

Panettone's Second Rising

In Milan, pastry chefs are reclaiming the fruitcake.

by SERENA RENNER
photographs by ANDREA WYNER

PASTICCERIA Cucchi is protective of its panettone.

The Milanese pastry shop has been baking the famous fruitcake—a traditional Italian Christmas treat—in a humble kitchen for more than 70 years. Laura Cucchi and her sister, Vittoria, whose grandparents founded the *pasticceria* in 1936, are thinking about expanding. But they fear that any change to the kitchen's microclimate or production volume could upset *il lievito madre*, the revered mother yeast they use to make panettone. "It's a very delicate decision," Laura says.

Pasticceria Cucchi's panettone is a deliciously fancy cry from the supermarket versions that emerge every holiday season in both Italy and the United States. It's pillowy and sweet, laced with high-quality vanilla, raisins, and chunks of

candied citrus—and so good the pasticceria makes it year-round. Customers might stop by the elegant shop on Corso Genova in Milan to eat a slice for breakfast or, on a warm summer night, order *pangelà*, a panettone-gelato sandwich, for dessert.

"Artisan panettone is completely different," Laura says, "in the taste, in the perfume, in the satisfaction you get when you eat it."

Panettone is thought to have originated in the 1400s as a wheat bread made for religious celebrations. Over the centuries, the bread evolved into a sweet cake that requires a painstaking 36 to 48 hours to make. It all begins with the mother yeast, which must be refreshed with flour and water three times a day, for much of the year. Bakers take a piece of the yeast and work it into a dough made from flour, egg yolks, butter, and sugar. (By Italian law, any cake labeled panettone must





Panettone dough rises (far right) and the baked loaves cool (right) in the kitchen of Pasticceria Cucchi.



3 More Places to Try Panettone in Milan

LA BOUTIQUE DEL DOLCE

Achille Zoia, sometimes called the “father of modern panettone,” makes a honey-infused cake flecked with cocoa, hazelnuts, almonds, and chocolate chips.
laboutiquedeldolce.it

PASTICCERIA BUSNELLI

This pasticceria practices *in corda*, an ancient method of yeast preparation. Try the Giallo Milano, made with all-yellow ingredients (saffron, candied lemon, ginger) in a nod to the color of Milan’s old homes and the city’s famous saffron risotto.
pasticceriaabusnelli.it

PASTICCERIA MARTESANA MILANO

In a modern space outfitted with black and white photos of midcentury bakers making panettone, sample the one Enzo Santoro bakes with chocolate and ginger or the version with pineapple and pine nuts.
martesanamilano.com

adhere to strict ratios of these ingredients as well as of raisins and candied fruits, which are added at the end.) Once the mixture is ready, it’s kneaded into a ball using a circular shaping technique called *pirlatura*. Finally, the dough is placed in a paper mold (known as a *pirottino*) that helps the cake achieve a tall, domed shape as it bakes. To prevent the finished panettone from collapsing, it is speared and hung upside down to cool.

The industrial panettone that most of us have come to know, and regift, grew out of a rivalry between two Milanese bakers, Angelo Motta and Gino Alemagna. “At the beginning of the 1920s, there was a panettone, either Motta or Alemagna, on every Italian Christmas table,” says Stanislaw Porzio, author of *Il Panettone*, the most complete book on the subject. “The Italians divided their loyalties between the two companies as if they were choosing between two soccer teams.”

As the bakers’ reach expanded, quality suffered. Aside from the cakes made by a handful

of stalwarts such as the Cucchis, factory panettone reigned—that is, until the early 2000s, when Italian pastry chefs began to embrace the classic cake once more, and to reinvent it.

New versions from intrepid artisans now feature everything from regional nuts and berries to chocolate and limoncello cream. Luxury brands, including Prada and LVMH (the conglomerate behind such names as Louis Vuitton, Dior, and Marc Jacobs), have even acquired venerable Milanese pasticcerias that specialize in panettone.

In addition to writing about the cake, Porzio has launched a festival, Re (or “King”) Panettone, to raise the standards of ingredients and expertise as well as to discourage the use of preservatives and additives commonly found in mass-produced panettone.

“Panettone is like pizza,” Porzio says. “There is the original panettone, like there is the original pizza margherita, but now there are also many different tastes.” 