

## SAINT JOSEPH'S FEAST

According to legend, during the Middle Ages severe drought and famine plagued Sicily. Sicilians prayed passionately to Saint Joseph for rain. They promised that if he sent rain, they would prepare a large feast in his honor. Saint Joseph heard their prayers and sent rain. In gratitude and to pay homage to him, the nineteenth of March is celebrated as La Festa di San Giuseppe.

People celebrate and express their gratitude by displaying a table with foods and by distributing their foods to those most in need. Every family celebrates Saint Joseph's Day a little differently. So let's talk about the food served on Saint Joseph's Day.

No meat is served. This is because, even if the poor peasants could afford meat, Saint Joseph's Day occurs during Lent which is a time of fasting. Fish as well as omelets (frocias or frittate) filled with vegetables are featured.

A legend provides a reason why fish is served. Fishermen were having very bad luck catching fish. There were none in the sea. The fishermen promised Saint Joseph that if he gave them fish, they would make a feast for all the people in the village. They caught a lot of fish and fulfilled their promise by creating a table and having a feast in the village square.

Saint Joseph's Day breads are baked to be placed on the table or altar. The breads are done in symbolic shapes which have meaning for people. The large braided breads are typically in the form of a cross, a crown (for Jesus), a staff (for Joseph), or a palm (for Mary). Some feel that keeping a piece of the bread in the home will be protection against fire, lightning and other misfortunes.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are also arranged on the table or altar reflecting foods grown by the peasants or found growing wild in the fields. Oranges are used which some say are for the sweetness of Saint Joseph. Wild fennel and

fava beans play an integral part of the celebration. Fennel has been a healing herb for centuries. Fava beans saved the Sicilians from starvation. The beans are said to bring good luck.

How Saint Joseph became associated with pastries depends on which legend you know. In my favorite version, Mary finds that she has no food for her family. A voice tells her to go to Joseph's workshop and to ask him for the chips that have fallen to the floor. She takes the chips and fries them. Lo and behold, the chips become wonderful fried dough. The fried dough is "zeppole." Zeppole are widely consumed during Saint Joseph's Day.

In summary, the traditional foods served during Saint Joseph's Day are symbolic of both the legends associated with Saint Joseph and the very real struggles of the Sicilians. However, two Italians best summed up Saint Joseph's Day:

"Growing up in an Italian-American family, Saint Joseph's Day was always one of my favorite holidays. I could take the day off from school and all I had to do was visit relatives and eat!"

As one Sicilian, Virginia Buscemi Carlson, passionately affirms: "Without our traditions, there would be nothing left. We would be just like everyone else."

Prepared by Jennifer Murphy

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