**IIA Carducci - Venturina Terme Italy**

In Italy the figure of Santa Claus derives from the legend of Saint Nicholas, the protector of children: in some countries in Northern Italy the little ones receive gifts on 6th December, the day on which this Saint is celebrated. In other areas, for example in some Northern cities such as Bergamo and Verona, or even in Sicily, in Southern Italy, children receive gifts on December 13th: on the 12th, in the evening, a bowl with flour is prepared for the donkey , a cup of coffee for Saint Lucy and some bread with biscuits for her coachman.

However, most children anxiously await the arrival of Santa Claus on the night between 24 and 25 December, when the gifts could magically appear under the Christmas tree. During the Christmas period there are many traditions that vary according to the regions. For example, in Puglia, a region in Southern Italy, “cartellate” is prepared, a dessert of fried dough with honey and vin cotto, the “7-sfoglie pizza”, made with almonds, raisins, chocolate, pine seeds and many other ingredients. In Calabria, another region of Southern Italy, from December 8th they begin to prepare “zeppole”, dough cut into large pieces and fried; in seaside towns they have a salted anchovy inside them.

People also cook typical desserts such as Pitte di San Martino which are biscuits from the province of Reggio Calabria, made with honey, raisins and dried figs. In Reggio Calabria they are called Petrali, known by various names in the villages of the province (for example in the local Pitte or Sammartini dialects), they are generally in the shape of a stuffed panzerotto. Another dessert is the nacatole also known as nucatole: they are a typical fried dessert from Calabria and prepared during the Christmas period. The traditional shape is woven, just like a cradle (“naca” in Calabrian dialect), which reminds the cradle of Baby Jesus.
On Christmas Eve, in Abruzzo, a region in central Italy, people usually eat only fish, generally stockfish and cod, while as desserts they prepare fried “tortelli” filled with jam, nuts and honey.

In Tuscany, the region in which we live, traditionally pipers walk through the town streets, in the morning or in the evening, for all the days of the novena and Christmas, playing popular Christmas songs. Their name comes from the bagpipe, the instrument they play, made of hollow olive reeds inserted in a leather bag; it reminds the ancient tradition of the mountain shepherds. Even today the musicians wear the long black cloak of the shepherds. In our area, the typical Christmas menu is the following: crostini and cured meats, lasagne and tortelli alla maremmana, roast with baked potatoes and an avalanche of Christmas desserts such as cantuccini with Vin Santo, cavallucci, ricciarelli, panforte and various chocolates. In the evening you can’t miss the classic meat broth with tortellini. Between lunch and dinner we play bingo, cards and other board games. In Abbadia San Salvatore, on Mount Amiata, in Tuscany, on the night of December 24, big piles of wood up to six meters high, called “torches” are lit; it’s a tradition of probable pagan origin which was intended as an invitation to the Sun to return to shine as before the winter solstice.

Throughout Italy, a tree is decorated with various decorations. Usually a nativity scene is also made either under the tree or nearby to remember the moment in which Jesus came into the world inside a cave surrounded by his parents, Joseph and Mary. Tradition dictates that the figurine of Jesus is placed in the nativity scene on the night between 24 and 25 December.

On January 6th, however, the Befana is celebrated. It is represented as an old lady with a hunchback and a crooked nose, dressed in rags, who rides a broom and dirty with soot because she enters houses through the chimney. On the night between 5 and 6 January, she leaves sweets in the hanging stockings for children who have been good, while he leaves pieces of coal for those who have been less good. It is a custom that means the arrival of the Three Wise Men at the Bethlehem cave to bring gifts of gold, myrrh and incense to Jesus. Epiphany is the celebration that closes Christmas holidays.