



Panettone: The Story of Italy's Ubiquitous Christmas Cake

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments



Milan's Cathedral

Panettone translates as “a large loaf of bread”. Actually, it’s a large sweet bread cake with various creamy fillings, raisins and candied fruits; its dome’s covered with toppings of different flavors. *Panettone*’s origins probably date to the Roman Empire: when ancient Romans sweetened a type of leavened cake with honey. Centuries later, during the Renaissance, when bakers had permission to bake bread with wheat alone (not mixed with less noble cereals) only at Christmastime, it became a Milanese Christmas specialty and the legends of its origins are set there.

In fact, as Milanese food blogger and author of a monograph about *panettone* Stanislao Porzio tells us, “*panettone* is first documented by a manuscript conserved in the city’s Ambrosian Library. It goes back to the 1470s and is authored by Giorgio Valagussa, the preceptor of the House of Sforza. In the text, a dialogue between the master and his pupils is narrated about the Ceremony of the Log that had been celebrated by the family of the Duke since time immemorial. On the night of 24th December, a huge log was placed in the fireplace. This log was supposed to burn until Epiphany. The *pater familias*, after having sprinkled it with wine and set it ablaze, cut from each of ‘three great loaves of wheat bread’, a symbol of the Trinity, a ‘particle’ (Valagussa uses precisely this Eucharistic term), which was to be set aside until the following year. Of course all the remaining slices were distributed among those present.”

Panettone’s next literary reference dates to Cherubini’s Milanese-Italian dictionary of 1839 under the entry, Porzio tells us, *Panatton* or *Panatton de Natal*: “A kind of bread garnished with butter, eggs, sugar and raisins or sultanas.” These pre-modern *panettoni* were without candied fruit and, because they lacked yeast, were flat. Again, according to Porzio, the first recipe that clearly speaks of yeast “is handed down by Gian Felice Luraschi in his *Nuovo cuoco milanese*

economico (New Milanese Economic Cook) from 1853.

As for legends, the most popular one concerns a nobleman named Ughetto who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of a baker named Toni. Her name was Adalgisa. Ughetto's family opposed his love for the humble baker's daughter and blocked their marriage. It happened that Adalgisa's father's bakery boy fell ill suddenly so poor Adalgisa had to work even longer hours. Soon, it became nearly impossible for the two love birds to find the time to meet. Deeply frustrated, Ughetto decided to work incognito as the bakery boy's substitute. Unfortunately, the bakery had hit hard times; another bakery had opened nearby and was luring away customers. As a result, Adalgisa and her father sold less and less bread and were making little money. Ughetto decided to modify the bread's recipe by adding more butter and sugar. However, there was no money to buy the new ingredients so he sold some of his hawks (He was Duke Ludovico Maria Sforza's hawk breeder). The money he received was enough to buy the necessary butter and sugar. His recipe was successful and soon the business started gaining customers. Happy that Adalgisa was in better spirits, Ughetto added candied citron and eggs to his recipe. During the upcoming Christmas season, he added raisins to make the recipe even more festive. He hadn't only invented a delicious bread which everyone in town praised, but, as a result, he and Adalgisa were soon able to marry and live happily ever after.

A similar story recounts that the invention of *panettone* wasn't the brainchild of Ughetto, but of Sister Ughetta. She lived in a poor convent with other young nuns: their upcoming Christmas promised to be miserable. But all of a sudden the situation changed: Sister Ughetta came up with a new cake. She had traced a cross on its dough with a knife. When the cupola-shaped crust was cooked and golden, the cross opened up, creating those bumps still visible today in traditional artisanal *panettoni*.

The third legend also goes back to the reigns of the Visconti and Sforza families, when Milan was at its peak of prosperity during the 15th century. The story takes place at a large banquet held for the Duke on Christmas night. The chef had prepared a wonderful dessert, but it had burned up. A scullery boy named Toni came to the desperate chef's rescue. Toni explained that he'd made his Christmas cake for his family and friends using the chef's leftovers. He offered his cake to the chef for the Duke's banquet. The chef had no choice but to accept Toni's generous offer. The dessert proved a huge success, and, when the Duke congratulated the chef, the chef gave credit where credit was due. Hence the bread was named after the scullery boy Toni.

Throughout the ages this "tall leavened fruitcake" has made cameo appearances in the arts. It's depicted in a 16th-century painting by Peter Bruegel the Elder and is mentioned in a contemporary recipe book written by Bartolomeo Scappi (c. 1500-70), personal chef to six popes. The first recorded association of *panettone* with Christmas can be found in the writings of 18th-century philosopher Pietro Verri. He refers to it as "*Pane di Tono*" ("luxury cake").



During the 19th-century *panettone*'s popularity gradually spread through Northern Italy and then abroad to North and South America thanks to the immigrants. For example, Lombards who went to Argentina and Brazil brought their love

of *panettone* with them, and so *panettone* is enjoyed at Christmastime with hot cocoa or liquor, now a mainstream tradition in those countries. In the early 20th century, two enterprising Milanese bakers began to produce *panettone* all over Italy. One was Angelo Motta, who in 1919 revolutionized traditional *panettone*. By adding yeast, he gave it its tall domed shape and now-familiar light texture by making the dough rise three times for almost 20 hours before cooking. Motta's recipe was adapted around 1925 by another baker, Gioacchino Alemagna, who also gave his name to a popular brand that still exists today. The stiff competition between the two bakers led to *panettone*'s industrial production. Nestlé took over the two brands in the late 1990s, but Bauli, an Italian bakery company headquartered in Verona, has since acquired Motta and Alemagna from Nestlé.

After the Second World War *panettone* had become affordable to everyone and, again thanks to the immigrants to Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium, gained popularity in Northern Europe. Today Italian bakers produce some 117 million *panettoni*



Gioacchino Alemagna with Pope Paul VI



Alemagna's assembly line



Angelo Motta

every Christmas.

In Milan and Rome for the widest selection both industrial and artisanal, go to Eataly, the megastore for Italy's top-quality gourmet delights. For the best artisanal selection in Milan go to Pasticceria Marchesi, Pasticceria Migliavacca, Pasticceria Martesana, Pavè, and Cova, the historical café.

Nota Bene: Although it became a predominantly a Christmas tradition at the turn of the last century, *panettone* can be eaten at any time of year and at every meal and snack, best with milk, coffee, or *cappuccino* at breakfast, or after lunch or supper with moscato or other sweet wines. It's at its best when slightly warmed.

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