

Epiphany, from the Greek word for "manifestation or appearance of God," is celebrated on January 6 with a national holiday in Italy and the tradition of *La Befana* (the good witch who brings presents). It commemorates the 12th day of Christmas when the Three Kings or Wise Men arrived at the manger bearing gifts for Baby Jesus. It also marks the date of Jesus' baptism 30 years later, and of the Wedding Feast of Cana. Italy's Christmas holiday season ends with Epiphany. Hence the saying: "*L'Epifania a tutte le feste porta via*" or "*Epiphany sweeps away all the festivities.*"

La Befana is the tale of the good witch who arrives on her broomstick during the night of January 5th and fills stockings with toys and sweets for good children and lumps of coal for naughty ones, in return for a glass of wine.

According to the legend, the night before the Wise Men (Caspar from Thauris bearing gold, the symbol of Christ's kingship; Balthasar from Gedaliah bearing frankincense, the symbol of His divinity because it was used in religious ceremonies; and Melchior from Nubia bearing myrrh, the symbol of His mortal humanity because it was used during burials) arrived at the manger, they stopped at the shack of an old woman to ask directions. She offered them shelter for one night. The next morning they invited her to come with them, but she replied that she was too busy doing her housework. Then a shepherd asked her to come with him, but again she refused. Later, that night she saw a bright light in the sky and decided to join the Wise Men and the shepherd. Unfortunately, she got lost and still hasn't found the manger.

The origins of *La Befana* probably go back to the Romans' pagan festival of *Saturnalia*, a one-or-two-week-long festival starting just before the winter solstice. At the end of *Saturnalia*, the ancient Romans would go to the Temple of Juno on the Capitoline Hill to have their fortunes told by an old crone. Many pagan traditions were incorporated into Christmas celebrations when Christianity became mainstream.

Befana festivals take place in many parts of Italy. The most famous, though in 2015 and 2016 reduced in size, is Rome's *Befana* Market in Piazza Navona with its dozens of stalls selling crèche figures, sweets and *carbone* (black spun sugar coal) for the *Befana's* stocking. Elsewhere in Rome at the *Casina di Raffaello*, in the *Villa Borghese* Park, Epiphany is celebrated with shows and magic workshops, jugglers and street artists from 11 AM to 5 PM. Entrance free. There's also Rome's *Befana Village* with sweets, cotton candy, *carbone*, clowns, puppets, and lots of *befanas* at *Piazza Capocelatro* (reachable by the 46 or 49 bus). Entrance free.

EPIPHANY CELEBRATIONS IN ITALY



Stefano Nuvolari illustration

Near Rome, in Viterbo, there are shows and street theater for kids from 4 PM, accompanied by the *Bersaglieri* (the Army's Infantry Regiment) Band, while at 5 PM, the traditional firefighter *Befana* arrives. At 9 PM this year, the Happy Day Gospel Singers performed in Viterbo's St. Lawrence Cathedral.

In Fiumicino, the city near Rome's main airport, the 13th edition of Epiphany celebrations took place. These included rides with the *Befana* in old cars and tractors, the ugliest *Befana* contest, and candies galore.

Far from Rome, the town of Urbania in the Marche region every year holds a four-day festival, one of the biggest in Italy, for *La Befana* from January 2-6. Since the 1970s, in Venice men dressed as *La Befana* compete in the *Regatta della Befana* on the Grand Canal.

In the past, roast lamb was Epiphany's traditional dish. Now besides ubiquitous *carbone*, in the Veneto it's *pinza* or a cross between *panettone* and Siennese *panforte*, and in Naples *struffoli* or tiny balls of fried dough covered with honey and multi-colored sprinkles.

Elsewhere in Italy Epiphany is celebrated with religious processions. Near Vatican City every year at 11 AM, hundreds of people dressed in medieval costumes follow behind the three Wise Men on horseback up *Via della Conciliazione* to St. Peter's Square where the Pope celebrates a commemorative Mass. In Florence the historical procession, known as the *Cavalcata dei Magi*, usually starts from the *Palazzo Pitti* in the early afternoon and crosses the Arno River to the *Duomo*. On the way, flag throwers perform in *Piazza della Signoria*. In Milan, a similar procession goes from the *Duomo* to the Church of San'Eustorgio, not to mention the procession in historical costume in Rivisondoli, a picturesque town in the Abruzzi. ☺

From the left: roast log of lamb with potatoes, *pinza*, *struffoli*, and candy coal of various flavors

