The New York Times

Who Controls Panettone? The Gold Rush Is On.

The Christmas treat that one chef calls “the mountaintop” of baking has become a global moneymaker, inspiring laws, contests and a fervid debate over how to make it.

Photo Illustration by Nacho Alegre for The New York Times

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Who owns panettone?

In the last decade, the Christmas classic has burst its Italian borders and gained a global profile. Like Basque burnt cheesecake and French croissants, panettone is being tested and transformed

When the standard was set, most likely in 15th-century Milan, panettone was a domed sweet bread with a tender, bright-golden crumb, scented and studded with sugared fruit. It belongs to the same luxurious holiday tradition as German stollen, Polish chalka and British fruitcake: treats made once a year from expensive stores of butter and eggs, refined flour and sugar, spices from Asia and preserved fruit from the Mediterranean. Bits of chocolate were added later, and regional ingredients like lemon on the Amalfi coast and hazelnuts in Piedmont.

As Italy unified, panettone became a national symbol of Christmas; extravagantly wrapped and ribboned loaves became status symbols and popular gifts. But with the advent of commercial baking, the product inside the boxes became increasingly dry and flat-tasting, with cheaper ingredients like candied squash and milk powder.

Naturally leavened panettone must hang upside down to cool, to preserve the rise and the domed shape. Camilla Ferrari for The New York Times

The surge of appreciation for panettone is both restoring interest in the bread and fomenting new conflicts among those who make it. Disputes have broken out between purists and ultrapurists, between traditionalists and modernists, and between Italy and the rest of the world. The battles have played out in trade unions, legislatures and online, where a passionate worldwide community of sourdough bakers weighs in on matters like hydration, acidulation and almonds vs. hazelnuts.

Laura Lazzaroni, a journalist and bread consultant, said panettone is following the arc traced by pizza: A food not considered particularly interesting at home catches on abroad, is adopted by foreign artisans, then returns to great fanfare.

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“We never fell out of love with pizza, but we didn’t think about it very much,” she said. “Then people started coming home from America saying, ‘I had better pizza in California than in — insert name of my town in Italy here — and we have to do something about it.’”

Now that panettone’s reputation has risen, so have the stakes for Italian bakers, who are jockeying not only for ownership of that tradition, but also for market share. Conpait, the pastry trade group, estimates that market will be about $650 million this year, with 10 percent growth of “artigianale” over “industriali” products. Best-of lists, awards and contests like the new Coppa del Mondo del Panettone have proliferated.

"MARIO TURUANI"

Giuseppe Piffaretti, founder of the Coppa del Mondo del Panettone, said, “Panettone isn’t a recipe; it’s a lifestyle.” Camilla Ferrari for The New York Times

“This is a world championship, not a church bake sale,” said Giuseppe Piffaretti, who started the Coppa del Mondo in 2019.

The struggle to control panettone has been raging for 20 years, since Italian exporters sounded alarms that foreign-made versions were capturing the global market.

Panettone has long been popular in Argentina, Peru and Brazil, where Italian food arrived along with immigrant populations in the late 19th century. Many of the panettone sold in U.S. supermarkets are made in South America, especially by the giants Bauducco and D’Onofrio.

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Unlike tomatoes from San Marzano or mortadella from Bologna, panettone from Milan isn't a protected regional specialty under the European Union's labeling system. Luigi Biasetto, a top baker in Padua, is leading an effort to have panettone declared part of the world's "intangible cultural heritage" by UNESCO, as Neapolitan pizza was in 2017.

In 2005, Italy passed laws that control the ingredients in classic panettone. Camilla Ferrari for The New York Times

In 2005, the Italian government passed laws that dictate the ingredients, and decreed that "natural fermentation" is required to produce panettone labeled "Made in Italy." But the code makes no distinctions between wild yeasts and cultivated ones, between organic and bleached flour, between fruit candied with sugar and with glucose — distinctions that have become increasingly important to bakers and customers.

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Dec. 19, 2022

Like all bread, traditional panettone was naturally leavened, giving it a taste, tang and texture that got lost in the translation to industry, like the move from aged Cheddar to American cheese.

The best ones combine the fluff of cotton candy, the creaminess of French toast, the gentle pull of a fresh doughnut and the buttery softness of poundcake. Now modern bakers are trying to recapture those qualities, despite — or because of — the notorious challenges of making panettone from scratch.

"It's the most difficult product to make," Mr. Piffaretti said. "Panettone isn't a recipe; it's a lifestyle."

Iginio Massari, a nationally revered master in Brescia (his panettone is called simply, "L'immortale,") said it takes 10 years to train an employee to make it correctly.

Mr. Massari's American protégé, Roy Shvartzapel, put it another way: "Panettone is the mountaintop" of baking.

Iginio Massari, center, is Italy's most revered master of naturally leavened panettone. He said it takes 10 years to teach an employee to make it correctly. Iginio Massari Alta Pasticceria

Two separate doughs are required, each a challenging mix of high-gluten flour to provide structure, sustain long fermentation and absorb incredibly high amounts of fat and sugar. The first dough is slowly fermented to a specific level of acidity, which takes anywhere from 12 to 24 hours, depending on microbial activity, and requires constant monitoring of temperature and humidity.

