

# The Voices of the Befanotti

Every year on the night of **January 5**, the hills and villages around Lucca echo with familiar sounds: the creak of old windows opening, footsteps on cobblestones, and above all the chanting of the *befanotti* – the traditional singers who wander from house to house reciting local *filastrocche* to welcome the Befana.

In much of Italy, the **Festa della Befana** belongs to childhood. But in the province of Lucca, especially in the Garfagnana, Mediavalle del Serchio, and small villages around Bagni di Lucca, the celebration is still a living piece of folklore – performed with joy, humour, and a touch of rustic mischief.

## A Tuscan Epiphany Tradition with Deep Roots

The Befana is the legendary old woman who visits homes on Epiphany Eve, filling stockings with sweets or coal. But in the Lucchesia, the ritual has long included something more: communal song, improvised blessings, and friendly requests for treats.

The *befanotti* – groups of villagers, once mostly men, now often mixed or even made up of children – travel from door to door singing good wishes for the new year. In exchange, families offer small gifts: a glass of wine, walnuts, oranges, a slice of castagnaccio, or (today) a few coins for local charities.

It is part-performance, part-community ritual, part-living archive of the dialects of the Serchio Valley.

## The Befana Herself in Lucchese Tradition

Local folklore imagines the Befana not just as a magical figure but as a familiar mountain presence – an old woman of the woods, a guardian of hearth and home. In some stories, she lives among the chestnut groves of the Apuan Alps; in others, she is a wise crone watching over the Serchio river.

She is not elegant – her shoes are broken, her clothes patched – but she is deeply benevolent, the symbolic protector of children and families.

## The Rhymes of Lucca and the Serchio Valley

While many Italian Befana rhymes are known nationwide, the Lucchese variants have a unique warmth and musicality. They are often improvised, always dialectal, and full of rustic humour. Below are a few typical examples heard in the region.

### 1. A classic Garfagnana opening rhyme

This short chant announces the arrival of the singers:

**Siamo i befanotti  
che vengon dalla montagna,  
portiamo alle famiglie  
la pace e la cuccagna.**

A blessing for abundance (*cuccagna*), it is a recurring theme in the region's agrarian past.

### 2. The traditional request for hospitality

Often sung before knocking or at the doorway:

**Apriteci la porta,  
siamo la Befanina,  
portiamo la fortuna  
a tutta la famigliolina.**

The diminutive endings (*-ina*, *-ina*) are typical of Lucchese rural speech, giving the rhyme a soft, affectionate tone.

### 3. A Bagni di Lucca variant full of humour

Bagni di Lucca villages often include playful teasing: Here the Befana is imagined hiking down from the Apennines, wooden clogs clacking on stone paths:



**La Befana vien pei monti,  
coi suoi zoccoli sonanti;  
se gli date un po' di vino,  
vi farà più ricchi d'anni.**

### 4. A Serchio Valley farewell verse

This is often sung as the *befanotti* move to the next house, a typical mix of Christian blessing and folk formula:

**Grazie della cortesia,  
Dio vi porti allegria;  
la Befana è già vicina,  
buona notte e buona mattina.**

## A Song for the Whole Community

Unlike the more commercial Epiphany celebrations found in cities, the Befana traditions of Lucca retain a strong collective spirit. Villages like Coreglia Antelminelli, Castiglione di Garfagnana, Galliciano, and Fabbrie di Vergemoli still organize official *Befanate* – street performances, bonfires, and rounds of singing that continue late into the night.

Historically, these chants were tied to the agricultural calendar: they marked the end of the long winter solstice cycle, a symbolic cleansing of the old year, and a hopeful invocation for the one to come. The singing groups, passing from home to home in the cold January darkness, were almost like traveling blessings.

Today, the custom is more festive than religious, but the sentiment remains the same: good wishes shared through music.

## The Survival of an Oral Heritage

The *filastrocche* of the Befana may seem simple, but they preserve fragments of Lucchese dialect, ancient blessing formulas, echoes of pre-Christian winter rituals, and a sense of community identity.

As Italy becomes more urban and globalized, these local rhymes act as anchors. They remind the people of Lucca where they come from—and how winter nights once sounded along the Serchio, when the dim light of lanterns and the rhythm of rough voices were enough to warm whole villages.

## The Magic Endures

On the evening of January 5, if you walk through a small village in the Lucchese mountains, you still might hear it: a chorus of voices approaching through the cold, the laughter of children, the gentle tapping on a wooden door.

*Apriteci la porta...* is both a request and an invitation: to open not just the door, but the year ahead – with warmth, with good fortune, and with the simple music of a centuries-old tradition.

– by Francis Pettitt

You can follow Francis' blog at [longoio3.wordpress.com](http://longoio3.wordpress.com)