

The background image shows a hand sifting powdered sugar from a small sieve over a bowl of sweets. In the foreground, a silver-plated pedestal dish is filled with a variety of Italian Christmas sweets, including round orange-colored pastries, chocolate-covered treats, and some with colorful sprinkles. The scene is set against a dark background with warm, out-of-focus bokeh lights, suggesting a festive holiday atmosphere.

ITALIAN CHRISTMAS SWEETS

5 CLASSIC FESTIVE RECIPES
FROM REGIONAL ITALY

NADIA FRAGNITO

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Egg & Dairy Substitutes

AND OTHER VEGAN VARIATIONS

Here is a table of my favourite substitutions for sweet Italian recipes to keep the integrity of the traditional dish as much a possible when it comes to flavour and texture. Some ingredients are everyday pantry items, some may require a special purchase (which I'm sure you'll be able to use again and again).

ORIGINAL INGREDIENT	VEGAN SUBSTITUTE	WHY IT WORKS	USE IN THESE RECIPES
HONEY	RICE MALT SYRUP	Rice malt syrup is a thick and sticky syrup. It isn't as sweet as honey, but works well added to doughs, for coating or drizzling over pastries or basting cakes.	Mostaccioli, Struffoli, Panforte, Pan di Zenzero, Cartellate, Crostoli, Zelten
EGGS PART 1	WHITE WINE + OIL	This two ingredient combination creates a light and crispy pastry, especially when fried in oil. It also helps dough rise. This is a hallmark of Pugliese cooking, whereas other regions often use eggs and sometimes butter or lard.	Struffoli, Cartellate Crostoli, Biscotti di Vino, Intorchiate, Cannoli (shells)
EGGS PART 2	CHICKPEA FLOUR & CORNFLOUR (CORNSTARCH)	Chickpea flour when whisked with water can create an egg yolk substitute for thickening batters or mimicking the protein, colour and viscosity of eggs. Cornflour is an excellent thickener, perfect for creating custard and silky smooth pastry cream.	Pastry cream (Crema Pasticciera), Zuppa Inglese, Panettone, Strauben, Zabaione, Cannoncini, Tiramisu
EGG WHITES	AQUAFABA	<i>Aquafaba</i> is the preserving liquid from a can of chickpeas that whips up like egg whites - which makes it a helpful substitute when creating a light and airy cake, biscotto or dessert.	Zabaione, Tiramisu, Torta Caprese, Savoardi, Amaretti
MILK	SOY MILK (FULL FAT)	A full fat soy milk will replace the fat of dairy milk as well as the protein. Other plant based milks, like oat milk often won't work as well, as they contain less protein.	Struffoli, Cartellate Crostoli, Zabaione, Panna Cotta, Crema Pasticciera, Cakes

A Note on Ingredients

These recipes have been tested in Australia, so there may be some variations with the names of ingredients and measurements, depending on where you are based in the world!

In Australia, all sugar production generally uses a vegan process. So where sugar is mentioned, please use your preferred vegan sugar. With chocolate, wine, liqueur, sprinkles, glacé (candied) fruits, etc, please reach out if you'd like to know my favourite vegan versions.

For accuracy with baking measurements I've used grams or millilitres, so a kitchen scale and measuring jug is helpful to have on hand.

If you have any further questions about the recipes or ingredients, please drop me an email theveganitaliankitchen@gmail.com



1.

Mostaccioli

DARK CHOCOLATE SPICED BISCUITS

I fell in love with these diamond-shaped treats on a trip to northern Italy, baked fresh by a vegan pastry chef from Napoli. The thick chocolate coating paired with the soft, spicy biscuit interior was something special. I was hooked. Adjust the biscotti thickness to your preference: thicker for a softer texture or thinner for a crunchier style. In Napoli, they use a spice mix called 'pisto' often including cinnamon, star anise, nutmeg, coriander and cloves.

Some recipes add black pepper or omit the coriander. Adjust the spices according to your taste.

CAMPANIA

Mostaccioli

MAKES ABOUT 50 | 90 MINUTES + RESTING

Ingredients

500 g plain flour (all purpose)
150 g caster sugar (superfine)
150 g almond meal (ground)
5 tablespoons cocoa powder,
sifted
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons of pisto (see note
on previous page) or
substitute with cinnamon
zest of 1 large orange
120 g rice malt syrup, warmed
400 g dark chocolate,
chopped

Method

1. Mix all the dry ingredients in a large bowl, then add the zest and rice malt syrup.
2. Gradually pour in 250 ml or so of water, mixing until a soft dough forms. Use your hands to bring the mixture together. If the dough is too sticky, incorporate a bit more flour; if it's too dry, add a splash more water.
3. Wrap and cover the dough, and refrigerate for 30 minutes.
4. Divide the dough in half. Roll each portion between 2 sheets of non-stick baking paper, dusted with flour until it's 5 mm thick (not too thick as the biscuits rise when baked).
5. Cut the dough into diamonds using a diamond-shaped cookie cutter or by creating diagonal slices with a knife.
6. Transfer to a tray lined with non-stick baking paper and bake in a fan-forced oven at 160°C/320°F for 12-15 minutes. Allow the biscotti to cool before melting the chocolate.
7. To melt the chocolate, place the chopped chocolate in a heatproof bowl. Melt gently over a water bath on the stove or on a medium power setting in the microwave, stirring until smooth and glossy.
8. Dip the biscotti in the chocolate, coating each side. While the chocolate is still wet, you may like to garnish with thin chocolate shavings, crushed nuts, orange zest or whatever garnish takes your fancy!
9. Place on a wire rack and allow the chocolate to set completely before serving. Store in an airtight container.





