

Festivals and Cultural Events in Italy and Tuscany



EPIPHANY



Epiphany is a religious holiday in Italy and it is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, on 6th January. On this day the Catholic Church commemorates the day when the **Three Wise Men** or **Three Kings** (" **Re Magi**") - Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior -visited the Infant Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea a few days after His Birth .

The **Magi** , who came from the East , were led by a Star, the **Star of Bethlehem** , which revealed them the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, and led them to Bethlehem, where they worshipped Him and offered Him three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The word "Epiphany " means "manifestation " and "revelation" and Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of God to human beings through his Son , Jesus.

Epiphany is celebrated with particular enthusiasm by children, because ,according to the Italian tradition, an old, ugly but good white-haired woman, called the **Befana** flies on her broom in the sky with a special bag full of sweets, candies and presents on the night between the 5th and the 6th of January and she comes into their home through the chimney .

Italian children hang decorative Christmas stockings on the chimney so that the **Befana** can fill them with presents, chocolates and sweets.

Children, who have been good all through the past year, usually receive toys and sweets , while



naughty children receive charcoal (made of sugar!!) as punishment for their bad behavior .This is just a joke because all children receive presents and sweets, as well. The **Befana** leaves her gifts not just at one house, but she also visits grandparents, uncles and other relatives 'homes; so on Epiphany, Italian houses are always full of people and children unwrapping gifts.

On this day many Italian families usually have lunch together in order to spend a pleasant day before returning to their daily routine.

The name **Befana** derives from the Greek word, Epiphany. A legend says the Three Wise Men stopped on their way to Bethlehem to ask an old lady for directions. They invited her to go with them but she refused because she was too busy with her housework. Later she changed her mind so she prepared a basket of sweets and set off to find the Three Wise Men. She was unable to find them, so she gave her sweets to all the children she met on her way, hoping that one of them was the Infant Jesus.



Every year the **Befana** still flies around on her broomstick looking for the Infant Jesus and on her way she stops in every house to give gifts to the children in the hope that she might find the Infant Jesus.

In Tuscany there are celebrations in the main squares of cities and towns.

In Florence there is the famous **Cavalcade of the Wise Men**. It is a large parade in historical costumes. There are ladies and lords, knights, country folks, soldiers and flag-weavers .

In Pistoia the **Befana** comes down from the Cathedral giving children presents and sweets.

Many towns and cities have processions ending with a living Nativity Scene, **Presepe Vivente**, or markets , where toys, sugar charcoal and other candies are on sale. You can see women dressed up as the Befana wandering through the streets in many towns and cities.

In the **Vatican City** , Rome ,a procession of hundreds of people in medieval costumes walk along the wide avenue leading up to the Vatican City, carrying symbolic gifts for the Pope. The Pope says a morning Mass in **St.Peter's Basilica** to commemorate the visit of the Three Wise Men to the Infant Jesus.



There are poems about “**La Befana**”, which are known in slightly different versions throughout Italy.

*La Befana vien di notte
Con le scarpe tutte rotte
Col vestito alla romana
Viva, Viva La Befana!*

The English translation is:

*The Befana comes by night
With her shoes all tattered and torn
She comes dressed in the Roman way
Long life to the Befana!*

Another version is given in a poem by Giovanni Pascoli:

*Viene, viene la Befana
Vien dai monti a notte fonda
Come è stanca! la circonda
Neve e gelo e tramontana!
Viene, viene la Befana*

The English translation is:

*Here comes, here comes the Befana
She comes from the mountains in the deep of the night
Look how tired she is! All wrapped up
In snow and frost and the north wind!
Here comes, here comes the Befana!*



CARNIVAL

Carnival celebrations begin 40 days before Easter and finish on the day before **Ash Wednesday**.

Martedì Grasso is the Italian word for **Mardi Gras** and it is the last day of **Carnival**. The name of this day refers to the practice of eating rich, fatty food before the beginning of **Lent**, which was the time of the year during which Catholic people were not allowed to eat meat in the past, a period of fasting and sacrifice. The name **Carnival** derives from the words “*carne levare*” (stop eating meat).

Carnival has very ancient origins. It is believed to have originated in Roman times when Saturnalia, the Saturn festival, and Lupercalia, the festival of the full moon, were celebrated.

In Italy **Carnival** is a great winter festival celebrated with parades, masquerade balls, entertainment, music and parties.

Children dress up and throw each other confetti. Mischief and pranks are also common during Carnival, hence the saying “A Carnevale Ogni Scherzo Vale”.

The most famous carnivals in Italy are those held in **Venice** and **Viareggio**.



