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Maritozzo: Rome's Only Native-Son Sweet Gets Its Own Celebration

From ancient to modern, sweet to savory, as lovers' pledge or phallic symbol, the "maritozzo" is laden with history and tradition

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



The maritozzo

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Maritozzo Day will be celebrated on December 7. The press conference to present the third edition of Maritozzo Day, founded by Gabriele Lupo and Silvia Pontarelli of the food-blog Tavole Romane, was held on November 26th at the Art Hotel, Via Margutta 56, the artists' street just off Piazza di Spagna. This location was chosen because it was the first hotel to serve maritozzi at breakfast.

While *gelato*, *panettone*, *cannoli*, *torrone*, and *tiramisù* are beloved worldwide, other Italian sweets are less well-known and even regional. Some examples are

bûnet in Piemonte, *sbrisolona* in Lombardy, *torta Barozzi* in Emilia-Romagna, *tozzetti* in Tuscany and Umbria, *sfogliatelle*, *babà*, *struffoli* and *la pastiera* in Naples, *seadas* in Sardinia, and *cassata* and *granite* of multiple flavors in Sicily. In Rome for centuries now the local sweet is the *maritozzo*, under-publicized outside *Caput Mundi*.

As I wrote in my article about this year's **Tiramisù World Championship**, many Italian foods are celebrated on a specific day of the year. For the past three years *Maritozzo Day* is December 7, so now is the perfect timing for its publicity.



Gabriele Lupo, Gigi Cartoni and Silvia Pontarelli_

The press conference to present the third edition of *Maritozzo Day*, founded by Gabriele Lupo and Silvia Pontarelli of the food-blog *Tavole Romane*, was held on November 26th at the Art Hotel, Via Margutta 56, the artists' street just off Piazza di Spagna. This location was chosen because the Art Hotel was the first hotel to serve *maritozzi* at breakfast.

At the start of the conference the scholar, home poet, and city guide Gigi Cartoni,

nicknamed “Er Salustro” after the famous 19th-century Roman poet **Trilussa**, gave a brief history in Roman dialect or ***Romanesco***, of this soft bun of oblong shape, a kind of bread traditionally made of flour, eggs, olive oil, salt, and honey, and then “dressed-up” for special occasions.

In ancient times “this loaf” was baked and then seasoned with honey and raisins. Its name derives from the Latin, *mas*, *maris* meaning man or companion/co-worker. The farmer’s fast food, it gave them enough energy to work all day in the fields without returning home for lunch.

During the Middle Ages these loaves were one of the few “church approved” “treat” foods that the Romans were permitted to eat while fasting during Lent, known in doctrine as “*Extra Horam*” or “Extra Hour”. Their filling of raisins, pine nuts, and candied fruit made them a kind of “sweet fix”. Hence it was nicknamed “Santo Maritozzo”.

Recipes for such loaves started to appear in cookbooks in the 1700’s, but it wasn’t until the 1800’s that the “loaves” were given their current name of *maritozzo*, an affectionate dialectic version of the Italian word *marito* or husband.

One tradition claims that the girls of a neighborhood held a contest of who could make the best *maritozzo*. The winner was then sure to be courted by the most eligible bachelor. Another more plausible story was that on March 1 or the first Friday of that month, not on modern Valentine’s Day, a girl’s fiancé would give his bride-to-be this pastry, its icing on top depicting two pierced hearts. Inside he concealed a gift: a ring or other small gold object.

In his sonnet “Er padre de li Santi” (1832), another Roman poet, Gioachino Belli (1791-1863) writing in dialect (he wrote 2279 such sonnets between 1824-46) compares the *maritozzo* to a phallus because of its elongated shape. He also called it “*Pan di Passerina*” or “Sparrow’s Bread”, probably in homage to the ancient Roman poet Catullus, and his euphemistic definition of the sparrow as a phallus. (Many of Belli’s sonnets were loosely translated by the British novelist, satirist and composer **Anthony Burgess** (1917-1993), who lived in Rome during

the first half of the 1970's).



