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# St. Joseph's Day Traditions in Western New York

March 2-3, 1991

Castellani Art Museum  
of Niagara University

## THE SAINT JOSEPH'S DAY TABLE

The Castellani Art Museum's St. Joseph's Day project is very much a "work in progress". As is so often the case with folk traditions, a wealth of information about this beautiful celebration is stored in the hearts and memories of Italian-Americans throughout Western New York, but very little has been written about it. Our weekend presentation of St. Joseph's Day traditions at the museum represents only a small part of the much larger task of putting together all the pieces of the tradition people carry within themselves.

Scholars believe the St. Joseph's Day tradition has its roots in 16th century Sicily. In the United States, the tradition continues to live and grow. St. Joseph's tables, for example, which were customarily set out in private homes are now hosted by parishes and social clubs. How has this move from personal to public spaces affected the meaning of the celebration, or the kinds of foods laid out for the feast, or the way a St. Joseph's table should be decorated?

We hope to answer these and many more questions through ongoing conversations with Italian-Americans. Their generous gift of information makes this event possible. More importantly, this information will be documented and become part of the permanent archive of folk traditions kept at the Castellani Art Museum. Of course, the record of St. Joseph's Day customs can never be complete; it grows fuller and more richly detailed each time an Italian-American tradition bearer passes on a cherished memory.

Kate Koperski  
Project Coordinator

Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary and foster father of Jesus, was a descendant of David and by trade a carpenter. His flight into Egypt with his family to escape Herod has long been a popular subject in folklore, literature and art. He is often depicted as an old man carrying a staff. Joseph is the patron saint of carpenters and of the Sicilian capital city, Palermo. In addition, undoubtedly because of Jesus' promise to the dying Joseph that he would bless those who aided the poor, widows and orphans, he is also their patron saint. This last legend, as do so many others concerning Joseph, appears in the *Coptic History of Joseph the Carpenter*, a book that was popular throughout the Eastern world.

In the Roman Catholic Church, March 19 is celebrated as the principal feast of St. Joseph, spouse of the Blessed Virgin, Confessor and Patron of the Universal Church. It was not widely celebrated until its introduction to Rome in about 1479 by Pope Sixtus IV, but had spread to at least seventy known European cities by the time of the Council of Trent. St. Joseph is the patron saint of Buffalo and his feast is extremely popular with Sicilian-Americans in the city and elsewhere on the Niagara Frontier. He is associated with "looking after" family finances. Unpaid bills are sometimes placed under his statue as a petition for assistance. Recently families have taken to burying his statue in the yard of a house on the market, to ensure its quick sale.

The St. Joseph's table, sometimes known as the St. Joseph's altar, dates back to the sixteenth century in Sicily and continues to be celebrated in Sicilian-American enclaves in Texas, Louisiana, California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and New York. Although the plays and processions in his honor documented in Detroit and southern California early in the century are unknown on the Niagara Frontier, the custom of giving a table is found in homes, churches, clubs, schools, nursing homes, and restaurants.



St. Joseph's Table, Italian Village,  
Buffalo, 1990

Photo: Madonna Dunbar

Traditionally, the table was offered to the saint in gratitude for a favor received and a large part of the food was distributed to the poor people of the neighborhood. As an act of humility, the person giving the table might beg for the money to prepare it. Today, domestic tables are prepared for friends and relatives while public tables often charge a small admission fee which is donated to charity. Preparing the public tables is either done in a communal kitchen or those attending bring a dish. For example, each year a lavish St. Joseph's table is presented at Buffalo State College to faculty, staff and students as an offering from the Italian workers employed by the Food Services. A fee is charged to cover expenses, but the considerable labor of preparing the feast is donated. When a domestic table is prepared, friends often come by early to help prepare the food or they bring a donation of bread, pastries or wine.

Whether public or domestic, the table, or a separate altar, is elaborately decorated with St. Joseph statues and holy pictures, flowers, lace-trimmed cloths, fruit, bread and candles. The food, which is prepared for days in advance, includes fish (often salt cod), cheese, zucchini, fennel or artichoke omelets (usually served cold), various pastas, salads and vegetable dishes, fruit, wine, and a large selection of pastries. The focal point of the food display is the St. Joseph's bread baked in the form of crosses, crowns, St. Joseph's staff, and his beard.

Domestic tables are often blessed by the family's parish priest and public tables are blessed by a priest from a neighboring church. Once a common custom in Buffalo, and still occasionally found today, children from the family or a local orphanage attended St. Joseph's tables dressed as angels, saints or the Holy Family. They were seated first and took

the first helping from every dish. Old family pictures show children dressed in white robes with tinsel halos and wings solemnly playing their parts.

It is not unusual for a family to invite fifty guests to a domestic table. At times an entire neighborhood may attend. Each guest leaves with a gift of food, usually a small loaf of bread and an orange. Oranges, like the breads, are an indispensable part of the feast and are featured prominently in the decoration of the table and the altar.

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#### SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

##### **Saturday, March 2, 1991**

1:00 p.m. **Making St. Joseph's Bread** — Michelina Velardi will show how to make bread shaped like St. Joseph's lilies and many of the special "greens" found on his feast table. Frank Balistreri will make bread shaped like St. Joseph's beard, cane and crown.

2:00 p.m. **"The Religious Arts of Italian-Americans in New York City"** — Yard shrines, street processions, Christmas creches, and more are featured in this slide presentation by folklorist Joseph Sciorra.

##### **Sunday, March 3, 1991**

1:00 p.m. **"The St. Joseph's Day Tradition in Western New York"** — A discussion with local Italian-Americans who help keep St. Joseph's Day traditions alive.

A St. Joseph's Day Altar and video documentary of Italian palm weaving will be on display both days.

These events are made possible through generous support from the Folk Arts Program of the New York State Council on the Arts and the Speakers Program of the New York Council on the Humanities.

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