

This year, trade your green beer and shamrocks for an Italian feast honoring a *different* saint.

St. Joseph's Day

BY NATALIE ERMANN RUSSELL

IN THE SHADOW of that other saint's holiday in March, St. Joseph's Day (March 19) brings Italian-American communities to the table, quite literally. The focus is on "St. Joseph's Table," a feast that includes all manner of breads, vegetables, egg dishes, pasta and desserts.

"It's a time of getting together, kind of like Thanksgiving," says Antonino Pollaro, president of the St. Joseph Society in Lodi, N.J. That's because, legend has it, during a medieval drought and famine, Sicilians prayed to St. Joseph, the patron of workers and the guardian of family. When the famine subsided, they attributed it to the saint and promised to honor him each year with a feast.

Because the holiday often falls during Lent, when Catholics forgo eating meat, the dishes are all without meat. The complete menu varies a bit by region, but there are some solid staples. For pasta, it's usually "St. Joseph's pasta," a spaghetti with meatless red sauce — but often with anchovies or sardines — topped with bread crumbs (to represent sawdust, a nod to the saint's connection with the working man). And there's typically a vegetable dish that is made with stalks of the artichoke-like cardoon. "The cardoon looks like a big celery," says Janice Encalade, co-director of the St. Jo-

Sicilians feasted in thanks for the end of famine.



Special foods prepared for a "St. Joseph's Table" are presented in an altar-like display: "St. Joseph's pasta," left, is meatless.

seph's Day Feast at the St. Cletus church in Gretna, La. "It's not very tasty, but we try to make it tasty. We steam it, then make a batter and fry it."

Fava beans, associated with good luck because they survived that Sicilian drought, often are given away in dried form to bring good fortune. Elaborate breads are shaped into biblical symbols such as fish and Joseph's staff. These and the many other fanciful foods sometimes are displayed on a



Here, a taste of some of the St. Joseph's Day celebrations across the United States:

San Pedro, Calif., March 9
This is the 35th year of the feast at Mary Star of the Sea Parish. The meal includes salad, pasta fagioli (a thick soup with pasta, white beans and broccoli), fried squid and ice cream. The display altar features even more food. "If you can think of it, we have it up there," says organizer Josephine Accetta.

Buffalo, March 9
This feast is held by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Clarence, assisted by a team of volunteers. Frittatas (Italian-style omelets) — some with cardoons — are the big draw. To get around the lack of meat, there are "egg balls," made with cheese, bread crumbs and, of course, eggs.

◀ **Lodi, N.J., March 15**
The St. Joseph Society organizes a traditional feast table in March for the public and hosts a big festival on Labor Day weekend in honor of St. Joseph (as the patron of laborers).

New Orleans, March 14
About 3,000 people attend this feast in Gretna, La., just outside of New Orleans. (This holiday is big in the Big Easy.) On the menu: fried fish, omelets, broccoli casserole, cakes and more.

Tampa, March 19
A local Italian family has been holding this massive feast for more than 30 years, all to benefit the MacDonald Training Center, which works with people with disabilities. Some 1,000 Tampa residents come to feast on pasta, fish, cardoon patties and sfinci. ❧



three-tiered altar for guests to behold.

As for dessert, celebrations generally include zeppole or sfinci, fried-dough confections that are filled with ricotta, fruit or cream, or just drizzled with honey.

And no good celebration is complete without a take-home bag of cookies, fruit — and a fava bean.