



# Italian Historical Society of America

## Newsletter

JANUARY 2023

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VOLUME 19, NUMBER 1

### **Tutto Italiano** **Benvenuto a *Tutto Italiano***

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Italy is a land of festivals and celebrations, with most observed regionally, or in the ancient villages and modern cities within one of its twenty regions. Nationwide, the country celebrates [eleven public holidays](#) – with more than half based on religion, and five specifically for Jesus or [Mary](#). Epiphany, on January 6th, celebrates the arrival of the [Magi](#) in Bethlehem. According to [Matthew 2:1-2](#), they followed a star and traveled from the East to worship the Messiah, the "king of the Jews." (Some sources note the visit may have happened up to two years after Jesus was born.)

Although solemn in its foundation, Epiphany is a day of anticipation for Italian children: they'll find out what gifts [La Befana](#) – the Christmas witch – has placed in their stockings. The [legend of Befana](#) is offered through several accounts. Most common is the tale of the Magi stopping at the elderly lady's door and inviting her to join them in their journey to visit the infant.

Befana is too busy cleaning and declines their request, but later changes her mind. She grabs her broom and a basket of gifts for the child and follows after them. Others connect the legend to another good witch, or to the ancient goddesses Strenia or Persephone. (See "The Italian Roots of a Merry Christmas" below.) Befana is unable to find the Magi, but continues her search every year, and delivers gifts to all the children she passes along the way. The popular tradition is prevalent throughout Italy, with regional festivals, neighborhood Befana visits, and stockings hung to collect the gifts.

The legend of Befana poses an interesting twist, and a question: how did the Magi, traveling from Ancient Persia to Bethlehem – all on the Asian continent – lose their way and travel to Italy?

[What Is Epiphany Day In Italy?](#)

[La Befana: Celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany in Italy](#)

[The Tradition of Epiphany in Italy](#)

[The Legend of Old Befana by Tomie DePaola: Read Aloud](#) (YouTube)

[In the Still of the Night, La Befana Decides Who's Naughty and Nice](#)

[All the Must Go Festivals in Italy](#)

**Italian American Press**

The Italian American Press offers a great selection of books – culture, history, memoirs, art, family, food, the supernatural, the natural beauty of Italy, and more – for every interest. Help preserve Italian American heritage and history. Support authors of Italian heritage who write about Italian American and Italian culture and let them know you found their books on the Italian American Press.

After sending the December issue of *Tutto Italiano*, Peter Tafuri, author of [\*Famous Italians You Probably Never Heard Of\*](#), sent this excerpt from his book to share.

### **The Italian Roots of a Merry Christmas**

Decking the halls with boughs of holly, wreaths, lights, the Yule log, gifts, feasts, peace on earth, good will towards men, the Nativity Scene (Creche), Christmas carols and Santa Claus are all part of the celebration of Christmas, and all had their origins in Italy.

Our ancient ancestors celebrated a number of festivals at this time, the chief of which was the Roman Saturnalia, a commemoration of the Golden Age when Saturn, an old Italian god of agriculture, was king and all people were equal and enjoyed peace and prosperity. To celebrate this, wars ceased, houses were decorated with garlands of evergreens and wreaths, a log kept burning, lamps and candles lit, gifts given and large feasts held during which slaves and the poor were not only invited, but even waited on by the rich. A floppy red cap, called a pileus, was worn, and the festivities were overseen by the jolly Saturnalicus Princeps, the Lord of Misrule, and prototype of Santa. A variety of food was enjoyed, including nuts, honey, raisins, cookies, pastries, and numerous fish and meat courses.

December 25, under the old calendar, was the date of the winter solstice, called the Dies Natalis Sol Invictus, the birthday of the sun. The Italian Christmas Eve dinner of seven fishes is a most interesting link to this distant past, and one of the oldest holiday celebrations in the world, possibly stretching back to prehistoric times.

