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## A fish tale

by **Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco**

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To Anthony Pucciarello, executive chef at Luce Restaurant in Caldwell, nothing says Christmas Eve like the 30 pounds of octopus he recently tossed with celery, basil, onions and olives. Unless it's a panful of smelts, a writhing eel, or practically any other type of seafood.

Growing up in an Italian household in Belleville, he recalled, "We never had meat on Christmas Eve. It was always seven fish -- sometimes more."

Those feasts of the seven fishes were spent in the company of an extended family that included about 30 first cousins, with Pucciarello's aunts Barbara and Gloria doing the cooking at their Bloomfield home.

"The seven fishes can be done in a variety of different ways -- baccalà , eel, fried smelts, flounder, pasta with anchovies, stuffed calamari, seafood salad," said Pucciarello. "The traditional things were the inexpensive fish -- eel and the smelts, which was bait to most people."

Over the years, his family's holiday menu has been adapted to include such dishes as clams oreganata and lobster ravioli. Yet tradition remains important to the 39-year-old father of two. Each year he and his partners at Luce, Joseph Capasso and Dino Vitigliano, hold a three-course seven (or more) fishes Christmas Eve dinner. The restaurant's 147 seats have long been booked -- twice -- for the night.

Earlier this month, Pucciarello prepared 10 fish dishes for the annual Seven Fishes Dinner sponsored by the Center for Italian and Italian-American Culture, a nonprofit organization based in Cedar Grove, for 80 of its members. "It's an opportunity for them to gather together at the beginning of the season, to share something that, for sure, has Italian roots," said Daniela



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Octopus salad is just one of the dishes prepared by Anthony Pucciarello at Luce in Caldwell.

Puglielli, a native Italian who serves as the Center's director.

The precise origin of this tradition, however, can be as difficult to pin down as a Christmas eel. What's certain is that in Italy and other predominantly Catholic nations, fish is popularly served for Christmas Eve because the holiday used to be a day of abstinence from meat. Moreover, fish was an ancient symbol of Christianity. The letters of the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, was an acrostic for *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter* -- Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

Though seafood tends to be more commonly consumed than meat throughout the Italian peninsula, in families whose Italian ancestors lived in inland communities, the only fish on the table come Christmas Eve might be *baccalà*, cod that's been dried and salted to withstand long-distance travel to even the most remote hill town.

Where seafood was plentiful and, thus, inexpensive, the number of fish might multiply -- just as in the miraculous gospel story -- according to local custom: to seven (one for each of the seven sacraments or the gifts of the Holy Spirit), nine (three times three, an ancient mystical number, which also represents the Trinity), 11 (for the 12 apostles minus Judas), or 13 (for the 12 apostles plus Jesus). Whereas the number 13 is considered unlucky here, in Italy it is a lucky number, and on holidays revelers are encouraged to taste 13 different things for luck, noted Puglielli. In many areas of Italy, however, the concept of eating seven or any pre-ordained number of fish for Christmas Eve is unheard of.

"Each little town has so many different traditions. The locations closer to the sea will more likely have fish," said Puglielli. And when it comes to tracing the development of the seven fishes dinner tradition, it seems all roads lead to Italy's most famous city by the bay, Naples, from whose port thousands of Italians sailed for a new life in America.

"I think it's a Neapolitan tradition which died and resurrected in the United States," said Anna Teresa Callen, a cooking instructor from Italy's Abruzzo region who lived in Naples from age 12 to 17 and whose latest book is "My Love for Naples" (Hippocrene, \$35). "In Naples, we never counted the fish. It was fish, of course, for Christmas Eve, but the most important one was the *capitone* -- the conger eel. That was a must." In her book she wrote, "My father used to buy the eels alive, and we kept them in the bathtub where the eels would swim happily, unaware of their destiny" -- which was to be dressed in white wine and olive oil and roasted on a spit.

Growing up in downtown Jersey City in the mid 20th century, recalled Tony Martignetti of Lake Hopatcong, a second-generation American whose ancestors came from Florence and the provinces of Bari and Avellino, "we had fish -- sometimes eight, sometimes six, whatever was available."

After Christmas Eve midnight Mass, his extended family would gather for an elaborate meal that would last until three in the morning. In addition to the requisite seafood, there would be an array of vegetables, breads and cheeses. But there also would be meat, for his father owned butcher shops in Jersey City and Hoboken. "That was the irony of it: My father never ate fish," said Martignetti.

The Christmas Eve (actually early Christmas Day) fish dinners of those days centered around cod, eel, octopus, calamari, mussels and clams. "Every fish

other than my father -- loved that stuff," said Martignetti. Nowadays, his sister, Victoria Ross, strives to maintain the revered family tradition while appealing to the newer generation's taste for shrimp, crab and lobster. Her Christmas Eve feast, said Martignetti, who's 71, "takes me back to when I was a young boy."

And therein lies the essence of the celebration -- and explains why Pucciarello will not seat anyone after 8 p.m. at his restaurant on Christmas Eve. He's got to get over to his aunts, Barbara and Gloria.

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