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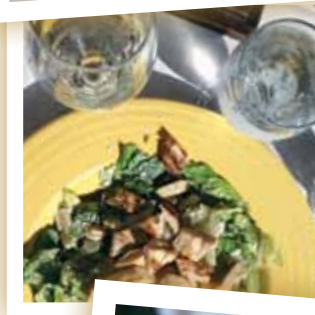
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# Feast of the 7 Fishes

(& other holiday tales)



Local inspirations add sparkle & spice to international holiday traditions in Maine.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Christmas Eve is by far, without exception, our single busiest day of the year,” says Nick Alfiero at Portland’s Harbor Fish Market. “It’s crazy. We have people directing traffic; in the past, we’ve hired policemen outside.”

### I MEAN, WHO’S COUNTING?

The feast of the seven fishes is an Italian Christmas Eve tradition, but at Harbor Fish it’s more a point of departure. “It’s not a rule, but it’s a Catholic tradition not to eat meat on Christmas Eve. Growing up, my mother might treat us to *baccalà* (salt cod), soak it for three days, and make a salad. Or, she might stuff calamari or serve it with red sauce and linguine. We always had fresh eel—even my Irish wife developed a taste for it. Then we

started to branch out with baked stuffed shrimp and clams casino, but it was never strictly seven.”

These days, at Harbor Fish, “I couldn’t tell you seven *anything*. People buy absolutely anything and everything for Christmas Eve dinner. From gray sole to lobster to salmon. Oysters, for oyster stew, and lobsters for lobster stew are big. In the old days it was the squid and eel, but I’ve seen it more and more over the years—there isn’t a fresh fish that doesn’t sell. And nowadays, seafood’s not just for Christmas Eve, it goes into Christmas Day, too. It’s a real challenge to get enough fresh in here, because we won’t put out the frozen.”

Harbor Fish’s understanding of this holiday is so legendary, “every year, one family

drives all the way from Brooklyn, New York, on Christmas Eve to get the freshest seafood—eels, periwinkles, *baccalà*, smelts, shrimp, and lobster,” Nick’s brother Ben Alfiero says. “It blows me away.”

Just down Commercial Street at Browne Trading Company, the very first festive thing we see walking in the door is a display case of Maine-raised Belon oysters lined up on crushed ice in front of a bowl of gigantic, shiny sea scallops. “A lot of our customers order whole sides of salmon because they

**They’re here to help you plan your holiday feast (above, clockwise from bottom left): Bogumila Bogusha at Bogusha’s Café and Polish food shop; Kelsey Elliott, conversant with caviar and Camembert at Browne Trading; Nick Alfiero surrounded by seafood at Harbor Fish Market; and Liz Demers, manager of Mittapheap international market. All of these shops are in Portland.**

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: LAURA BRESLIN(2); MOIRA QUINN; LAURA BRESLIN



## HUNGRY EYE



cure their own *gravlax* at home for holiday parties. That and our house-smoked finnan haddie are big sellers," says Kelsey Elliott, in a watch cap and white fishmonger coat as she takes orders behind her refrigerator display case. "We sell a lot of seafood and cheese at the holidays. People like small, whole wheels of cheese for parties.

"Don't miss our annual Christmas champagne and caviar tasting on December 14," she says. "We open up a few tins of the good stuff so you can try them and pick out what you like for New Year's."

**Harbor Fish Market, 9 Custom House Wharf, 775-0251.**

**Browne Trading Company, 262 Commercial Street, 775-7560.**

### FRANCO SOUL FOOD

"Pork pies are *huge*," says Kari Grant of Grant's Bakery in Lewiston. "The traditional French-Canadian *tourtières* we bake year-round become a hot commodity during the holidays." They sell "up to 2,500 of them during Christmas week. We don't have enough refrigeration space, so we rent a refrigerated 18-wheeler for our parking lot!"

The pies' filling is "100-percent pork, with just a hint of mashed potatoes." The 10-inch pie is \$11.40, and there's an individual size for \$3.80. "It's busy at Christmas. People stop by to pick up meat pies and desserts all day long. So just remember, when we're out we're out."