To speculate a bit, in some myths the sun is believed to have been born out of the mouth of a serpent which dwelled in the waters of chaos, and then slain by him (sun), thus a story told in Greco-Roman mythology has Apollo, the sun god, killing the Python; perhaps the eel which forms an integral part of the Christmas Eve meal is a forgotten commemoration of this. As for the number seven, it could signify the journey of the sun both through the seven seas and the seven heavens, later Christianized as a commemoration of the Seven Sacraments. Eating fish itself is also symbolic of the Golden Age, when food was to be had free for all, and in Christianity, the fish is used as a symbol of Christ.

The Roman author Macrobius gives a general menu for a Saturnalia banquet, which included various fish, mussels, oysters, and sphondyli and becaficoes which sound like scungilli and baccala, and the Romans were quite fond of a fish sauce called garum which survives as anchovy sauce. Ancient murals, found at Pompeii and elsewhere, often depict a variety of fish and shellfish, and there is one sometimes called “The Unswept Floor” which consists of fish bones and shells, perhaps the aftermath of a happy evening’s feast.

January 1 was the major feast day of Janus, the god of beginnings, and hence New Year’s Day, celebrated as the Agonalia, with more gifts given.

All of these holidays gradually blended into a twelve day period of merriment, culminating with the eating of a special cake in which a bean was baked; whoever got that slice would be the Lord of Misrule for the next year, a custom still observed in much of Europe on the Epiphany, January 6, an old Roman feast day of the goddess Prosperina (Persephone), who survives in Italian folklore as the good witch Befana, who gives children presents on that day, which is still the case in Italy and other countries.

The Romans spread these celebrations throughout the world, and after Christianity supplanted the old religions, the Church transformed this period of celebration into the

Twelve Days of Christmas, with December 25 being fixed as the otherwise unknown birthday of Christ, who, like the sun, was the light of the world.

As for the custom of setting up a Nativity Scene, sometimes called a Creche, it was started in the year 1223 by St Francis of Assisi, who wanted to hold a special Christmas Mass for the people of the town of Greccio. He set up a manger in a cave, and brought in an ox and ass to stand over it while he celebrated the Mass. An eyewitness said that the Infant Jesus miraculously appeared and was held by the Saint during the ceremony; some of the straw from the manger was kept by the people as a relic, a custom which still survives in parts of the world. And, although sacred music in celebration of the birth of Christ goes back to the times of the Romans, he also introduced the Christmas Carol as we now know it, being the first to write popular songs to be sung by the people, a practice that soon spread throughout Europe.

Italians have contributed many good things to the world, and these Christmas customs are among the nicest gifts of all!

### **Italian American Heritage Project**

“this ... has been at the center of a polarizing debate marred by the continuous spread of misinformation online. Misinterpreted evidence by independent blogs and unsubstantiated claims ... have sidelined the facts ...”

Has a national media outlet finally addressed the roots of the Columbus controversy? No. The above was written for a more contentious topic in American society: the [trial of a musician who was shot](#).

Throughout the years, numerous articles have been published in defense of just about every topic on the planet. One, “The New Disney Movie is the Latest in a Long Line of Hollywood Films that Demonizes the Industry. Why?” written in 2021, rallies against “[the demonization of fashion](#).” (Link is provided; the article was available to the public, but now only accessible to subscribers.) A quote from the article: “It is one of Hollywood’s most beloved, if increasingly inane, clichés.” Is demonizing fashion worse than demonizing those of Italian heritage, who are often depicted in films and television shows as inane clichés of mobsters and buffoons?

In 2019, in San Francisco, the George Washington High School Board of Education [voted to paint over an historical mural](#) of George Washington; “a mural once seen as educational and innovative but now criticized as racist and degrading for its depiction of black and Native American people.” Sued on a legal technicality of an environmental regulation, in May 2022, the Board dropped its appeal of a court order to “[cease all actions related to the removal of the mural from public view](#).”

In defense of the mural cover up, a Parent Advisory Council member said, “students, among others, now experience the reality of being confronted with these images of violence and abuse of power on a daily basis. We cannot deny the impact that they claim this has on their mental health and well-being.” Does the impact of the negative depictions of those with Italian heritage and the criminalization of Columbus not affect children of all nationalities?

