

FOOD EDITION

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FIJITIME

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Traditional Tastes

Flavours from the Islands and Afar



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JOY FROM ITALIA

The Feast of the Seven

FISHES

By MARINA KAY

Photos by VINCENT LONG

In Italy, Christmas Eve fasting means feasting on seafood, when dinner tables brim with plates of squid, mussels, shrimp, salmon, sardines, and pescetti, or marinated small fish. You see, abstaining from meat and dairy on this holiday hardly means going hungry. Rather, the focus shifts to *frutti di mare*—and lots of it. This culinary prelude to Christmas Day is referred to as *La Vigilia* (literally, The Vigil), which in America translates to The Feast of the Seven Fishes, a custom that flourished after waves of Italians immigrated to New York in the early 1900s. While no-one can pinpoint exactly how the feast got its name, the tradition of eating seafood is an old Roman Catholic one, and these days, is enjoyed by everyone.

A New Yorker for over thirty years, chef Ali Kihanmahd is familiar with the extravagant feast, having worked in top Italian restaurants such as *Cesca* which pays homage to the tradition. But these days, this chef channels his love for classic Italian fare through *Al Forno Caffè*, a convivial trattoria he owns and operates in Orange County in Southern California—an area not dissimilar to the Mediterranean (they even share the same latitude). Come Christmas Eve, the popular dining spot celebrates its interpretation of the Italian-American feast with a bounty of seafood dishes inspired by regional Italy. “Our Seven Fishes menu caters to the different tastes of our clientele,” chef Kihanmahd says. “For example, salmon, while not used much in Italy, is our top selling fish.” Guests might order a few seafood plates at a time before winding toward a sweet note. “I always say that dinner is a great excuse to have dessert and I’d cap this feast with either our homemade tiramisu or pannacotta, which we infuse with lemon and a hint of rosemary,” he says. Our take: Visit with an empty stomach and hungry eyes. [Mangia! alfornocaffe.com](http://alfornocaffe.com)





Chef Ali Kihanmahd

AL FORNO CAFFE'S FEAST OF THE SEVEN FISHES

Chef Kihanmahd takes us behind the scenes of his festive seafood feast:

1. Scallop Crudo

"I like to start the meal with a dish of fresh, clean flavours," he says. "Our scallop crudo is a nice starter—simple and sophisticated." Crudo means "raw," so while the bay scallops aren't cooked, they are marinated in a mix of extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, and the secret ingredient—ginger beer—which adds sweetness. For colour, he chops in red bell peppers and chives before dusting the finished plate with Mediterranean sea salt.

2. Steamed Clams

Based on a traditional dish from Marche, this steamed clams recipe is known in Italy as Vongole Alla Pescatora. To its sauce—a combination of white wine, lemon juice, butter, and garlic—chef Kihanmahd adds a dose of Calabrian chile "which caters to the Southern Californian palate that's partial to hot spices," he explains. "It's my way of adding a contemporary twist to a classic."

3. Shrimp Scampi

In Venice, you'll recognize this dish by its traditional name: Scampi Alla Veneziana. Enveloping these prawns is a sauce similar to that of the steamed clams (above), but without the Calabrian chile.

4. Cozze Alla Tarantina

Cozze means mussels, and Tarantina is for Taranto, a province of the Puglia region that sits in the heel of Italy's boot. Shallow waters around this peninsula produce an abundance of mussels, which give the recipe its name.

5. Salmone Al Forno

"This is my version of New York's lox on a bagel," chef Kihanmahd says. "Instead of fresh tomatoes, I use sundried tomatoes; in place of onions, leeks; and the artichokes stand in for capers. As for a smoked salmon substitute, I oven roast a salmon filet. Hence the dish's name: Salmone Al Forno." If you desire a bagel substitute, a basket of daily baked foccacia accompanied by extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar is placed on every table, compliments of the house.

6. Mahi Mahi Livornese

Livornese sauce—comprised of tomatoes, olives, capers, white wine, and parsley—was conjured in Livorno, a Tuscan port city. It is typically paired with firm white fish, and this being California, Al Forno Caffe opts for Mahi Mahi given it is local to the nearby Pacific Ocean.

7. Branzino Al Forno

The final course of Branzino Al Forno (oven-roasted European sea bass) gets the hot treatment. "We bake ours in a pizza oven at 650 degrees Fahrenheit, which helps to blister the skin and give the flaky fish a slightly smoky flavor," the chef says. "Although this dish is not usually on the menu, we offer it as a special throughout the year." The head-to-tail presentation, a whole fish stuffed with rosemary, thyme, and lemon, makes for a beautiful (and Instagram-worthy) centerpiece to a lavish Seven Fishes feast.



FEAST-WORTHY WINE PAIRINGS

Good Italian food calls for good Italian wine. We asked the chef to spill his wine pairing secrets:

1. SCALLOPS with PROSECCO: Italians like to start a meal with something light and bubbly. Candoni Prosecco is a perfect palate cleanser.

2. CLAMS, and SHRIMP, with GAVI DI GAVI: I recommend a bright, slightly acidic white wine to cut through the buttery sauces of both these dishes. My favourite is Banfi Principessa Gavia.

3. MUSSELS with FIANO: Fiano is a grape grown in the Campania region. A full-bodied white like Villa Matilde Fiano Diavellino highlights the spiciness of the tomato sauce in this dish.

4 SALMON with SAUVIGNON BLANC: This is a classic pairing. We pour Pedroncelli's Sauvignon Blanc by the glass.

5. MAHI MAHI with CHIANTI: Our Livornese sauce is spiked with olives and capers, so a light red Chianti matches nicely. As the saying goes: "What grows together, goes together." That is, Livorno and the Chianti region are both located in Tuscany!

6. BRANZINO with CHARDONNAY: The crisp, citrusy notes of Tormaresca Chardonnay complement the lemon- and herb-infused flavours of our oven-roasted branzino. Tormaresca Chardonnay comes from the Puglia region, also known as the "wine barrel" of Italy.