2.

Struffoli

‘HONEY’ BALLS

When it comes to struffoli, my family serve these deep-fried balls as a savoury snack. However, when drenched in honey and shaped into a pyramid or wreath, they become a Christmas showstopper. This Neapolitan version is often made with eggs and butter, but it can be successfully recreated without them. We also replace the honey with rice malt syrup. Struffoli can be served as a single large portion or formed into small mounds in cupcake liners for individual servings. You'll find the nearly identical versions of *pígnolàta* and *cícerata* in Calabria, Sicily and Basilicata.

CAMPANIA

Struffoli

MAKES 1 LARGE WREATH

Ingredients

500 g plain flour (all purpose)
¼ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
(baking soda)
2 tablespoons sugar
zest of 1 lemon or orange
150 ml sunflower or olive oil
150 ml vegan white wine
1 tablespoon liqueur, like Strega
50 g vegan butter or margarine,
softened
sunflower oil for deep frying

Syrup

200 g rice malt syrup
3 tablespoons caster sugar
(superfine)
juice and zest of 1 small orange
50 g citrus (candied) peel
(optional)
to garnish: coloured sprinkles
and glacé (candied) cherries

Method

1. In a large bowl, stir together the flour and bicarb soda.
2. Add the sugar and zest. Mix in the oil, wine and liqueur.
3. Rub in the butter and use your hands to bring the mixture together into a firm dough.
4. Knead for 1-2 minutes until smooth.
5. Cover and rest for 30 minutes.
6. Divide the dough into 6-8 pieces, then roll each into long ropes.
7. Cut into approximately 2 cm pieces. You can leave them as they are (a little like gnocchi) or roll into small balls.
8. Half-fill a medium saucepan with the frying oil to around 170-180°C/356 °F.
9. Fry in batches for 2-3 minutes or until they turn golden brown. Drain well on absorbent paper.
10. In a separate saucepan, heat the rice malt syrup, sugar, orange juice and zest. Stir until the sugar dissolves, then simmer for a few minutes.
11. Remove from the heat and stir in the citrus peel, if using.
12. In a large bowl, combine the struffoli and syrup, stirring gently to coat each piece evenly.
13. To serve, use a large round platter and form the balls into a large pyramid or wreath. For a wreath shape, lightly grease the outside of a drinking glass, place it in the centre of the serving plate, and build the struffoli balls around it. Once formed, gently remove the glass.
14. Scatter over the coloured sprinkles and garnish with glacé cherries for pops of colour.



Replace with your own content

3.

Zeppole

DOUGHNUT FRITTERS

I love this rustic Italian version of a doughnut. These misshapen deep-fried morsels are often made for special occasions like Christmas and Easter. Just as well, as they're very much a treat food. My nonna would make piles of zeppole which she would leave plain, coat in sugar, or fill with an anchovy or two. I like to use a neutral-flavoured oil like canola or sunflower and approximately 1 litre for deep frying.

CAMPANIA

Zeppole

MAKES 20-25 | 25 MINUTES + PROVING

Ingredients

250 ml (1 cup) warm water
1 teaspoon instant dried yeast
60 g (¼ cup) sugar + 1 teaspoon
300 g (2 cups) plain flour
(all purpose)
1 teaspoon salt
oil for deep frying, like sunflower
to serve: icing sugar (powdered)
or caster sugar (superfine)

Method

1. In a small bowl, combine the warm water, yeast and 1 teaspoon of sugar. Stir to dissolve the yeast. Set aside for 5 minutes to activate or until it becomes frothy and bubbly.
2. Combine flour, 60 g of sugar and salt into a large bowl.
3. Pour in the yeast mixture and add about 75 ml (⅓ cup) of extra water. Stir thoroughly until it forms a sticky wet dough, or like a thick batter.
4. Cover and leave in a draught-free place for 1 hour to rise.
5. Heat the oil in a small to medium saucepan to about 180°C/356 °F. You can check this by using a thermometer or test by dropping in a small piece of the dough.
6. Carefully drop approximately 1 tablespoon of the batter into the oil. You may need a second spoon to help the process.
7. Fry zeppole in small batches until golden brown, about a minute each side (depending how hot your oil is), flipping over to cook evenly.
8. Remove from the oil and drain well on absorbent paper. Continue with the remaining dough.
9. Dust with icing sugar or roll in caster sugar. Best served fresh and warm.