As the cover up made headlines, a letter published from a history teacher in Los Angeles notes “my lesson today included relating to my students how the study of history has changed, just in my lifetime. The example was Christopher Columbus. My students learn that his actions led directly to the deaths of millions of people.” ([Link for subscribers](#).) Several months later – still in regard to history, but a different topic – the same source published a piece that included: “It seems today that indoctrination of young impressionable minds is being substituted for education by opinionated, narcissistic professors.” ([Link for subscribers](#).) Teacher or professor; both titles indicate an educator; but what are they teaching?

Another national outlet published an opinion piece in reference to a place of worship

that was vandalized, “A person who desecrates an object that holds meaning for a large group of people can do harm both to that object and to the people who care about it ...” ([Link for subscribers.](#))

Included in the desecration of numerous Columbus statues in 2020, in July that year, was the [statue in Baltimore’s Little Italy](#). Nine days before the statue was destroyed, having received threats about the statue’s demise on social media, the Italian American Civic Club of Maryland [sent a letter to local government officials](#), voicing their concern about the statue.

The statue was left unprotected; and the video shows a violent demonstration that – through common sense – would prohibit anyone from attempting to protect it. Activities “Involving acts dangerous to human life ...” and “Appearing to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population” or “Influence the policy of government by intimidation ...” are the [definition of domestic terrorism](#).

Several days after the statue was destroyed, the mayor of Baltimore “warning those who toppled the monument near Little Italy [stated] that ‘if we identify them, they will be brought to justice.’” [Within the article were several falsehoods](#) about Columbus, misinterpreted as facts – and what seem to be reasons – for destroying the statue. Also in the article, quoted from the U.S. House Speaker, “people will do what they do.” Her comment spurred [another letter from the Civic Club](#), asking for her support to “condemn this hate crime against our Italian heritage.”

In November 2020, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) provided a grant to help restore the Baltimore statue. The reporter noted the removal of Columbus statues throughout America and [erroneously states](#) it’s “due to his [Columbus’s] enslavement and intentional extermination of Native Americans (something he was later arrested and stripped of his titles for) ...”

In October 2022, the [completion of a new Columbus statue](#) was announced. “The group raised funds and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a new statue. The replica was created by a sculptor on the Eastern Shore with a mold created from pieces of the original statue. ... It’s finished, and now we’re looking for an appropriate home for it, ...”

Does an appropriate home for a Columbus statue need police protection? In 2021, an [article in a New York City paper](#) criticized police protection, stating “Monuments to Christopher Columbus on city parkland remain under constant NYPD protection and behind barricades – 10 months after nationwide protests against police brutality ignited a renewed reckoning over historic symbols of oppression.”

Last month, the city of Philadelphia was [ordered to remove the plywood box](#) that has covered the Columbus statue in Marconi Plaza since June 2020. However, [“Officials with the city have four options moving forward](#): they can decide to appeal the court’s decision, file a whole new petition, ask to re-argue the current petition or leave the statue standing. ... Attorneys don’t have a specific timeline on whether to file a new petition, but while they weigh their options, the city is legally obligated to protect the controversial statue.”

Italian Americans who support Columbus have a continued uphill battle. While some victories have been reported, those who are against Columbus have a mission to remove the statues and the holiday from American history.

[Columbus Day Back on Clinton Township Calendar](#) (candgnews.com; December 19, 2022)

[Uncovering of Columbus Statue a Victory in Fight Against Intolerance](#) (pottsmmerc.com; December 16, 2022)

[Richmond Gives Toppled Christopher Columbus Statue to Italian-American Organization](#) (wric.com; December 13, 2022)

[Onondaga Nation Wants Appellate Court's Attention on Syracuse Columbus Statue: 'Fundamentally Offensive'](#) (msn.com; December 2022)

[Connecticut Board Approves Italian-American Monument to Replace Columbus Statue that was Removed in 2020](#) (foxnews.com; November 23, 2022)

[General Info on Anti-Columbus Movement](#) (Click link on page for PDF.)

