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Why the Feast of the Seven Fishes lives on in Pittsburgh but not in Italy

Baccala, smelts, calamari, eel, clams, mussels, salmon, tuna, and more.




At left, dishes from the Feast of the Seven Fishes. At right, the Argentine family, of Pittsburgh's South Hills, celebrating the meal in 1969. [GW FINS / FLICKR | COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER](https://www.flickr.com/photos/gw_fins/6517332509/in/photolist-avv4pe-avvdjk-avv1cp-avv2tt-yt95b-avv92p-avva98-dpwnp-avvghz-976zug-avv7lk-avvbnp-avuy3b-avv6iz-976zrb-4zqnpp-4ghum7-tvpmrb-xnvzfc-xsubq7-xnvzul-avvfmr-6duusa-7zemgs-7zcmmr-xfq5py-xsuc8m-xnvzkn-xznseq-xsuesc-xsuckq-ymfse1-ymkk4f-ymkkcb-kmgfsh-ymkjbp) ([HTTPS://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/GW_FINS/6517332509/IN/PHOTOLIST-AVV4PE-AVVDJK-AVV1CP-AVV2TT-YT95B-AVV92P-AVVA98-DPWNP-AVVGHZ-976ZUG-AVV7LK-AVVBNP-AVUY3B-AVV6IZ-976ZRB-4ZQNPP-4GHUM7-TVPMRB-XNVZFC-XSUBQ7-XNVZUL-AVVFMR-6DUUSA-7ZEMGS-7ZCMMR-XFQ5PY-XSUC8M-XNVZKN-XZNSEQ-XSUESC-XSUCKQ-YMFSE1-YMKK4F-YMKKCB-KMGFSH-YMKJBP](https://www.flickr.com/photos/gw_fins/6517332509/in/photolist-avv4pe-avvdjk-avv1cp-avv2tt-yt95b-avv92p-avva98-dpwnp-avvghz-976zug-avv7lk-avvbnp-avuy3b-avv6iz-976zrb-4zqnpp-4ghum7-tvpmrb-xnvzfc-xsubq7-xnvzul-avvfmr-6duusa-7zemgs-7zcmmr-xfq5py-xsuc8m-xnvzkn-xznseq-xsuesc-xsuckq-ymfse1-ymkk4f-ymkkcb-kmgfsh-ymkjbp)).

[Rossilynne Culgan](#)
Dec. 16, 2017, 5:30 a.m.

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Updated: Dec. 17, 2019

For many Italian-American families in Pittsburgh, there's a Christmas Eve tradition that has endured for more than a century: The Feast of the Seven Fishes.

For the unfamiliar, it's exactly as it sounds — a hearty meal consisting of seven varieties of fish served the night before Christmas, enjoyed with the whole family around the table before heading to midnight mass.

"The history of seven fishes in the U.S. is really interesting, because it's something that's brought over by Italian immigrant families. If you were to go to Italy today, you'd notice that contemporary Italians haven't kept up with the traditions," said Melissa E. Marinaro, director of the Italian American Program at Heinz History Center.

When Italian immigrants left home, they brought traditions popular in that particular moment and passed them down without knowing the styles and customs had changed in Italy.

"Many of the things we do are what our ancestors were doing in the late 19th and early 20th century. That's something that's kind of unique about Feast of the Seven Fishes. In some ways it's kind of an antiquated Italian tradition," she said. "We get so steeped in what our ancestors brought from Italy, we're not going to Italy to see what are the latest food trends."

Given Pittsburgh's large population of families with Italian heritage — [Pittsburgh is in the top five cities with the most Italian Americans](http://www.niaf.org/culture/statistics/5187-2/) (<http://www.niaf.org/culture/statistics/5187-2/>), per the National Italian American Foundation — it makes sense that the tradition has stuck. The Feast of the Seven Fishes is especially popular in families with roots in coastal Italian towns.

Each family has its own take on which seven (or more) types of fish should be served, but there's always baccala, smelts, calamari and then a smattering of eel, clams, mussels, salmon or tuna. As an American spin on the tradition, some families make one dish, such as a stew, that incorporates seven kinds of seafood.

It's hard to definitively say exactly where the "seven" number comes from, but some say it's based on the seven days of creation or the seven sacraments, Marinaro said. Catholics would typically go without meat on Christmas Eve, so seafood fit in well.

The feast, also called La Vigilia, is a tradition that brings together the whole family, Marinaro said, adding that a family member of hers used to set up saw horses topped with wood planks to build a makeshift table big enough for the whole family.

“Feasting in any Italian family is usually a large affair where people will take out the fine china,” she said.

Other Italian-American traditions include baking ornate cookies, serving a resplendent antipasto spread, attending midnight mass and building a presepio, a nativity scene with a background representing the town a family lived in, Marinaro said.



Presepio from the Albini family of Vandergrift, 1930-1950 COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

For those who want to create their own Feast of the Seven Fishes tradition, Marinaro recommended visiting the Strip District – “between Wholey’s, Penn Mac, Consumer’s Produce and Sunseri’s, you pretty much get everything you need for a holiday feast.”

Even Giant Eagle is marketing seven fishes nowadays, a sign that what once was once an ethnic custom has entered the mainstream, Marinaro said.

“Those who maybe didn’t grow up with it are starting the tradition anew in their family,” she said. “I think people are looking to learn or they want to try out a new recipe for this year, because you have seven or more opportunities.”

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