



CHRISTMAS DAY in every country of the world where the great festival is solemnised is more or less associated with feasting and a general feeling of conviviality, and although the Christmas dinner is not quite such a solemn thing in sunny Italy as in England and Germany, still the natives of this fair land are by no means behindhand in their appreciation of the various delicacies of the season. The huge sirloin of beef and the flaming plum pudding, whose memory is apt to linger in the form of indigestion, are unknown items in the *menu* of an Italian Christmas dinner, their place being taken by the goodly capon stuffed with chestnuts, and the gala dish of Italy, *panna montata* or whipped cream.

The following is a fairly typical *menu* of a Roman dinner-party on 25th December. It varies occasionally according to taste, but this is the general order of the courses. Clear soup, with *capelletti* floating in it, viz., little hat-shaped pieces of macaroni filled with forced-meat; this is followed by the *lesso*, or meat of which the soup has been made, and which is an inevitable feature on the majority of Italian tables, and is served with a piquant sauce and vegetables. The next course is the *misto fritto*, a dish of brains, liver, potatoes and various vegetables all fried that rich golden colour which seems to be only obtainable in a foreign frying-pan. Bologna sausage, a *specialité* of the season, is then partaken of, no Christmas dinner being considered complete without its somewhat garlicky presence. Now appears the capon in all its substantial glory, surrounded by sippets of fried bread and pounded anchovies, and accompanied by a fresh green salad. Then follow the sweets: ices and *panna montata*, for which I will give the recipe, judging by my own experience that it will be appreciated by my readers.

Boil and pulp about a pound or a little over of chestnuts, skin and pound them to the consistency of very fine flour, sweeten with powdered sugar and place in a glass dish. Whip and sweeten a quart or so of rich cream, the quantity depending on the size of the dish required, and heap it over the chestnuts. Serve with ice wafers. In Italy, the cream can be bought already whipped and sweetened, which is an immense saving of

labour. With the dessert, the Italian substitute for plum pudding, *pan forte*, makes its appearance. This delicacy, of which a very little goes a long way, is something of the description of soft hardbake, and pounded almonds enter largely into its preparation. The schoolboy term "stickjaw," which I have heard applied to it, is a singularly appropriate one. At this season it occupies a prominent place in the confectioners' shops, which are indeed worth regarding from an artistic point of view, with their ethereally-tinted bon-bons in gaily-hued satin bags, and their variety of cakes frosted over with sugar icing in white and pink.

Very tempting also are the grocers' and provision shops, with their array of comestibles and delicacies artistically arranged, with the inevitable sausages tied up in frilled papers and adorned with coloured ribbons.

As for the jewellers' and fancy shops, etc., it would take up far more space than I am permitted were I to dilate upon their charms, and as this article is devoted more to the solemn business of feeding than to æsthetic considerations, let us return to our capons.

The great idea at Christmas-time in Italy in the present-giving line is to send off enormous cakes called *panettoni* to your absent friends and relations. These are much esteemed, though the reason of such appreciation is, and will ever remain to me, one of the unsolved enigmas of existence. They are unwieldy to pack, and they are not particularly nice, being distinctly plain in character. The principal ingredients are eggs, flour and yeast, forming a sort of very light dough, with here and there a solitary currant, separated by a painful distance from its companions. Such are the *panettoni*, and yet, every postman staggers under their weight, and aunts, and cousins, mothers-in-law, and uncles despatch them to various members of their family, receiving the self-same souvenir in return. By the way, the recipient of a gift in Italy finds it rather expensive, as one of the unwritten laws of Italian etiquette decrees that a present shall be immediately sent off to the giver, with the evident intention of shaking off the irksome load of obligation and crying quits as soon as possible.

In Naples, the Christmas-Eve dinner is

almost as important as the banquet partaken of on the day itself. Being a fast, there are naturally no meat dishes, but the changes are rung on boiled, roast and fried fish, the *pièce de résistance* consisting of a dish of stewed eels, which are considered such a luxury, that many a happy-go-lucky Neapolitan cheerfully starves for a week beforehand in order to secure this delicacy for Christmas-Eve.

Many family gatherings are held about this time, dancing and the *tombola* taking the place of our Christmas trees and snapdragon. On New Year's Eve the majority of Italians invite their relations and intimate friends to spend the evening. It is amusing at these reunions to observe the formality and propriety which reigns supreme at the beginning of the proceedings, gradually melting away under the combined influences of the *tombola*, a game like a miniature lottery, and a *recherché* supper. On first arriving, the women portion of the guests range themselves on one side of the room and talk chiffons, servants and babies, while the men, after making elaborate bows, congregate together on the opposite side, somewhat after the manner of the lost and saved in Michael Angelo's "Last Judgment." A chastened solemnity lingers upon all present until the entrance of the supper, after which the social atmosphere becomes buoyant, choruses are sung, glasses are clinked, and everyone talks at once. It is harmless, innocent mirth, however, that one witnesses at these family *festas*, for these sons and daughters of the South are slow to banish the memory of their childish days, and are fortunate in possessing that capacity for the enjoyment of the moment, which is rarely seen beyond the limits of our English nurseries and schoolrooms.

New Year's Day itself is not such an important festival in Italy as it is in France. Members of families usually meet to dine together, but no presents are given, and instead of the boxes of bonbons, fans, jewellery, etc., which are exchanged between friends and relations, in Paris and New York, visiting-cards, with the owner's good wishes, are sent round to all one's acquaintances, which practice, if not so pleasing, is decidedly more economical.

VERA.

