

# Here's to Saint John!

*The traditional Italian festa to mark Midsummer.*

June is sweet wherever it is experienced, but Rome is particularly prodigal in occasions for feasting—not only the national holiday to celebrate the birth of the republic, but saints Anthony, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul.

The feast day of Saint John the Baptist, which falls on June 24, is unique because it commemorates the date of his birth; usually saints are honored on the date of their death, which marks their birth into eternal life. Saint John the Baptist, however, was sanctified in his mother Elizabeth's womb and came into the world not only sinless but as the herald of Christ.

In Rome, Saint John's night is celebrated with the eating of snails. That was not a custom I adopted into our home life, even though I was fascinated by the wording of a Veneto recipe for them, which read, "Leave the snails for two days in a wicker basket lined with vine leaves and some pieces of bread soaked in water. . . ."

Saint John the Baptist is the patron and protector of Florence, where, on Saint John's feast day, the festivity includes a reenactment of a 16th-century procession in costume, which precedes a ball game in the Piazza Signoria. I remember from my student days in 1950 the whole spectacle, and though my future husband Antonio, a native of Milan, scoffed at the masquerade as something spurious, to me it was a beautiful spectacle. It was followed by fireworks in the Boboli Gardens, a display that is probably related to the bonfires lit in parts of Europe on Midsummer Eve (June 23) and closely associated with pre-Christian sun ceremonies at the time of the summer solstice.

Saint John is also the patron saint of love and marriage, and it was on the Saturday nearest his feast day that my eldest daughter, Linda, chose to be married. At the wedding feast, however, she forewent the stewed snails that Italian tradition calls for at celebrations of this day. We were living in the States then, and I prepared a splendid outdoor reception incorporating the Italian custom of passing around white sugar-coated almonds

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called *confetti*, which may be where the custom of throwing paper confetti at newlyweds derives from.

The Saint John's day menu, in part:

## Peperonata

2 pounds green, yellow, and red bell peppers  
2 pounds ripe tomatoes  
2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
2 cups onions, sliced  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch thick  
1 teaspoon red wine vinegar  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt  
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
1 tablespoon minced parsley

1. Remove stems, seeds, and membrane from peppers. Cut the peppers into thin strips.

2. Plunge the tomatoes into boiling water for 20 seconds. Cool under cold water and peel. Seed the tomatoes, and chop them into coarse chunks.

3. Put the butter and olive oil in a heavy skillet over moderate heat. When sizzling, cook the onions for 10 minutes, stirring often, until they are translucent and lightly browned.

4. Stir in the pepper strips, reduce the heat to low, cover and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

5. Stir in the tomatoes, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Cover the pan and cook over low heat for 5 minutes longer. Uncover, and cook over high heat, stirring gently, until almost all the liquid has cooked away. Sprinkle with the parsley.

6. Serve the *peperonata* as a hot vegetable side dish, or chill it and serve cold as part of an antipasto.

6 servings

## Meat Ring

3 tablespoons unsalted butter  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup minced onion  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup minced celery  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup minced carrot  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup minced red pepper and green pepper, combined  
2 teaspoons minced garlic  
1- $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds very lean ground beef  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  pound ground pork  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  pound ground veal  
2 eggs, slightly beaten  
1 teaspoon soy sauce  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon white pepper  
1 teaspoon chili powder  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup wheat germ  
2 tablespoons tomato paste dissolved in  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water  
8 watercress sprigs  
4 scallions, sliced

Preheat oven to 350° F.

1. Melt butter in a large skillet over moderate heat. Sauté the onion, celery, carrot, peppers, and garlic until soft, about 10 minutes. Let cool in the skillet.

2. Put the beef, pork, and veal in a large bowl. Add the eggs, soy sauce, white pepper, chili powder, wheat germ, and tomato paste dissolved in water, and incorporate these ingredients into the meats. Add the sautéed vegetables to the meat, and mix together well.

3. Pack the mixture into an ungreased ring form (6-cup capacity) to create the ring shape. Then turn the packed mix out of the form into a shallow baking pan. Bake 45 minutes. Cool.

4. Fill the center of the ring with sprigs of watercress and sliced scallions. Serve at room temperature.

6 to 8 servings

► **HELEN BAROLINI'S** enchantment with Italy grew while she was living there as an exchange student and wife of Antonio Barolini, an Italian poet and journalist. For the first time, she experienced *festae* celebrating harvests and local patron saints. Her diary notes on the relationship between food and Italian customs resulted in the book *Festa*, from which the above excerpt is drawn. *Festa* celebrates special Italian days and the meals that make them special.

Barolini's Italian heritage seasons all of her work with the flavor of strong-willed immigrants and their influence on future generations. She is the author of two novels, *Umbertina* and *Love in the Middle Ages*. Her anthology, *The Dreambook*, is the first major collection of Italian-American women's writings. Barolini received her undergraduate English degree from Syracuse in 1947 and lives in Ossining, New York.

