

St. Joseph Table

A Saint Joseph Table is an offering of love, labor and sacrifice in honor of the Patron Saint of the Sicilians and the Universal Church.

The people of Italian heritage in Kansas City have worked year after year to perpetuate this unique tradition of our heritage, brought to America by our grandparents and great-grandparents.

According to legend, the St. Joseph Altar originated in Sicily many centuries ago during a period of drought and famine. In desperation, the people turned to St. Joseph asking his help and intercession.

When the rains finally came and the crops prospered, their prayers were answered. In thanksgiving, the community made offerings to St. Joseph of their most prized possession which was food.

In his honor, they erected a lovely altar, with three levels to represent the Holy Trinity. They draped it simply and beautifully in white, adorned it with flowers. They then selected their finest grain, fruits, vegetables, seafood and wine and invited all the poor to share in their prayer and festivity.

The custom and devotion continue to this day. Each year altars laden with food are prepared on March 19th to celebrate St. Joseph's Feast Day. Reasons for having altars vary: to fulfill a promise; to give thanks for a favor granted, such as the safe return of a loved one from war, for healing the sick, for a happy life, for success in studies or business. It is also an opportunity for the prosperous to share with those less fortunate.

Preparations are made weeks in advance for the Great Day. Much hard work is involved, but participants, family and friends, joyously accept this as a form of sacrifice and a labor of love.

Many hours are spent shaping and designing the elaborate loaves of bread and cookies which decorate the altar. Quite a number of these items are symbolic. The Cuchidati which are large golden brown bread with a glossy finish of egg wash and sesame seeds, is rolled and cut into wreaths representing the Crown of Thorns, hearts symbolizing the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, the cross which represents the crucifixion, the Chalice for water and wine, a Monstrance containing the Host. St. Joseph's staff and beard, palms representing those strewn in Jesus' path in Jerusalem; Paupacoulova (baskets containing dyed eggs-foretell the coming of Easter). There are fish, birds, flowers and whatever the artistic temperament dictates.

The cookies are everyone's favorite. Fig cakes in many lovely patterns, large and small; Biscotti, various shapes and sizes iced in colors of pink, green, white, yellow and chocolate, flavored with almond, vanilla, lemon, anise and other spices. The Pignolati are pastry kernels molded with caramelized sugar into pyramids which represent the pine cones Jesus played with as a child and which children still play with in the Near East. There are fluffy coconut bars and lambs. Bible shaped layer cakes and connoli.

In addition to all the wheat products, there is the great display of fruits, vegetables, and a variety of seafood. No meat is ever served on a St. Joseph Table because the feast falls during Lent



and also because meat was a rare commodity in Old Italy and Sicily. The few goats and cattle were retained for their milk and cheese.

The altars groan under the weight of Baked Redfish, twelve fried whole trout, (which represent Christ's feeding the multitudes). Some claim that 12 fish represent the 12 apostles. Shrimp, crabmeat, and tuna are sometimes used in stuffed vegetables such as green peppers, eggplant, squash, etc. Codfish (baccala), lobster, crawfish, and oysters also enhance the table.

Pasta Milanese is the leading entrée on the Table. The tomato sauce is made with a fish base, anchovy or fresh sardines, wild anise greens, pignola and currants topped with fried seasoned bread crumbs (Modica) instead of cheese. (The bread crumbs are said to represent the sawdust of St. Joseph the Carpenter.)

Most of the vegetables, finocchi, broccoli, spinach, green beans, cabbage, and cauliflower are prepared as "frittata" (omelets). Stuffed artichokes; the carduni (cardoon) are delicious boiled, then dipped in batter and fried.

The green fava bean is also served in a frittata with garlic sauce. When dried, roasted and blessed, it becomes the very popular "Lucky Bean." Legend has it that you will never be broke as long as you carry three fava beans.

This myth began during the famine in Sicily. The fava bean at that time was used as fodder for cattle. Some people today in Calabria still call them "horse beans." In order to survive, the poor people prepared them for themselves. Thus, it became the "Lucky Bean." Today it is considered a delicacy and used in numerous recipes.

A most important custom and a lovely one for the St. Joseph' Day rites is that of having children enact the roles of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Sometimes Angels or favorite Saints are chosen to accompany them. A table is set up especially for them. They are served a very small portion of each food on the altar beginning with an orange segment and other fruits, Lentil soup, Pasta Milanese, fish, frittata, artichokes, olives, salad, cheese, eggs, bread, cookies, rice pudding, confetti (sugar coated almonds), fig, and sesame seed cookies.

This ritual is solemnly observed and usually accompanied by prayer and hymns. Guests dine after the Holy Family has completed their meal.

Then there is much levity and joyful exchanges of camaraderie. The age-old expression is frequently used – "May St. Joseph always smile upon you!"

