

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 7, 2020:
[LA BEFANA](#)

It's a week of holidays here in quarantined-history-land. Today we look at the Italian legend of La Befana, a Christmas witch who gives Santa a run for his money.

THE STORY

In Catholicism, January 6 is the feast of the Epiphany: the last of the twelve days of Christmas and the day on which the three visiting kings are said to arrive to meet the baby Jesus.

And in Italian legend, it's when La Befana comes to visit. And trust me, your holiday life needs La Befana, because if the Christmas season needs anything, it's a cranky, elderly Italian lady with a heart of gold, a sack full of cheese, and an advance wine order for a nice red.

According to legend, Following the star to Jesus' birth, the Three Kings stop at the house of an old woman. Too busy with housework to follow the wise men onward, she has second thoughts and packs her broom and a basket of homemade baked goods for Mary, thinking that a new mother might appreciate a clean floor and a meal more than gold or myrrh. Unable to catch up with the magi, she runs so fast she is lifted into the sky and has spent forever since in search of the Christ child. La Befana leaves gifts and sweeps up wherever she finds a child sleeping, since you never know divinity is hiding.

It's good manners to put out a snack for Befana, too, but rather than cookies and milk, families usually leave "a glass of wine and a plate of sausage and broccoli," or a nice ricotta since the old lady might not have all her teeth. La Befana brings gifts of little pastries or sweets, but just like Santa, beware if you're on the naughty list: she may also decide to leave you ashes or lumps of coal.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

What are your family's holiday traditions? What about them is meaningful for you?

What is the purpose of a folk tale?

What can we learn about a group of people by reading and studying their traditional stories?

What role does storytelling and oral tradition play in modern life?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

["Forget Santa. You Should Celebrate La Befana,"](#) *Slate*, December 18, 2015

["Festa della Befana,"](#) La Tavola Marche (VIDEO)

["The Legend of Old Befana,"](#) Elementary School Read-Alouds (read-aloud of Tomie dePaola)

["Myths, Folktales and Fairy Tales,"](#) Scholastic