*Thank you, John, for inspiring this article.*

Keep your Italian heritage alive. An excellent source for learning about Italian American culture and heritage is a museum specifically established to focus on the Italian American experience. Many have virtual exhibits and tours available on their websites. [List of Italian American Museums](#).

Talk with your children (no matter what age), grandchildren, other family members, friends, and educators. Tell them about the significant contributions people of Italian heritage have made to America ... and the world. [List of more than 70 contributors on Thirty-One Days of Italians](#).

Learn about Columbus. It's difficult to correct over 30 years of misinformation, and the rapid spread through digital sources is disheartening. In 2018, the Italian American Heritage Project was established to provide educational resources about Italian American history, heritage, and culture. The website also addresses the Columbus Controversy by providing facts about Columbus, how the controversy started, and why it continues. Read [What is the Truth About Columbus?](#) To understand how Columbus became an important part of American history, read [Christopher Columbus: When Did the Hero Become a Villain?](#) (Some links are no longer active.)

[Lesson plans developed from the letters Columbus wrote after his first voyage.](#)

The groups opposing Columbus Day have an organized agenda to eliminate it from America. The statements of truth and facts posted on Italian American websites are not working. Columbus Day has lost much of its relevance in American history. Indigenous People already have a designated day, and Native Americans have a day and a month to celebrate their culture.

Indigenous Peoples Day – August 9

Native American Month – November

Native American Heritage Day – Friday after Thanksgiving

Visit the [IAHP website](#) to read my articles, learn about the lesson plans, see the resources I've used, and support my work. Donate for a cause – preserving Italian heritage and Italian American history and culture through education. [All donations are tax-deductible.](#)

### **Italian American News**

[NJ Has More Kinds of Italian Christmas Cookies than Most Towns in Italy](#) (nj1015.com; December 16, 2022)

[Bindi: the King of Italian Desserts Conquers New York Too](#) (lavocedinewyork.com; December 16, 2022)

[Documentary Explores Post-War Effort to Boost U.S. Image](#) (franoi.com; December 6, 2022)

[Rocky Marciano's Training Routine Defines His Unbeaten Boxing Legacy](#) (lagazzettaitaliana.com; December 2022)

[Man Turns Showpiece 40-Layer Lasagna on Its Side](#) (washingtoncitypaper.com; October19, 2021)

## News about Italy

[No Energy Worries for Italy's 'Harmonious Walnut Tribe'](https://abcnews.go.com/24, 2022) (abcnews.go.com; December 24, 2022)

Nine Luxury Hotel Openings in Italy (barrons.com; December 20, 2022)

[Paolo Di Paolo: the Man Who Shot the Glamour – and Grit – of Postwar Italy](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/dec/17/paolo-di-paolo-the-man-who-shot-the-glamour-and-grit-of-postwar-italy)  
(theguardian.com; December 17, 2022)

[Italy Lights Up With Solar And Pedal-Powered Christmas Decorations](https://www.forbes.com/sites/amy-stein/2022/12/17/italy-lights-up-with-solar-and-pedal-powered-christmas-decorations/) (forbes.com; December 17, 2022)

[Italian Castle, Palace and Village on Sale for \\$2 Million](#) (cnn.com; December 14, 2022)

[Stanley Tucci's Searching for Italy Fails to Celebrate Region's Rich History](#) (italic.org;  
December 12, 2022)

[Amid Rising Energy Costs, Italian Cooks Go Old-School To Save Gas](#) (npr.com; December 10, 2022)

[Why Should You Keep a Piece of Panettone to Eat in the New Year?](https://italoamericano.org/2022/12/05/why-should-you-keep-a-piece-of-panettone-to-eat-in-the-new-year/)  
(italoamericano.org; December 5, 2022)

[The Town That Panettone Built](#) (eater.com; December 5, 2022)

[Discovery of Ancient Bronze Statues in Italy May Rewrite Etruscan and Roman History](#) (npr.org; December 3, 2022)

[Italian Bracco, the Italian Pointer Dog](#) (americadomani.com; November 10, 2022)

*Buon anno, buon tutto, buona vita,*  
Janice

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January 2023: Volume 19, Issue 01

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