

JANUARY

Epiphany is twelve days after Christmas; it is the time of the Christmas season when gifts are exchanged. In Italy, the role of Santa Claus is played by the toothless witch "La Befana", who rides about on her broomstick distributing toys and candy to good children, and garlic and "carbone" (sweets resembling lumps of coal) to bad children. Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season and is one of the best loved holidays, especially as it marks the beginning of Carnival as well. Popular dishes include festive sweet bread from the region of Friuli, as well as gnocchi di zucca, and grilled sausages. In Sicily, Greek Orthodox women celebrate Epiphany by wearing traditional dress and marching in a procession to church, where they take part in the beautiful Feast of Lights. The priest blesses the oranges, which he then hands out to the townspeople as a symbol of prosperity for the New Year.

FEBRUARY

Carnival (Carnevale) is celebrated throughout Italy for one week, beginning on Maunday Thursday. Every region has its own special traditions. As the Church was very restrictive, historically, this was the only time of year when people could hide behind masks, and freely indulge in revelry and merriment, before the sobriety of Lent set in. Aside from the parades, costumes, and music, other Carnevale highlights (in Ivrea and Turin) include three days of "battling" where oranges are used as weapons. The end of the festivities is marked by a torch-lit procession, when the most recently married couples dig the first holes for the "scarli" (tall poles), on which heather and juniper garlands are strung. These poles are torched and, if the flames reach the banner at the very top, this signifies prosperity for the community and many weddings in the coming year. Some delicacies that always appear at this time are cannoli, carnival gnocco, and all types of frittelle. Along with this big festival, several smaller festivals are held throughout the month, including the polenta festival in Lombardy and the olive festival in Umbria, when delicious bruschetta drizzled with olive oil are served. Throughout Italy the carnival is celebrated by eating "Nuns Ribbons." Ó

MARCH

During Lent (Quaresima) special meals are served to make up for the meat and eggs not eaten during this period. "La Vecchia," an old hag, is the embodiment of Lent and in different regions she takes on different guises. For example, in Sardinia she is made of bread and has seven legs, one of which is bitten off as each week of Lent passes. She is burned in effigy at the end of Lent and her death symbolizes the new growth of spring. Different regions have special dishes like the sweet rolls from Florence ("corollo") and the ("pazientini" or "patience") little cookies which everyone must have during Lent. For Saint Joseph's Day (March 19), Piedmont celebrates with all kinds of frittates, while in Lombardy tortelli are featured.

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APRIL

Easter (Pasqua) processions in Italy are special and every region celebrates in its own way. In Sicily, the dance of the devils is performed; after a ritual chase, they are supplanted by the Madonna - a large, mechanical figure that is paraded through the streets. Eggs, which are dyed red, are passed out to visitors. In some towns arches made of bread line the streets. Shortly afterwards, there is a huge potato gnocchi festival in Teolo in Veneto. On April 25, the feast of Saint Mark, (the patron saint of Venice), the traditional dish risi e bisi (rice and peas) is served. The annual banquet which was held during the Republic of San Marco in the Palazzo Ducale featured twelve courses, which always began with a rice dish followed by a pea and prosciutto recipe. Tradition holds that at one banquet the two got mixed up together, the Doge ate it and enthused largely, and the rest is history. Lamb dishes such as abbacchio are also standard. Rome celebrates the end of the month with an artichoke festival, and a traditional favorite here is the carciofi alla giudea.

MAY

During May many spring festivals and Saint's Days are celebrated. On May 1, a porchetta festival is held in Umbria, and the first Thursday in May honors the miracle that San Domenico performed, when he turned poisonous snakes into delicious breads. In Abruzzo, women form a procession carrying snake-shaped

breads, called ciambellone. The breads are formed into rings representing a snake biting its own tail. They are distributed to the men who carry the statue of the saint and the banner to the church. Money to make the bread is collected by the townspeople, who go from door to door "begging" for the ingredients. It is a great honor to be chosen to make these rings. This ritual has been carried out for almost four hundred years, and at one time involved live snakes. In Lazio, an asparagus festival is held during the last Sunday in May featuring all kinds of dishes, for example, the delicious asparagus tart.

JUNE

In June when fruits and flowers adorn the landscape, many agricultural festivals are held, including the strawberry festival of Nemi (Lazio) and the cherry festival of Marostica (Veneto). This is also the time of the pesto festival in Florence, when tribute is paid to pine nuts the first Sunday of June. One of the most beautiful festivals is the flower festival of Spello, (Umbria) on June 21 (the "Infiorata"); here incredible carpets are created entirely of flowers. These beautiful "pictures" are placed on the main street and on the street leading to the church in Genzano. It takes two weeks to gather the flowers; large groups of artists then evolve their designs in utmost secrecy until the eve of the celebration. The floral carpets are judged, and the judges' decision is made public at a special dinner, where the winning team receive money for a victory dinner of their own. A traditional dish eaten in Rome, on the eve of San Giovanni, is snails.

