



St. Joseph Altar

"A Labor of Love"

According to legend, the St. Joseph Altar originated in Sicily many centuries ago. During a period of drought, famine and starvation, the people turned to St. Joseph asking for his help and intercession. Their prayers were answered, the rains came and the crops prospered. In Thanksgiving, families of farmers and fishermen built altars in their homes in honor of the Patron Saint of the Sicilians and the Universal Church, to share their most prized possession, **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, and adorned it with flowers. They then selected their finest grains, fruits, vegetables, seafood, and wines. Two plates of each food are prepared, with one placed each side of the altar to balance the altar out.

The custom was brought to southern Louisiana by Sicilian immigrants, and continues to this day. The altar has become a symbol of the Faith, Tradition, and Culture of the Italian immigrants. Everyone was invited to share in their prayer and festivity, including the poor.

Today altars are made as promises or pledges of Faith and Love of God through the intercession of St. Joseph. Reasons for having an altar can vary greatly, from fulfilling a promise made, to giving thanks for a favor granted, to requesting healing of the sick, to being granted a happy family life, or for success in studies or business. People who visit, are invited to leave their prayer petitions on the altar.

Preparations are begun weeks in advance of the Great Day. Much hard work is involved. It takes a community of family, friends, neighbors and even strangers, who work together in unity, putting their heart and soul into doing their part. It is a time of camaraderie, mingling of spirits, socializing and gathering that stands in testimony to the strong sense of community within the Italian culture. Donations of food, money, and time are graciously accepted. Beggars, who represent Jesus and Mary going from inn to inn begging for a place to stay, go out to ask for donations from individuals and companies. As a result, everything comes from the community.

The cookies are everybody's favorites, and the first to be prepared. The fig cakes are made in small and large decorative sizes. Many cookies, shaped in small balls, can be flavored with cherry, chocolate, coconut, anise, lemon, maple and more. They are iced in the pastel colors of Easter. Snowballs with pecans are covered with powdered sugar. Seed cookies, "Jujulaine," are rolled in sesame seeds before baking. Hundreds of the many colors and flavors are mound on plates to decorate the altar. Dead man's bones, "Ossi de Morte," look like bones and represent the Sicilians that died during the drought and famine.

Candies of various shapes, sizes and colors are a part of the decorative touch. Easter candies and bunnies are used on the altar. The "Pignolati" or "GiGi's" are fried pastry kernels that are molded with caramelized sugar into various shapes, including the pine cones Jesus played with as a child.

There are cakes in many flavors in the shapes of hearts, bibles, lambs, and cross. There are popcorn cakes and watermelon cakes. The altar might also include cannoli, cream puffs, and sfingis (an Italian style beignet).

"Pupacoulova," bread filled with dyed eggs, foretells the coming of Easter. There are breads with beautiful, intricate

cutout designs over a fig filling. The main one in the shape of a "Spada" or monstrance. The "Cuchidati" are large golden brown breads with sesame seeds. Both breads are made in symbolic shapes such as Wreaths representing the Crown of Thorns; Hearts, for the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary; Cross, for the Crucifixion; Chalice for the Water and Wine; Dove for the Holy Spirit; St. Joseph's staff; Palms representing those strewn in Jesus' path in Jerusalem; Fish for Jesus, Fisher of Men.

The great display of fresh fruit includes apples, oranges, bananas, pineapples, strawberries. Some cut into artistic shapes. Most of the vegetables, finocchi, broccoli, spinach, cauliflower, cabbage, green beans, and carduni are batter fried, or prepared as "frittatas or froshias" (omelets). Vegetables such as green peppers, eggplant, squash etc., can be stuffed with shrimp, crabmeat or tuna. There are stuffed artichokes and lentil soup.

No meat is ever placed on the altar. Seafood such as shrimp, Codfish (baccala), catfish, lobster, crawfish, and oysters are also used to enhance the table. There is baked redfish, and twelve whole fried trout, which represent Christ's feeding of the multitudes. Others claim that this represented the 12 Apostles.

The main entrée is "Pasta Milanese," a tomato sauce made with anchovy or sardine with anise greens. It is served with a boiled egg. Instead of cheese, toasted bread crumbs, "Mudica," with a little sugar in them, represent the sawdust of St. Joseph the Carpenter.

The fava bean was used as fodder for the cattle of the Sicilians. During the famine, the farmers prepared them for their own table and thus survived. Today it is dried, roasted, blessed, and given to each visitor as a "Lucky Bean." Legend has it that you will never be broke as long as you carry a "Lucky Bean."

Wine symbolizes the Miracle of Cana, olives the olive orchards of Sicily, and figs the fig orchards.

At many altars, children represent the saints. At Our Lady of Pompeii, we have chosen to allow the very ill of the parish to sit as saints upon the altar. The ceremony is called "Tupa Tupa", which means "Knock Knock" in Italian. It begins with the Holy Family knocking on doors. At the first two doors they are turned away with the words, "There is no room for you here." At the third door they are welcomed with the words, "Whatever I have is yours. Come and eat at my table." The table is set with the finest white linen, china, silver and crystal. The Holy Family sits at the center of the altar, with the saints around them. A bell signals the feeding of the saints. A gun is fired outside to signal to the public that the saints have begun eating. The public is fed after the saints have begun eating. A gun is fired at the middle of the meal, and a third time at the end of the saints meal.

There is an age-old expression that is frequently used:
"May St. Joseph always smile upon you!"