

January 6 Celebrations and Traditions in Italy

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In Italy, January 6 (*il sei gennaio*) is celebrated as the Feast of the Epiphany, "*l'Epifania*", from the Greek word for manifestation, or revelation from above; the day when the Three Wise Men, thought to be astrologers, or *Re Magi* (Three Kings), came from foreign lands in the East and followed the star to bring gifts to the newborn baby Jesus. These gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh (*oro, incenso, e mirra*). It is a day where the Catholic church, and other Christian churches, celebrate the divinity of Jesus. Statues of the Re Magi are always displayed in a Nativity scene (*il presepe*).

This day is considered a *giorno festivo* (national holiday) throughout Italy, and is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, better known as the 12th Day of Christmas. It is sometimes considered the end of the Christmas season and the Italian saying goes "*L'epifania, tutte le feste porta via*" - the Epiphany takes away all the holidays. In days long gone, January 6 was the day to exchange Christmas gifts, as that was the day Baby Jesus received his gifts from the *Re Magi*. Catholics are encouraged to leave their Christmas tree, lights, and manger scene up for the Epiphany. This holiday is even older than the December 25 celebration of Christmas.

January 6 is also the celebration of *La Befana* (the good witch), whose Roman-born tradition, which has pagan roots, is closely linked to that of the Re Magi. This legend recounts the story of an old lady, often portrayed as hunched, hook-nosed, and with a pointed chin, who was approached by the Magi a few days before the birth of Jesus. The Wise Men had seen a star in the sky, and wanted to follow it to the Baby Jesus. The old woman provided her visitors shelter for a night, as she was known to be a spotless housekeeper. She was invited by the Magi to accompany them, but she declined because she was too busy with housework and told them she would join them later. Feeling guilty afterwards, La Befana quickly tried to find the astrologers, but, sadly, could not.

From that point on, the legend is that La Befana travels on her broom (*scopa*) with a black shawl (*sciallo*), a headkerchief (*il foulard*), and with a sack (*sacco*) of treats on the night of January 5 and the early morning of January 6, trying to find the little Jesus. Her clothes and face are covered in soot because she enters houses through the chimney. During the night she leaves *caramelle e cioccolattini* (hard candy and chocolates), for children who have been good, and lumps of dark rock candy, made to resemble lumps of coal (*carbone*), for children who have misbehaved, in stockings hung by the fireplace, or left on tables or other locations in the house, always with the hope that one of the children she has visited is the infant Jesus. In poorer parts of Italy, especially in the Sicilian countryside, a stick was placed in the stocking instead of coal. A more modern Befana leaves toys for the children in addition to sweets. La Befana is said to sweep the room before she leaves, which symbolizes sweeping away the problems of the year. A glass of wine and small amounts of local food are left for the Befana to enjoy.

It is said that if Befana spots someone who sees her, they will receive a little thump on the shoulder from her broomstick, as she doesn't want to be seen, which is perhaps an ingenious way for parents to keep children in their beds. The town of Urbino, in the Marche region, is considered the official home of La Befana, and holds a Befana Festival from January 2- 6, with thousands of participants.

Special foods which are associated with Epifania and La Befana feature lavish several-course meals including lasagna and *pasta al forno* (baked pasta), meat (*carne*), chicken (*pollo*), and fish (*pesce*). Sweets such as Cavallucci di Siena (soft biscuits from Tuscany), Anicini biscuits from Liguria served with wine, Strufoli (fried sweet treats from Campania), torrone, panettone, pandoro, caramelized apples, and leftover Christmas treats are offered. In Piemonte, Fugassa d'la Befana, a soft pizza-type dough shaped like a daisy, is baked with one hidden black fava bean and one hidden white fava bean. The person who finds the black bean pays for the cost of wine for the group, and the one who finds the white bean pays for the cost of the Fugassa. Some towns put coins in the Fugassa to symbolize wealth. The Veneto region features *Pinza*, a pizza made of cornmeal with dried fruit, fennel seeds, and grappa. Each region of Italy has its own special Epiphany and Befana recipes, and recipes pertaining to a region may have subtle changes from town to town.

Below is one of several different versions of a poem to La Befana, which is often repeated on the eve and day of January 6:

<i>La Befana vien di notte</i>	The Befana comes by night
<i>Con le scarpe tutte rotte</i>	With her shoes all tattered and town
<i>Col vestito alla romana</i>	She comes dressed in the Roman way
<i>Viva, Viva La Befana!</i>	Long live the Befana!

My family and my husband's family has always celebrated Epiphany and La Befana. As someone whose birthday is January 6, my presents were usually placed under the Christmas tree, so there were three celebrations in one day....birthday, Epiphany, and La Befana. My husband's family, from the Marche region, would always celebrate. When he was a child the local open air markets (*mercati*) would have tables and tables of toys that parents would purchase to gift to their children on Epiphany. There was a local woman who would dress like La Befana and would go visit children in their homes right before January 6. My husband's older brother was so frightened of her that he would hide under the bed and, to avoid even seeing her feet, would push his head up into the springs and woolen mattress so much that the shape of his head was visible in the mattress. Each child would receive a small gift from La Befana, which was left upon the kitchen table, since no gifts were exchanged on Christmas Day, only on January 6. Nowadays, some Italians are also starting to exchange gifts on Christmas Eve or Day, but still keep the tradition of La Befana alive for the children.

Epiphany and La Befana can be a great celebration for a lodge. You can have a Befana dinner on or close to January 6, where people can bring traditional food and candy, and can exchange gifts with a monetary limit. It would be fun to have someone dress like La Befana and hand out small stockings with candy to any children present, and explain the history and connection between Epiphany and La Befana. Members can tell how their towns in Italy celebrate La Befana and Epifania. Tomie dePaola, an Italian-American award-winning author and illustrator, wrote a beautiful book, "The Legend of Old Befana" telling one of the many stories about La Befana. This would be a great story to read at a lodge event, for both children and adults.