



Palermo Saved from the Sea on Saint Lucia Day

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Abstract

On the day of Saint Lucia, December 13th, an event that happened centuries ago is commemorated in Palermo. In the 17th century, the city, starving to death due to a famine, thought it was at the end of its days. Unexpectedly, a ship loaded with grain arrived from the sea and landed in the port of Palermo. Thus, was born an original recipe based on wheat which is still prepared only on the day of Saint Lucia and which excites all Palermitans.

IMAGE | *La Cala, the ancient port of Palermo, and Saint Lucia. (Source: Graphic composition by the author).*

Keywords

Religious gastronomic traditions | Cuccìa | Wheat cakes | Arancine | Rice balls | Panelle | Chickpea fritters | Palermo | Italy

Try to gamble an autochthonous Palermitan with a game of mental associations by evoking the name of "Saint Lucia". He/she would promptly say "*cuccìa!*", with a sparkling glow in his eyes! His/her mind would be in fire with a gastronomic kaleidoscope, which has little or nothing to do with religious devotion.

The logical connection between the two words is revealed by an ancient legend which speaks of the enormous hunger suffered by the Palermitans due to the severe famine that struck the city at the end of the 17th century. When it seemed that there was no escape left, salvation unexpectedly arrived from the sea: on 13th December 1646, the day on which Saint Lucia is celebrated, a ship full of wheat docked at the port of Palermo. The gaping citizens believed in a miracle and attributed it to the Saint.

Palermitans were so hungry that they quickly grabbed the precious food from the ship and, to eat as fast as they could, they simply boiled the wheat as grains and ate them just like this. The traditional wheat milling done to obtain flour from which making bread and pasta would have been a long procedure, way too long for a population starving with famine.

Since then, on Saint Lucia's day Palermitans commemorate the salvation that arrived from the sea by repeating the saving procedure to eat boiled wheat grains. The popular devotion to the Saint categorically forbids on this day to eat food based on flour; are therefore banned bread and pasta, but also pizza, buns, and similar. A traditional palermitan saying goes like this: "Santa Lucia, pani vurria! Pani nu nn'hiau: accussì mi staju" ("Oh Saint Lucia, I would love to have some bread! But I don't have any: therefore, I don't pretend any").

One would think that this is a day of food deprivation, if it wasn't for the extraordinary Sicilian culinary fantasy, capable of transforming the devotional starvation in a glorious gastronomic feast. Wheat grains, as by tradition, must be consumed as whole and boiled, yet nothing forbids to mix them with other food such as dairies or candied fruit, or maybe tiny chocolate crumbs and scented spices. And there you go: from the mix of these ingredients *cuccìa* is born, a delicious dessert devotedly appearing on the tables of all Palermitans on the early morning of every 13th of December, gluttony replacing biscuits and croissants, also reappearing at the end of supper as sweet devotion to the Saint.



The cuccìa, spoon dessert of the Palermitan tradition.

Don't you even bother to ask for *cuccia* any other day of the year: no chance! *Cuccia* is prepared only on Saint Lucia's day. The original recipe consists in a procedure that lasts for three days (a sort of spiritual ritual!). During the first two days, wheat grains are soaked in water. On the third day, wheat is boiled slowly for at least two hours. After cooling down, wheat grains are mixed with goat ricotta cheese, which has been previously seasoned with sugar and passed through a fine strainer. This procedure is important to make sure ricotta cheese acquires a velvety texture. Then, chocolate chips, candied pumpkin, caramelized cherries and cinnamon powder are added to garnish.

Let's not forget that *cuccia* is a dessert and cannot be the only food available for the entire day. So, the imagination of Palermitans comes to help once again, searching for alternative recipes based on food that has not been banned by the tradition. Not banned are, for instance, rice and chickpeas. Therefore, the incontestable Queen on Saint Lucia's day becomes the *arancina*, a golden and crunchy rice ball which looks very similar to an orange, and which is the casket of greedy fillings. Likewise, the boss of street food become the *panella*, a crunchy fritter made with chickpeas flour seasoned with parsley.

All in a sudden, from dusk to dawn, the bakeries of Palermo turn into frying shops and, for one single day, *arancine* replace bread on the sales counters and mischievously blink at the passers-by.



Showcase in the historic centre of Palermo with arancine stuffed with different varieties of toppings. (Photo: Maurizio Carta).

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To not tease the Patron Saint of Palermo, Saint Rosalia, the Palermitans dedicate one *arancina* also to her (just in case she feels jealous of Lucia!).



Showcase of the historic centre of Palermo which dedicates the arancina to the patron saint of the city, Saint Rosalia. (Photo: Maurizio Carta).



Seller of panelle in the historic centre of Palermo.

The vendors of street food appear at any junction, selling *panelle* that have been just fried, to be rigorously eaten as they are, and not as the filling of a burger, as instead are usually consumed during the other days of the year.

With no doubt, in Palermo, on the 13th of December, everyone knows that renouncing to bread and pasta (the daily indispensables in Palermitans diet), more than a penance becomes the excuse to indulge into – at least – one *arancina*, a few *panellas* and a spoonful of *cuccia*.

A ceremonial that is “totally” devotional and, therefore, a must-do for every faithful Palermitan!

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