

Torrone's Story: Italy's Favorite Christmas Candy

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments



A 13th-century fresco of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who introduced *torrone* to Cremona,
photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

When and where was *torrone* first created? No one knows for certain. Some connoisseurs say Persia; others Arabia; and still others China. A clue lies in its list of ingredients, which is short and sweet: almonds, honey, sugar, and egg white, although other nuts (pistachios, walnuts and hazelnuts), candied fruits, and chocolate have been added more recently. Thus, no matter where its birthplace, *torrone* almost certainly reached Europe from the Middle East, whether it was thanks to the Crusaders or more likely earlier, through Arab traders in Ancient Rome. All versions of its name *turrón* in Spanish, *torró* in Catalan, *torrone* in Brazilian and Brazilian Portuguese besides Italian, *turrone* in Sardinian, *torrão* in European Portuguese, and *turon* in Tagalog, appear to have been derived from Latin *torrere* (to toast). Thus the modern confection probably originates from a Muslim recipe, prevalent in parts of Islamic Spain and known as *turun*. It's certainly popular at Christmastime in Spain, particularly in Alicante and in Toledo, as well as in countries formerly under the Spanish Empire, particularly in Latin America, but in the Philippines too. However, a similar confection named *cupedia* or *cuperto* was marketed in ancient Rome and noted by ancient Roman writers: the historian Livy, the poet Martial, the grammarian Aulus Gellius and playwright Plautus.

Today Italian *torrone* is particularly popular all over Sicily, especially Condorelli's brightly-wrapped *torroncini*; in Bagnara and Taurianova in Calabria; in Benevento near Naples, best at

Fabbriche Riunite Torrone di Benevento or *Premiato Fabbrica Cav. Innocenzo Borrillo* in nearby San Marco di Cavoti; in Abruzzo best at *Le Sorelle Nurzia* in L'Aquila and at the *Pasticceria Lullo* in Guardiagrele where its Greek-influenced recipe, known as " *torrone Aelion*", includes candied fruit and cinnamon; as well as throughout Sardinia, where it's cloyingly sweet and very chewy; and Cremona in Lombardy, birthplace of Stradivarius, so frequently made there in the shape of violins.



Statue of Stradivarius photo credit: Lucy Gordan



Torrone violin photo credit: Lucy Gordan

Today in fact one of Cremona's most special sights in the Violin Museum founded in 2012. Cremona also is home to several music schools and 180 *liutai* or violin-makers from all over the world. Through www.tursimocremona.it it's possible to book a visit to one and learn all about the steps of their profession from choosing the woods to their finished product.



The Violin Museum photo credit: Wikipedia

Every mid-November for the past 25 years a festival in Cremona celebrates this delectable sweet. This year *La Festa del Torrone* took place from 12-20 November and counted over 400,000 visitors including me, a guest of Cremona Tourism. Next year's dates are 13-21

November.

The first documents mentioning *torrone* in Cremona date to the reign of Holy Roman Emperor super-cultured multi-lingual Frederick II (r. 1220-1250) when Cremona was already one of northern Italy's most powerful cities. Frederick II, whose birthday was December 26 hence likely *torrone*'s Christmas connection, visited here 16 times with his entourage of Sicilian cooks well versed in Arab culture. However, their recipe did not include egg white, so it was crunchier.

Instead local lore claims that *torrone*'s debut was in 1441 as a tower-shaped dessert created for the marriage on October 25th in the Abbey of San Sigismondo of Francesco Sforza (1401-66), one of 7 illegitimate sons of the *condottiere* Muzio Sforza, and the also illegitimate yet very intellectual Maria Bianca Visconti (1425-1468), a passionate hunter and lover of horses.



Francesco Sforza photo credit:
Wikipedia

The court's Sicilian pastry chefs were inspired by the *Torrazzo* or the brick bell tower next door to the Cathedral.

Built between 1230-1309, at some 112 m. tall, it's one of the tallest still-integral bell towers of medieval Europe and today the symbol of Cremona. Every year on the *Festa*'s first Sunday afternoon, the wedding is reenacted with a procession of musicians, *sbandieratori*, and ladies-in-waiting who accompany Maria to the Cathedral where Francesco awaits her. For the strong-at-heart, again through www.turismocremona.it it's possible to buy a ticket to

climb the 250 steps to the top.

One of Italy's most appreciated *torroni* is Cremona's native-son Sperlari, founded by Enzo Sperlari in 1836 and official supplier to the Italian Royal Family. Although since 2017 Sperlari has been owned by the German company Katjes International GmbH, its *torrone* is still made in Cremona. Still a major sponsor for the *Festa*, its flagship atmospheric 19th-century store remains located on Via Solferino 25, tel. 011-39-0372-22346), www.sperlari.it, for online orders: www.shop.sperlari1836.com.



Bianca Maria Visconti photo
credit: Wikipedia



"Il Torrazzo", the symbol of Cremona
photo credit: Lucy Gordan



Torrone tower like 1441 wedding cake
Photo credit Lucy Gordan

Cremona's homemade *torroni* can be ordered online from *Enoteca Cremona*, (Via Platina 18, 011-39-0372-451771), www.enotecacremona.it (click on *specialità* for its scrumptious *torta torrone "Ad Libitum"*), e-mail: enotecacremona@gmail.com or from *Pasticceria Fieschi*, founded in 1867, Via Lanaoli 24, 011-39-0372-32495, www.fieschi1867.com, e-mail: info@fieschi1867.com or from



Traditional Cremonese Torrone for sale photo credit:
Lucy Gordan



Sperlari Delivery Truck, photo credit: Lucy Gordan

chocolatier *Tosca Cremona* (Via Monteverdi 34, San Vito-26011 Castelbutnano ed Uniti (Cremona), 011-39-0374-374-361386) only www.toscacremona.it, e-mail: info@toscacremona.it.

In addition to Cremona's homemade torroni, Sicily's homemade *torroncini* can be ordered from online from two pastry shops in Catania, *I Dolci di*

Nonna Vicenza (Piazza San Placido 7, Palazzo Biscari, tel 011-39-095-715849),

www.dolcidinonnavicenza.it, e-mail: info@dolcidinonnavicenza.it, and “*Savia*”, in business since 1897, (Via Etnea 302, tel. 011-39-095-316915, www.savia.it, e-mail: savia@savia.it. The Italian varieties of *torrone* differ from the Spanish ones because they use a lower proportion of nuts in the confection. Traditional versions from Cremona range widely in texture (*morbido*, soft and chewy, to *duro*, hard and brittle) and in flavor (at the many white-tented stands in Cremona’s many piazzas I counted several: citrus fruits, limoncello, rum, black cherry, coffee, coco, raspberry and chocolate, coconut, blueberry, marron glacé, liquorice, and vanilla, added to the traditional nougat (English for *torrone*) and many contained whole hazelnuts, walnuts, and pistachios as well as the traditional almonds. Some were also dipped in chocolate.

Torrone di Benevento goes by its historic name *Cupedia*, which signifies the crumbly version made with hazelnuts. The softer version is made only with almonds. The Torrone di Benevento, considered to be “The Boot”’s oldest, predates Roman times. Today it’s very popular in the territories of Samnium and differs only marginally from the varieties of Torrone di Cremona. Thanks to Frederick II?

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