**Grant's Bakery, 525 Sabattus St., Lewiston. 783-2226.**

### SCANDINAVIA IN DEERING

"We'll sell every single one of these before Christmas," says Susan Lund Iverson, hauling one of many 3.3-pound white tubs of preserved lingonberries down from a shelf of Swedish jams and preserves, including gooseberry and cloudberry, in the Simply Scandinavian Foods shop on Stevens Avenue. "Cloudberry is a superfood; they're full of anti-oxidants." She circles a display of licorice candies from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands—such a Scandinavian staple there are even *uten sukka* (sugar-free) varieties. Holding up a familiar yellow bag of red Swedish Fish candy, Iverson laughs. "It's American, but the kids like them."

"Look at these beautiful cheeses and herring." She slides open the refrigerator case. *Nokkel-ost* is cheese fragrantly studded with caraway seeds. "We just got a shipment of Christmas food. *Peppar kakor* are spice cookies and gingersnaps in tins decorated with snowflakes and reindeer. She raises the lid of a freezer chest to reveal frozen Swedish meatballs, vacuum-packed *lutefisk* (large filets of cured cod), and plump sausage links of *korv*, a holiday sausage of pork and potato. "People just love these things at Christmas. And I have five bakers delivering breads, cheesecake, and pastries."

**Simply Scandinavian Foods, 469 Stevens Avenue, Portland, 874-6759.**

Food and drink for holiday feasting is found all around town including, clockwise from top left: Maine Belon oysters at Browne Trading; *prosecco* at Micucci's; fresh filets at Browne Trading; imported berry jams at Simply Scandinavian Foods; and chocolate stout cakes at the Rosemont Market. Polish pierogies are on the menu at Bogusha's Café; challah loaves glow at Standard Baking; and *panettone*, the luxurious, imported Italian fruitcake, turns up everywhere, including Morse's in Waldoboro and Micucci's in Portland; it's also made fresh at some bakeries.

### HOLIDAY BAKING

Close your eyes and inhale the fragrance. "Our chocolate stout cake's made with Gritty's Black Fly Stout," says Atticus Naylor at Rosemont's Brighton Avenue store. Rosemont Markets' baker Scott Anderson adds *stollen* to his line of richer treats, such as glossy braided challah loaves and fresh ginger molasses cake.

"We make a good amount of *panettone*, but it doesn't hurt to order ahead," says Victoria Levesque at Standard Baking Co. on Commercial Street. "We use raisins, orange zest, candied orange, and there's some rum in there—we bag them up to look pretty. We put raisins in the challah for Hanukka. Our *stollen*'s got dried cherries, dried pears, and dried cranberries, and then we make things like sage-onion biscuits for big dinners."

Portland's Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church holds a huge holiday bake sale every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. "*Baklava*, *finikia* (walnut cookies), and *paximathia* (biscotti) are some of the sweets,



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and we have *spanakopita* and *vasilopita* (Basil's bread) for the Epiphany (January 6)," says Father Sarantidis, the church's priest. These are all made by talented parish volunteers, and this is a real opportunity for a taste of Greek home cooking.

But if you missed the sale this year, you can find fresh *spanakopita* and a selection of sweets including *baklava* at Lakonia, the shop for Greek food and products in Saco hailed for its delicious imported Pelopponesian olive oil, olives, and herbs. Lakonia has expanded its offerings and now also carries a full menu of prepared foods such as *moussaka*, also made by their Greek pastry baker; in the fridge case you'll find *loukaniko* sausages, bright with spices and a hint of orange zest. **Rosemont Market, 580 Brighton Avenue, 774-8129; Standard Baking, 75 Commercial Street, 773-2112; and Holy Trinity, 133 Pleasant St., 774-0281. Lakonia, 575 Main St., Saco, 282-4002.**

### POLISH OASIS

"At the holidays, people want walnut and poppy-seed roulades, cheesecake, and streusel," says Bogumila Bogusha at her cozy combination cafe and imported food shop.