4.

Panforte

CHERRY CHOCOLATE PANFORTE

Panforte is a popular Italian Christmas sweet enjoyed worldwide, and this unconventional chocolate, cherry and almond version makes a lovely combination. To achieve the ideal texture, it's crucial to prevent the syrup from overcooking, otherwise you could end up with a teeth-cracking, inedible disappointment. I recommend using a candy thermometer, but you can also test the syrup's readiness in a glass of water. If you've never had the pleasure of eating panforte, it is rich and spiced, with a texture that is dense and slightly chewy - nothing at all like the lightness of a cake. All this is to say that panforte is a unique sweet and a little goes a long way.

TUSCANY

Panforte

MAKES 20 CM CAKE | 50 MINUTES

Ingredients

300 g blanched almonds
190 g glacé (candied) or dried cherries
100 g plain flour (all purpose)
3 tablespoons cocoa powder
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground coriander
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
210 g caster sugar (superfine)
150 g rice malt syrup
75 g dark chocolate, chopped
to garnish: cocoa powder or icing sugar (powdered)

Method

1. Line the bottom and sides of a 20 cm round springform pan with non-stick baking paper.
2. Spread the almonds on a baking tray and toast in a fan-forced at 170°C/338°F for about 8-10 minutes or until golden brown and fragrant. Remove the almonds and lower the temperature to 150°C/302°F.
3. In a large bowl, combine the almonds and cherries.
4. Stir in the flour, cocoa and spices.
5. In a small saucepan, combine the sugar, rice malt syrup and 2 tablespoons of water.
6. Place on a medium heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Once it simmers, do not stir again. Simmer until it reaches about 115°C/240°F (soft ball stage). If you don't have a thermometer, drop about 1 teaspoon of syrup into a glass of cold water and if you can roll it into a soft ball, it's ready.
7. Remove from the heat immediately and stir in the chocolate until melted.
8. Quickly pour the chocolate syrup into the almond and cherry mix and combine well. It will be thick and sticky.
9. Transfer to the prepared cake tin and press down firmly. Wet your hands with water to help smooth the surface. If the mixture is too hot to touch, use baking paper to smooth the top.
10. Bake at 150°C/302°F for about 30 minutes until the top of the cake is just firm.
11. Cool completely before removing from the tin and paper. The panforte texture will improve over the coming days.
12. To serve, dust generously with cocoa powder or icing sugar and cut into thin slices with a sharp knife. Store wrapped well and placed in an airtight container.



5.

Zelten

CHRISTMAS FRUIT CAKE

What's a Christmas cookbook without a Christmas fruit cake? Italy has its own version, Zelten, from the Trentino-Alto Adige region, featuring ingredients akin to Aussie and English festive cakes, with one exception - rye flour. Rye, a popular grain for breads in the region, makes its way into this dense cake. Zelten comes in various shapes and sizes, typically adorned with decorations like blanched almonds and glacé cherries. It will stay fresh for several weeks at room temperature.

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

Zelten

MAKES MAKES 25 CM CAKE | 90 MINUTES + OVERNIGHT SOAKING

Ingredients

100 g raisins
150 g dried figs, diced small
150 g citrus peel (candied)
zest of ½ lemon
zest of ½ orange
100 ml rum or grappa
200 g plain flour (all purpose)
100 g rye flour
1 teaspoon bicarb of soda
(baking soda)
150 g sugar
250 ml soy milk
1 tablespoon white vinegar
125 ml sunflower oil
150 g walnuts, chopped
to garnish: blanched almonds,
glacé cherries (candied), rice
malt syrup

Method

1. Soak the raisins and figs in boiling water for 15 minutes, or until softened. Drain and squeeze out any excess water.
2. In a bowl combine the soaked dried fruits, citrus peel, lemon and orange zest.
3. Stir through the rum or grappa, then cover and refrigerate, preferably overnight.
4. In a large bowl, combine the plain and rye flours, bicarb soda and sugar.
5. Make a well in the centre and pour in the milk and vinegar. Allow the milk to curdle slightly before adding the oil. Mix until smooth.
6. Next, fold in the macerated fruit and walnuts until evenly distributed.
7. Pour the thick batter into a 24-25 cm round cake tin lined with non-stick baking paper. Gently smooth over the surface of the cake.
8. Garnish with blanched almonds and glacé cherries.
9. Bake in a fan-forced oven at 160°C/320°F for 45-50 minutes until golden brown and a skewer inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean. Cool completely.
10. Heat a little rice malt syrup with a splash of water, then brush over the top and the sides of the cooled cake for a glossy finish.
11. Store in an airtight container and keep in a cool, dark place. Stays fresh for 2-3 weeks.



For more authentic festive recipes, check out the complete cookbook 'Natale: Recipes for a Vegan Italian Christmas' [here](https://www.theveganitaliankitchen.com).

