

La Festa e La Tavola di San Guiseppe

St. Joseph: Patron, Provider and Protector

March 19th is the feast day of St. Joseph, husband of Mary and earthly father of Jesus. The compassionate carpenter, who provided for and protected the Holy Family, is revered around the world, and especially in Sicily. *San Guiseppuzzu*, the island's patron saint, is said to have delivered Sicilians from drought and famine long ago. Since that time, Italians and their American descendants have paused each spring during Lent, to celebrate and set colorful, abundant altars with food and flowers, to thank St. Joseph and to pray for his protection.

St. Joseph's credentials are as plentiful as the foods on the altars. He is the patron of fathers and families, of workers and immigrants, of the orphaned, of the poor, and of social justice. Besides Sicily, Joseph is patron of Canada, Mexico, and China. And he holds the honor of Universal Protector of the Catholic Church. St. Joseph's day, March 19th, is Father's Day in Italy (La Festa del Papa), Spain, Portugal and Belgium.

St. Joseph's Altar: Origin Stories

The custom of La Tavola di San Guiseppe, or the St. Joseph's Altar, most likely began in the Middle Ages, during prolonged famine and drought in Sicily. Stories tell of generous fishermen and farmers who opened their homes and tables to the needy during those times. Other tales speak of political exiles cast adrift at sea who built altars in gratitude to St. Joseph for delivering them safely home. A less common legend recalls that repentant Sicilian soldiers built altars to ask God's forgiveness for their brutality against the French during the Sicilian Vespers rebellion of 1282. By far, the most popular story shared among scholars is that a group of Albanian refugees – the Abreshe – brought the custom of St. Joseph's altars with them when they fled to Sicily to escape the Turks in the late 15th century.

Celebrating St. Joseph Today

Whatever the custom's origin, the St. Joseph's altar endures today, not only in Sicily but wherever Sicilian immigrants have settled. Italian communities in Chicago, Houston, St. Louis, New York, and Los Angeles make altars and observe the March 19th holiday. But it is in New Orleans, with the highest per capita population of Sicilian immigrants in the U.S., where la Festa di San Guiseppe flourishes. March 19th in the Crescent City is a city-wide event replete with parades, banquets, and dozens of public and private Saint Joseph's Altars displayed in churches, halls, restaurants, garages, and living rooms. The nearness of St. Patrick's Day, March 17, only serves to magnify the revelry, when the Red and the Green Marching clubs converge in the streets. But even before immigrant Italians and Irish arrived on Louisiana's shore, French Creoles honored the beloved Saint with *mi-careeme* (mid-Lent), a brief pause in the Lenten fast distinguished by masked balls and weddings.

Altar Construction

The faithful build St. Joseph's altars for a variety of reasons: to pray for the sick, remember departed loved ones, protect those at war, request a favor, or in gratitude for a prayer answered. Altars are elaborate or simple, public or private. But they all share basic elements no matter the size or style. The 3 tiers or levels represent the Holy Trinity. A statue or image of St. Joseph resides on the upper level, often adorned with candles, lilies, other flowers or palm fronds. The 2 lower levels display edibles, symbolic food, icons, images, or statues of Mary, Jesus, the saints, and pictures of departed or needy loved ones. Often a basket to collect written petitions, or money or food to share with the poor is also situated here.

Edibles and Symbolic food

Traditional altar edibles include produce, baked goods, sweets, spices and wine native to Sicilian culture. Examples include: bread-crumbs stuffed artichokes, fava beans, seafood, citrus, almonds, figs, and pasta dishes. Sweets and breads may include: cuccidati (fig cookies), biscotti regina (sesame seed cookies), amaretti, anise cookies, pignolatti cannoli, sfinge (cream puffs), cudureddi (St. Joseph's bread), ciabatta, and St. Lucy's Eye Pie (fig pie). Because it is Lent, there is no meat. Grated parmesan is traditionally replaced by bread crumbs, which symbolize carpenter's sawdust. (In New Orleans they are called *mudrica*, a derivation of *mollica*, Italian for breadcrumbs). Besides edible breads, bread dough is used to craft symbolic, decorative breads in the shape of Joseph's sandals, carpenter's tools, Joseph's staff or wreaths. Cakes in the shapes of lambs, fish or crosses are traditional. Fava - St. Joseph's "lucky bean" - the crop that survived the drought and sustained the people, is a familiar talisman, symbolizing the protection and accessibility of this beloved saint.