Panettone

Panettone is a traditional Italian sweet bread most closely associated with **Milan** and with **Christmas**. It is tall, dome-shaped, light and airy, and usually filled with **candied orange peel, citron, lemon zest, and raisins**.

Origins in Milan

Panettone's history goes back to **medieval Milan**, where enriched breads were made for special occasions. Ordinary bread was often simple and plain, but during Christmas, wealthier families could afford bread made with more expensive ingredients such as **butter, eggs, sugar, and dried fruit**.

The name is often linked to the Italian phrase **"pan de ton"** or **"pane di tono,"** meaning something like "luxury bread" or "bread of importance." Over time, this became **panettone**.

Popular legends

There are several legends about how panettone began. One famous story says it was created by a young Milanese nobleman named **Ughetto**, who fell in love with a baker's daughter. To help her family's bakery, he added butter, eggs, sugar, and fruit to the bread, creating a rich loaf that became popular.

Another legend says panettone was invented by a kitchen servant named **Toni**. According to the story, a Christmas dessert at the court of the Duke of Milan was ruined, so Toni improvised a bread using leftover dough, butter, eggs, and candied fruit. The dessert was praised as **"pan de Toni"**—Toni's bread—which supposedly became "panettone."

These stories are charming, but they are more folklore than proven history.

Development as a Christmas bread

By the **15th and 16th centuries**, Milan had a tradition of serving a special wheat bread at Christmas. This was important because wheat bread was once more expensive and prestigious than everyday breads made with cheaper grains.

Panettone became tied to Christmas celebrations because it was rich, festive, and made with ingredients that symbolized abundance.

The modern panettone shape

For many centuries, panettone was lower and more bread-like than the tall version known today. The modern tall, domed panettone became popular in the **early 20th century**.

Two Milanese bakers played a major role:

- **Angelo Motta**
- **Gioacchino Alemagna**

They helped industrialize panettone production. Motta is especially credited with developing the tall shape by allowing the dough to rise in a paper mold, giving panettone its now-famous height and soft texture.

Spread around the world

In the 20th century, panettone spread throughout Italy and then internationally, especially through Italian immigration. It became especially popular in countries such as:

- Argentina
- Brazil
- Peru
- Venezuela
- the United States

In parts of South America, panettone is now a major Christmas tradition, often served with hot chocolate despite the warm summer weather.

Panettone today

Today, panettone is one of Italy's most famous holiday foods. Traditional versions use a long natural fermentation process with **lievito madre**, or mother yeast, which gives the bread its soft, fragrant texture and long shelf life.

Modern varieties may include chocolate, cream fillings, pistachio, coffee, or other flavors, but the classic Milanese panettone remains a symbol of Christmas celebration, craftsmanship, and Italian baking tradition.