Giggi Zanazzo. Wikipedia.org

Giggi Zanozzo (1860-1911), one of Belli's literary heirs and anthropologist, in his book *Usi e costumi del popolo Romano* (1907) described how priests risked choking on the huge number of *maritozzi* they stuffed into their mouths even while officiating at mass. Moreover, he recounts how during Lent it was a must to go to church and pray and then afterwards to make love and eat *maritozzi* (in both senses of the word.) Speaking of the *maritozzo's* relationship to love-making, Zanazzo writes in *romanesco*: “*Er primo pe’ li presciolosi, er zeconno pè gli sposi, er terzo pè ll’innammorati, e’r quarto pè li disperati*” or “the first one is for those in a hurry, the second for newlyweds, the third for lovers, and the fourth for the desperate.”

During the first half of the 20th century the *maritozzo*, baked not as a loaf but bun-size, was considered a pastry for the upper classes. The “in” pastry-bar was the historic *Caffè Greco*, founded in 1760 on elegant Via Condotti and now at risk of closing on January 8, 2020—at least temporarily due to an eviction notice because its owner, the ***Ospedale Israelitico***, wants to raise the management's rent of 17,000 euros per month to an unaffordable 150,000 euros.

After the Second World War, the “in” location moved to the Via Veneto and the *maritozzo* was split open and filled with whipped cream. Its other fillings, now both sweet and savory, date to 2017’s first Maritozzo Day.

This year’s event differs from the two earlier Maritozzo Days. For the first time it will be celebrated outside Rome, in cities throughout Italy: Milan, Turin, Brescia, Città di Castello, Viterbo, Siracusa and Trapani. Secondly, some of the participating health-concerned pastry chefs will color some of their *maritozzi* “*rosa*” or “pink” by adding red and dried fruits or other natural colorings, like beet juice, and seeds to unrefined flour, only a tiny amount of sugar or its natural substitutes, and no gluten or lactose. Thus, people with chronic health problems like diabetes or cancer patients undergoing treatments can enjoy them.

Thirdly and most importantly, in order to participate it’s necessary to download a personal coupon from **the website**, where there’s a list of the over 30 Roman participants and the ingredients of their many proposed fillings, as well as a map of their locations, so that you can personalize your itinerary. Most are pastry shops and coffee bars, but some are restaurants including “**All’Oro**” with one Michelin star, which will offer *maritozzi* to their guests as dessert in the evening, even though *maritozzi* are a breakfast dish.

Among the non-traditional whipped cream but sweet fillings on offer will be “Black Forest”, “Sacher” and “Oreo”. When it comes to savory, many fillings are based on Roman specialties are: *spaghetti alla carbonara*, *coratella* and artichokes, *coda alla vaccinara*, *mortadella* and *puntarelle*, and *trippa*. Some fillings will make their debut for the occasion; others are still secret.

Upon presentation of the downloaded coupon, each *maritozzo*— for as long as the supply lasts –(2018 counted over 5,000 customers), will cost one euro, which will then be donated to the Breast Unit of the **Fatebenefratelli Hospital** on Rome’s Tiber Island. This will go towards the purchase of cold caps to reduce the hair loss of those undergoing chemotherapy.

For those who are not in Italy but who would like to contribute anyway: the IBAN is IT27Y010050320600000002514, the *causale* or motive: Maritozzo Day per

acquisto casco chemioterapia or Maritozzo Day for the purchase of cold caps, and *intestato* or beneficiary: Sezione Onlus della Casa Generalizia dell'ordine Ospedaliero San Giovanni di Dio-Fatebenefratelli.

NB: Whether you are a resident of Rome or a future visitor, be sure to print the list of participants so that you can plan your *maritozzi* itinerary after December 7.

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Italian Hours

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