The carnival in Venice dates back to 1268. Masks are an important part of Carnival and Venice is the best city for traditional Carnival masks. Carnival masks, ranging from cheap masks to elaborate and expensive masks, are sold during the year and can be found in many shops in Venice. The main events are gondola and boat parades along the Grand Canal, mask parades in St. Mark's Square and a great fireworks show on Mardi Gras.

Viareggio Carnival is one of the most famous in Italy: it lasts a month with night and day celebrations, floats, parades, masquerade balls and other performances.

The allegorical floats, which are made in papier-mâché and parade along Viareggio promenade, are inspired by Italian and international politics and other events.

Viareggio Carnival dates back to 1873, when a group of young men sitting around the tables of “Caffè del Casinò” had the idea of organizing a parade. They asked the best artisans and sculptors to build astonishing carriages and soon it was a popular event, a moment of joy in the city during the glorious days of the “Belle Époque” in Europe. Then World War I broke out and there was an interruption of the event until 1921 when Viareggio parade returned even more beautiful than before.

In 2001 the new "Cittadella del Carnevale"(Carnival town) was inaugurated; it is a great structure where floats are created. Since 2002 Viareggio Carnival has been named **Italian and European Carnival**.



The symbol of Carnival is **Burlamacco**.



The typical Carnival fritters are ribbons of sweet pasta fried and covered with sugar or honey. They have different shapes: squares, sheets, strips, diamonds, knots and twisted ribbons and different names such as **chiacchiere** (gossip) in the south of Italy, **frappe** (tassels) in Rome, **cenci** (rags-tatters) or *Donzelli* ("young ladies") in Tuscany, **bugie** (lies) in Piedmont, **sfrappe** in Le Marche, **sfrappole** in Emilia, **nastri** (ribbons), **lattughe** (lettuce), **guanti**(gloves), **fritole**, **crostoli**, ("crusts") or **galani** in Veneto.



PALIO DI SIENA (Siena)

The Palio di Siena is a horse race held in Siena twice a year on July 2 and August 16, in which ten horses and riders represent ten of the seventeen “Contrade” or city wards.

The race involves circling Piazza del Campo. A magnificent pageant, the “Corteo Storico”, precedes the race, which attracts visitors and spectators from all over the world.

The first modern “Palio” took place around 1650. At first, one race was held each year, on July 2; a second race, which takes place on 16 August, was added later.

The winner is awarded a banner of painted silk, or “palio”, which is newly created by a different artist for each race.

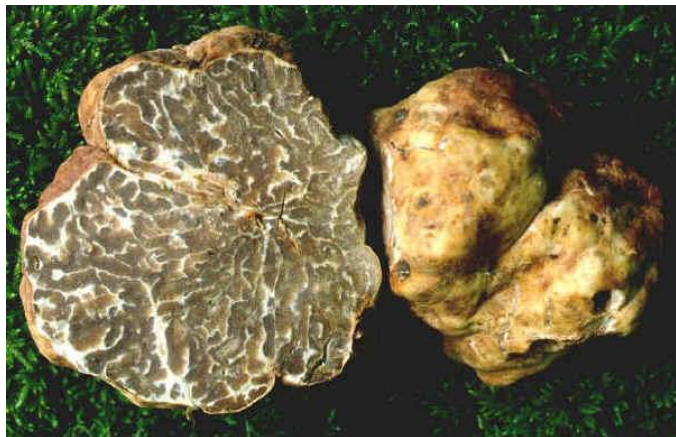
The enthusiasm after the victory, however, is so extreme that the ceremony of attribution of the “Palio” is quite instantaneous, being the first moment of a month-long celebration for the winning ward.

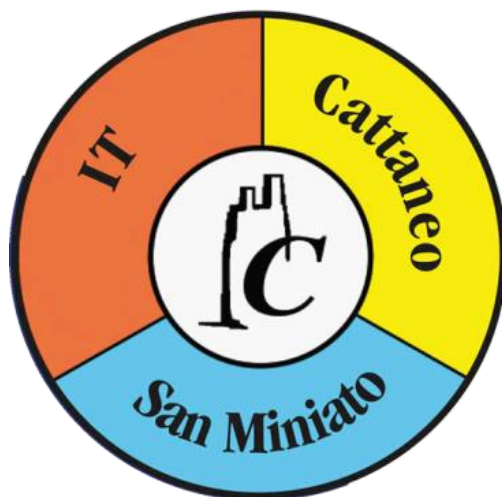


THE NATIONAL WHITE TRUFFLE EXHIBITION (San Miniato)

The National White Truffle Exhibition is held every year in the month of November. It is a market which attracts thousands of Italian and foreign visitors.

It transforms the city into a huge open-air tasting workshop. All the squares have their own markets where truffles and other typical flavours of the San Miniato hills are offered together with specialities from other Italian cities.





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