular take, or if it's specific to all those who hail from Guardiagreia, Campobasso (Molise). Perhaps it's a hybridization of Molise and the Italian-Canadian subculture in Ontario? My grandparents stopover was our sister country to the north—where many of my relatives still remain, and also the birthplace of my mother, Assunta—before they settled in North Jersey. Up there, if you don't eat it homemade, you are considered a "mangia cake" (like the poor saps who eat Ragu I grew up calling "meddigan"). Upon further researching the casatiell, which is actually considered a "lard bread," I found the origin to be Napolitano. But it's enjoyed from the north all the way down to Sicily, in all the different variations. Whatever the case, they are delicious, and I'm doing my best this year to attempt at recreating them. I consider myself a cook, not really a baker—got my St. Joseph's Day zeppoles from Lyndhurst Pastry Shop. But I can roll dough and make pretty damn good ahbeetz (the regular kind, not talking rustica/gaina/gena, etc.), and I'm determined to succeed here.

Here was the Easter weekend routine when I was a kid...Good Friday would entail a meatless meal (which had to include pasta fazule), followed by viewing the Stations of the Cross recreation at Church. On Saturday, me and my brother would do egg-coloring with our Paas pastel dye set. Sunday morning, after hunting for the eggs and opening our baskets, we'd all head to Church again, this time in our sharp white suits. After mass, that's when the Italian spread was unveiled. First enjoyed would be Mom's giant homemade frittata, which usually consisted of sausage and cheese—some years zucchini. Then, before the lamb and all the side dishes (stuffed artichokes, a macaroni course, dried figs and lots of other stuff), we'd eat my grandmother's casatiell—which we'd continue to eat for the following week since she made so much.

I remember taking them for lunch at school, and then eating them as an after-school snack as well. We ate the casatiell at room temp—but to me, they were closer to a stromboli in flavor, texture and design—as opposed to the cake or pie-like styles I see in the markets. I've heard them referred to as an Italian type of brioche, but I don't know about that. My grandmother's were crispy but also soft, they had a dryness about them in the crust that was perfectly balanced out by an airy, soft, sort of quiche-like center of diced ham and cheese. The shape in which she bakes them almost resembles mini panzerotti (calzones), or half-moon pockets. I'll tell you one thing, these to me, are better than anything Cadbury's can create. And you can keep those Peeps!!!

I love the holidays, especially Easter, and I'm excited to be hosting it in my home this year. Whatever you eat, and whatever you call it is fine by me, as long as you enjoy your feast with loved ones. Buona Pasqua, God Bless!

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