"There's a Polish community of about a thousand around here. But I drive down to the really big Polish community in Worcester, Massachusetts to get fresh baked goods. Everyone wants ham and Polish sausage at Christmastime." She shows off jars of imported herring from Poland in various sauc-

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Lobster *fra diavolo* takes a star turn at the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve.



es. “Most women take them home and make their own herring salads.” She has shelves of spicy Polish mustard spiked with horseradish, and horseradish made pink with shredded beets. The cafe serves two iconic national dishes: *bigos*, a rich stew of sausages, cabbage, and sauerkraut; and *pierogies*, the tender dumplings stuffed with potatoes, mushrooms, or cabbage.

**Bogusha's, 825 Stevens Avenue, Portland, 878-9618.**

**BAVARIAN DREAM**

Everyone thinks of Morse's Sauerkraut and its attendant store and café as German, with lots of kraut and sausages. “Oh, we're not just German,” says Jacquelyn Sawyer, who owns Morse's with her husband David Swetnam. “There's Austria and the Alps, and, really, we're all over Europe at the holidays. Everyone loves *stollen*,” she says of the rich holiday bread studded with nuts and dried and candied fruits. “We import that, but we have someone local bake our *springerle* [cookies made with traditional presses and molds depicting animals, flowers, and decorative patterns], and they are wonderful.”

She rattles off a dizzying list of cookies—*baumkuchen* (“tree cakes”), glazed *liebkekuchen*, and *pfeffernusse* (ginger snaps) among them—and “German Kinder chocolates, Austrian Reber chocolates, and the finest marzipan in the world,” which Sawyer says is from Lubec, Germany. “We have gingerbreads of all

sorts, too; Dutch gingerbreads are phenomenal. From Italy, we have the most beautiful *torrone*, *panettone* and *panforte*.” Even farther from the store's original German sauerkraut mission are the Walker mincemeats and shortbreads from England.

“You have to come. We get dressed up—it's like a Bavarian village here.”

**Morse's, 3856 Washington Road, North Waldboro, 832-5569.**

**INTERNATIONAL MARKET**

“Our clientele is Asian, but it also includes Central American, Caribbean, and African,” says Liz Demers, the manager at Mittapheap Market (pronounced *meat-a-fee-up*; the word means peace or friendship) at the foot of Portland's Munjoy Hill. “At the holiday—the lunar new year is in late January but it varies because it's lunar—the Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Cambodians like moon cakes.” These are pastry rounds encasing sweetened red bean paste or mung beans; some are green tea flavored.

Mittapheap's aisles are as internationally diverse as the neighborhood the market serves. Dried *chiles de arbol* are stacked next to tiny, fiery dried Thai chili peppers. Crackling packets of skinny Asian rice noodles abut stacked tins of Goya brand sardines in oil and tomato sauce. “We try to respond to demand. If people ask us to get something, we try.”

The produce section has fresh cilantro, Thai basil, *habañero* peppers, Chinese broccoli, green papayas, and lemongrass stalks. Ma-

kara Meng, arranging a display of knobby Chinese eggplants, says, “At the holidays, our African customers ask for cassava and semolina flours, palm oil, goat meat, and the African eggplant called ‘garden eggs.’”

**Mittapheap Market, 61 Washington Avenue, 773-5523.**

**LITTLE ITALY ON INDIA**

“We bring in *panettone*, *torrone* in a lot of shapes, and Italian chocolate, amaretti cookies, jars of rum babas in syrup,” says Rick Micucci at Micucci Grocery in the East End. “Once a year we bring in beautiful, beautiful pastries fresh from the North End in Boston for delivery Christmas Eve—these have to be special-ordered in advance, but you can place your order right up to December 20. There's ricotta pies, napoleons, and what they call lobster-tail pastries. We get in a lot of dried salt cod for *baccalà*, and we put out big bins of really best-quality chestnuts for roasting.”

Gil Galli leads the way into the stock room, lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves of imported goods with exotic labels. “Christmas wine? First we get in a lot of Beaujolais Nouveau, and then *everyone* wants *prosecco*.” He opens the top carton on a stack of wine cartons and pulls out a special-occasion-pretty bottle of Jeio *prosecco*. “We'll go through a lot of this. It seems to be the one everyone wants.”

Just the thing to go with the seven fishes on Christmas Eve.

**Micucci Grocery, 45 India Street, Portland, 775-1854. ■**



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