

La Befana Festivals

The town of Urbania, in the Le Marche region, of Italy holds a 4-day festival for La Befana from January 2-6. Children can meet La Befana in *La Casa della Befana*. This is one of the biggest celebrations for La Befana in Italy.

Now *La Befana* flies around on her broomstick each year on the 11th night, bringing gifts to children in hopes that she might find the Baby Jesus. Children hang their stockings on the evening of January 5 awaiting the visit of *La Befana*.

The origins of La Befana may actually go back farther, to the Roman's pagan festival of *Saturnalia*, a one or two week festival starting just before the winter solstice.

At the end of *Saturnalia*, Romans would go to the Temple of Juno on the Capitoline Hill to have their augers read by an old crone. Many pagan traditions were incorporated into Christmas celebrations when Christianity became main stream. *La Befana* was a good substitute for the old woman who read the augers.

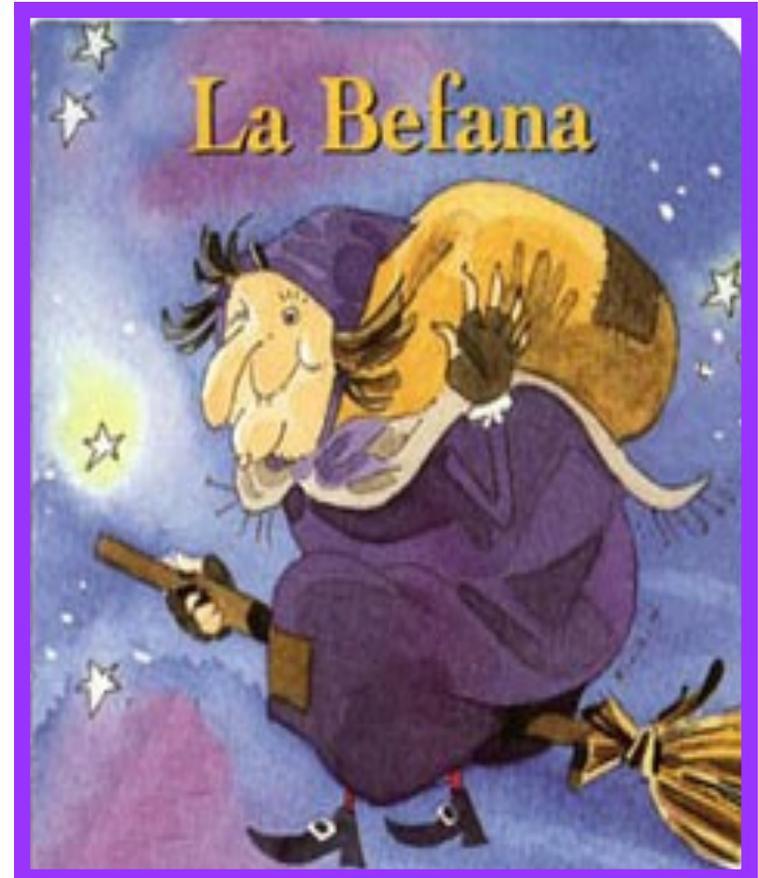
The saying *augur* originated with this practice, too, as it was common to wish someone *good augers*.

PERHAPS IF LA BAFANA GOES TO CHURCH SHE MIGHT FIND BABY JESUS!



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La Befana And Epiphany in Italy



La Bafana searching for Baby Jesus

THE LEGEND

LA BAFANA

A TALE OF A GOOD WITCH IN ITALY

The Feast of the Epiphany, celebrated January 6 with a national holiday in Italy, and the tradition of *La Befana* are a big part of Italian Christmas celebrations. Epiphany commemorates the 12th day of Christmas when the three Wise Men arrived at the manger bearing gifts for Baby Jesus. The traditional Christmas holiday season in Italy lasts through Epiphany.

La Befana is the benevolent old woman with magical powers who brings gifts to the children of Italy on the eve of the Epiphany.

Like any other legend, there are many versions. There is an abundance of sources to research the history, origin, significance and the numerous versions of La Befana—an Italian Christmas tradition.

Derivation: The name *Befana* is derived from the word *epifania*, the Italian name for the religious festival of the Epiphany.

A Tradition for Children: In the weeks preceding Epiphany, the children of Italy are busy writing notes to *Befana* telling her the presents they would most like to receive. And they are on their best behavior because they know that *Befana* will leave a lump of coal, instead of sweets and toys, for ill-behaved youngsters.

This story takes place at the time of the birth of Baby Jesus, the Christ Child. *La Befana* is an old woman who lives in a house in the hills of Italy. She once had a husband and child, but now lives alone. *Befana* spends her days sweeping and baking.

One night, *Befana* notices a bright light in the sky, she thinks nothing of it and goes back to her work of sweeping and baking. Later, a glorious caravan led by Three Wise Men stop and ask *Befana* for directions to Bethlehem and invite *Befana* to join them in their search for the Christ Child. But *Befana* is too busy and knows nothing of this far-away place nor the birth of a special baby.

After the caravan disappeared over the hills, *Befana* thought of how much she missed her child who sadly died at a very young age. She changed her mind and wanted to visit this special child, because she loves children very much.



So she placed some baked goods and gifts for the child in a sack, took her broom to help the new mother clean and raced out after the caravan in search of the Baby Jesus.

Befana soon was lost. And just as she tired, angels appeared from the bright light, the magic star, in the sky to give flight to *Befana* on her broom - after all this was a night of miracles.

She searched and searched for the Baby Jesus. *Befana* still searches, even today, even after all these centuries. And so, every year on the eve of the Epiphany, whenever *Befana* comes to a house where there is a child, she drops in to see if it might be the child she seeks. It never is, but *Befana* leaves a gift anyway. For *Befana* has come to realize, over the years, that her searching is not vain, that in a way the Christ Child can be found in all children.