Despite the high skill barrier, hundreds of individual panettone producers have flocked to the bewildering new array of competitions. The Coppa del Mondo de Panettone should not be confused with the Panettone World Championship, or with the Panettone Day contest held in Milan, with the Tenzone del Panettone (panettone duel) in Parma, or with the prestigious national Artisti del Panettone competition. Japan's Panettone Appreciation Society, founded in 2020, held its first championship last month.

"Every pastry chef now wants to have his own contest, but it's confusing for the customers," said Giorgia Grillo, whose panettone have often reached the finals at the NeroVaniglia pastry shop in Rome. "There are too many championships."

The Coppa del Mondo is the only major one based outside Italy, though not very far outside: Mr. Piffaretti's bakery is in Lugano, Switzerland, about 50 miles from Milan. Still, his contest seeks to expand the reach of panettone, allowing entries from countries like the United States, Spain, Algeria and France. This year, a round of competition was held in Singapore, home to several of Asia's most prestigious culinary schools. (Still, Italians win most of the titles, and culinary schools and hotel chains have begun flying the winners to teach workshops in places like Kuala Lumpur and Mumbai.)

Giorgia Grillo, in red bandanna, is one of few female pasticceri who have won awards for panettone, considered the pinnacle of Italian baking. Massimo Berruti for The New York Times

Although each contest mandates that bakers adhere to the 2005 Italian law, the other rules are often influenced by sponsors, like the producers of Agrimontana fruit or Dallagiovanna flour, that require contestants to use their products. (Like Italian soccer players, Italian pastry chefs often wear uniforms plastered with sponsor logos.) These competitions are scorned by many champions, like Mr. Biasetto, who uses only his own flour blend and a 90-year-old starter.

He and Ms. Grillo belong to a confederation of strict sourdough purists, the Accademia dei Maestri del Lievito Madre e del Panettone (Academy of Masters of Sourdough and Panettone). Its members broke away from the larger Accademia dei Maestri Pasticciere (Academy of Masters of Pastry) in 2020 over the question of whether panettone could be leavened with added yeast or only with natural leavening, called “lievito madre.” The group’s president, Claudio Gatti, called it “the only possible way to make true Italian panettone.”

High-end pastry shops and design houses like Gucci and Fornasetti have long dominated the world market for artisanal panettone. Now smaller artisan bakeries are trying to elbow in, with popular flavors like Nutella, prestige ingredients like Belgian centrifuged butter and Madagascar vanilla beans, and new techniques. Olivieri 1882, in Vicenza, makes not only its prized classic but also a limited “super classic,” with three doughs and a four-day fermentation. Infermentum, in Verona, folds in candied orange and lemon pastes along with the traditional bits of peel.

Roy Shvartzapel, who studied under Mr. Massari in Brescia, started the only year-round, all-panettone bakery in the United States in 2015. Carolyn Fong for The New York Times

The American panettone revolution has so far been spearheaded by Mr. Shvartzapel, who baked at Balthazar, Bouchon Bakery and Pierre Hermé in Paris, where panettone is popular. He became smitten, describing his first bite as an “unctuous, delicious cloud.”

“I had never given it a thought before,” he said.

But he found that he could think of little else. He moved to Brescia, Italy, to study under Mr. Massari. In 2006, Mr. Shvartzapel returned with two goals, both quixotic: to open an all-panettone bakery, and to move panettone beyond Christmas, with fresh fruit and seasonal flavors. Soon after that bakery, From Roy, opened in San Francisco in 2015, its panettone landed on the “Oprah’s Favorite Things” list, and a star was born.

Mr. Shvartzapel's innovations, like adding pistachio paste and nurturing large air bubbles in the dough, have made him a controversial panettone celebrity. Carolyn Fong for The New York Times

Mr. Shvartzapel's innovations, although widely respected in Italy, have brought even more drama to the debate over panettone. Like many modern sourdough bakers, he nurtures an "open crumb" with visible air pockets and skeins of gluten that make his creations tall and voluminous. On social media, Mr. Shvartzapel's alveoli have become a global talking point.

Some bakers, like Mr. Piffaretti, feel that this looser look renders his panettone inauthentic; others believe it is a return to tradition.

Last year, Ms. Lazzaroni, the bread consultant, curated a museum exhibition about the evolution of Italian food from 1970 to 2050, including three panettone: one from the industrial producer Alemagna, one made by Mr. Massari and one from Mr. Shvartzapel.

"Panettone is a perfect example of how Italian taste is always traveling back and forth, being contaminated and then reborn," she said. "It would be wrong to see it as something that belongs only to us."

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***A correction was made on Dec. 19, 2022**: An earlier version of this article misstated a place where Roy Shvartzapel worked. It was Bouchon Bakery, not the French Laundry. The article also misspelled the first name of a panettone maker. She is Giorgia Grillo, not Georgia.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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