ITALIAN HOLIDAYS

- November, 21st: Venice honors St. Mark. His feast day is actually April 25th, but since that is also Liberation Day, the city gives its patron saint his own holiday in November instead

- December, 7th: Milan honors St. Ambrose, one of the key founders of the early Roman Catholic Church.

December 8: This holy day commemorates the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The Day of the Immaculate Conception is often considered the start of the Christmas season, when lights and nativity scenes go up and world-famous Christmas markets commence.

December 25: Christmas is a wonderful time to visit Italy, thanks in large part to the gorgeous decorations and festive atmosphere. Prepare for Christmas like a real Italian with a fish dinner on *la Vigilia* (Christmas Eve), followed by midnight mass! Christmas Day is celebrated with a large lunch with family

December 26: The day of Santo Stefano (Saint Stephen), the day after Christmas, the first martyr for Christ.

Capodanno (New Year's Eve/ New Year's Day, December 31st-January 1st)

New Year's celebrations begin on December 31st with the standard 10-second countdown to midnight, and celebratory fireworks. What makes *Capodanno* a bit different in Italy is the food: Italians have a tradition of eating lentils on New Year's Eve, as it is believed they will bring money and good fortune in the new year.

Italians like to wear red underwear to start the year with good humor and fortune, but also throw away something old to symbolize the will of getting rid of all negativity associated with the year about to end.

Befana (Epiphany, January 6th)

Similar to an American Christmas celebration, the Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th. If you are big on Santa Claus and your kids believe in magic and fairy tales, then this holiday is a perfect opportunity for combining American and Italian traditions. Italians set out a large sock, or stocking, by the fireplace on the night of the 5th, so that the old woman named Befana, a female Santa Claus-like character, will come and fill it with sweets and presents - if the child was good- or charcoal -if the child was bad. It is also customary to leave some milk and cookies for Befana to enjoy. Children can write letters to her requesting specific gifts.

The Epiphany originally symbolized the birth of Jesus. It is still celebrated as that in the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, when the Catholic Church decided to celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December instead, the meaning of the holiday changed, at least for Catholics.

Greek for "miracle," the word "epiphany" came to be known as a celebration of three important events that took place early in Jesus' life: the visit to the a newly born Jesus of the Three Wise Kings, or Magi, his baptism by John the Baptist, and the first miracle he performed, at the wedding in Cana.

In Italy, the Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season: it is, literally, the Twelfth Day of Christmas. As the saying goes "l'Epifania tutte le feste porta via", which can be rougly translated as "Epiphany takes all the holidays away".