

The Italian festive season starts on December 8th with the celebration of the Immaculate Conception, and continues until the Epiphany on January 6th, when the Three Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem. The most important date of the celebrations is Christmas Eve.

The nine-day period before Christmas, known as the Novena, is when we remember the journey of the shepherds to the baby Jesus' manger. In rural areas in particular, children go from house to house dressed as shepherds and performing Christmas songs or poems, often in exchange for money or sweets.

In southern Italy and Rome, bagpipe-playing shepherds, or zampognari as they are known, perform tunes in piazzas, normally dressed in traditional sheepskin and wool cloaks. The pipers usually travel in pairs down from their mountain homes - it's quite a spectacle.

The tradition of presepi, or Christmas cribs, is widespread in Italy. Most churches, as well as other public areas and many Italian homes, will have at least one nativity scene on display. Styles vary and may depict just the holy family or a whole village, but the baby Jesus is usually added only on Christmas Eve. Sometimes, contemporary characters (such as ex-PM Renzi or Italian footballers) are included too.

In Rome, an annual exhibition displays 100 different cribs from all over the world, including miniscule versions carved into nuts, and all kinds of materials - even pasta.

To prepare and purify their bodies for Christmas Day, Italians avoid meat on la Vigilia (Christmas Eve). Although the idea is to eat lean, most indulge on multiple courses of fish... sometimes as many as seven!

After the "light" Christmas Eve dinner, on Christmas Day, Italians invite their family and friends for a large lunch that usually goes on all day (cenone). The traditional meal on Christmas Eve is meat-free (fish doesn't count) and the traditional Christmas day meal is centered around meat, but it's the dessert course where the holidays really come into their own. There are regional specialties, including candied fruits and nuts, marzipan, and deep-fried pastries – but the best-known Christmas treat is the "panettone" (pah|neht|TOH|neh).

Panettone is a sweet bread filled with candied fruit, but if you're thinking it's akin to that brick-like liquor-soaked fruitcake we all love to hate – think again. Panettone is typically a light bread with a scattering of candied fruit (and sometimes nuts). The origins of the bread are steeped in legend, but we know that it came from Milan originally and has now become synonymous with Christmas through much of Italy. You'll see elaborate packages of panettone in bakery windows leading up to Christmas.

Children in Italy believe in a female version of Santa Claus called La Befana, an old woman who flies on a broom and brings presents. According to Italian legend, Three Wise Men asked La Befana for directions to Bethlehem. La Befana was asked to join them but declined three times. It took an unusually bright light and a band of angels to convince La Befana that she must join the Wise Men, but she was too late. She never found the Christ child and has been searching ever since. On January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, La Befana goes out on her broom to drop off stockings filled with treats to all the sleeping children of Italy. Just as children in America leave milk and cookies for jolly Santa Claus, La Befana collects messages and refreshments throughout the night.