JULY

In July summer festivities are in full swing but few are as exciting as the horse race, the palio, which is held on July 2 and August 16 in Siena. This event captivates the entire city. The horses are picked by lottery, and lots drawn for the ten "contrade" who will compete for the special silk victory banner. Horses and riders are also paired off by lottery, and an age-old system of negotiations begins between contrades. A great deal of money may be exchanged, as when one contrade pays off another to defeat an old rival or pays to keep a jockey in his pocket, though he may be riding for another. It is victory enough to defeat a rival, even if one does not come in first. The worst case scenario is to come in second. This is such a humiliation, that the contrade who suffers this fate will slip away into the darkness, while the rest of the city is out celebrating. Many other festivals take place: in Palermo, the Feast of Saint Rosalia in mid-July is celebrated with caponata, while in Venice marinated sole is enjoyed for the feast of Il Redentore.

AUGUST

The famous white wine of Lazio, Est!Est!Est!, is celebrated in festivals during the first few weeks of August. This wine takes its name from the German "est" meaning "it is." A German cardinal traveled to ROME for the coronation of Henry V in 1110. He sent his steward ahead to identify taverns serving good wine and instructed him to mark those tavern doors with "est." His rather intoxicated steward was later found by the cardinal beneath a door upon which he had written "est, est, est" and thus the wine got its name. On August 14 in Tuscany, in the town of Cortona, the famous Bistecca alla Fiorentina are cooked over the largest grill in Italy for one of the country's largest barbecues. Other food events include the cured pork festival in Arnad in Val d'Aosta. Siena's specially bred pigs are used as the sausage meat in their traditional risotto dish. Lazio celebrates with its pasta all'amatriciana at the end of the month.

SEPTEMBER

At Marostica (Venice) a chess game is acted out, using people as the pieces and played by experts of the chess club. It has been held on the first Friday to the second Sunday of the month in even-numbered years since 1923. Legend has it that a fifteenth century wise man, concerned for his daughter's welfare, warded off the many suitors asking for her hand. Disdaining violence, he refused to have duels fought over her. He then decided that the winner of a chess game would be the one to marry his daughter, as the winner would need be incomparably clever, patient, and wise. The game is played fast and is quite exciting, and the entire square is decked out like a giant chessboard. The famous tomatoes of Italy are honored at a festival in Angri, Campania during September. During this time all sorts of tomato dishes are served and enjoyed. One of the staples enjoyed by workers of these regions, for centuries already, is a tasty country soup.

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OCTOBER

In Tuscany, on the fourth Sunday of October, a thrush festival dating back to the 14th century is held. The small birds gather in Tuscany for the juniper berries that grow there and, during the festival, costumed men form a procession wearing medieval regalia and arms. The birds are then killed, grilled, and served in a variety of ways. During September and October there are many wine festivals, ranging from the elaborate ones of large cities to the smaller village festivals. The wine festival in the mountain community of Bisenti is highlighted with a parade and, of course, lots of food. It is also the time to make bagna cauda. Traditionally, people would enjoy this dish while standing over the large earthenware pot in which it was made. Eggs are sometimes broken into the oil remaining at the bottom of the pot and then scrambled. Truffle shavings might also be added for a special treat. Truffles, of course, are abundant at this time, which is truffle season as well. For over 100 years, Piedmont has made tagliarini pasta - the only original pasta from this region.

NOVEMBER

As a fitting end to the growing season, a very old celebration takes place in Emilia-Romagna on the third weekend of November in the city of Terra del Sole. The fruits of the province are blessed, bonfires lit in the afternoon, and feasting goes on all day. Many special sweets are made, since this is also the time of All Saints' Day, which marks the saint's entry, into Heaven or ritual birth. "Dead Men's Cookies" are but one example. There are also many chestnut festivals. These are roasted, or sometimes ground to make delicious breads. This is also the time of the olive harvest, and minestrone is always made in Tuscany this season. The best olive oil, from the first pressing, is drizzled on top of this delicious soup.

DECEMBER

The festivities leading up to Christmas are wonderful events. Celebrations throughout Sicily, in honor of Santa Lucia, are quite joyous. In the sixteenth century she reportedly saved the island from starvation during a terrible famine by miraculously providing a boat-load of grain. Today Sicilians do not eat wheat-flour products on December 13 in honor of her memory. Christmas is always celebrated with family and the baking begins several weeks before. Everyone makes a special creche and as figures are often amassed over the years, some of the displays are quite elaborate. Christmas Eve is a solemn time. Special dishes like panettone, pandoro, and mostaccioli are served. Fish dishes traditionally form the centerpiece of this two day holiday, so as to purify the body. Eel is a favorite for Christmas Eve. In Piedmont, lasagna is made. However, dishes such as buccelatti, roast capon, cappelletti, and many kinds of sweets such as torrone are eaten on Christmas in various regions.