

FOOD & DRINK

Merry Fishmas: Feast of the Seven Fishes

*Once rarely seen in Seattle, the traditional Italian Holiday dinner is gaining steam, ostensibly thanks to Hulu's *The Bear**

BY MEG VAN HUYGEN DECEMBER 16, 2024



PHOTO BY BRENT HOFACKER / SHUTTERSTOCK

As a born-and-raised Seattleite from a lapsed Lutheran family, I'd never heard of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, a traditional Italian holiday meal. That is, until I got hooked on Hulu's *The Bear*, wherein a pivotal episode shows the fractious Berzatto family disintegrating over the dinner.

Traditionally, "you would fast the entire day, and then celebrate with a feast from the sea," says Mike Easton, a James Beard nominated chef who is now executive chef at [Abeja](#), a winery in Walla Walla. "It's a tradition mostly started here in the United States by Roman Catholic Italian immigrants, to celebrate the Christmas vigil — La Vigilia di Natalem."

Some Internet digging pinpoints its origins to Southern Italy specifically, where it seemingly wasn't a huge deal — the Roman Catholic calendar of holy days doesn't even mention the feast. Some have tied the concept to the Catholic practice of abstaining from eating meat, dairy products, eggs, or animal fat on the eve of a feast day, so they'd eat seafood instead.

The American interpretation takes a more defined shape. Here, the feast is held on Christmas Eve, and seven seafood dishes are served, usually including baccala, calamari, and fried smelts.

When I spotted [a Tock link](#) for Kitchen at Abeja's Feast of the Seven Fishes, I snapped up my reservations without haste. The 38-acre Abeja Winery and The Inn at Abeja is set up in a series of immaculately restored barns and carriage houses that's something out of an Enid Blyton children's book, and I've been dying for an excuse to return.

We all know Easton from the old Pioneer Square pasta counter Il Corvo and later West Seattle's Il Nido — which Easton sold in 2022 to open Bar Bacetto in tiny Waitsburg, a short drive north of Walla Walla, with his wife, Erin. Longtime Seattleites might also remember Easton from his chef gig at Bizzarro Italian Cafe, way back in the day. After Bar Bacetto closed last spring, Easton took the wheel at Abeja, where he's turning out the same laureate-level pasta you remember from his Seattle era, via a lavish Tuscan-inspired menu.

The Feast of the Seven Fishes is happening at Abeja during the last two weeks of December, Thursdays through Sundays. Easton isn't sharing which seafood dishes he's featuring, but there will be seven of them, and his pile of James Beard nominations ensures they'll all be well worth the drive (or flight). A handful of Seattle restaurants are also doing the Feast of the Seven Fishes, including Carrello and Delancey.

"I just love how this feast blends history, community, and amazing seafood into one unforgettable celebration," Easton says. "And it's about more than just food. It's also about the stories and connections shared around the table."

See you at the seafood table. Bring your stories.

Abeja's Feast of the Seven Fishes will be held during the last two weeks of December at 2014 Mill Creek Road in Walla Walla. Tickets are \$185, and reservations are required. See [Abeja's website](#) for more information.