

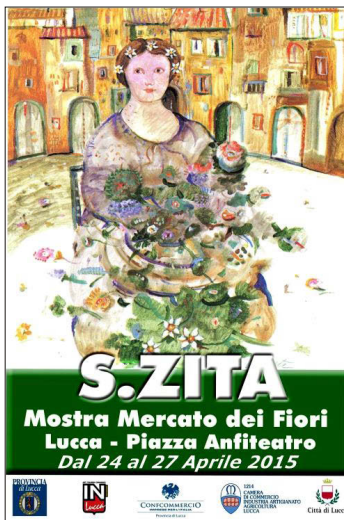
From Flour to Flowers: Festa di Santa Zita

What better idea for a flower fair than Saint Zita's day, 27 April (and the days before: 24, 25, 26)! Dodging short but intense April showers one year, we spent a colourful afternoon in and around Amphitheatre square in Lucca admiring the blooms and buying some very prosperous geraniums for our winter-depleted balcony boxes.

In the great basilica of San Frediano the saint's body had been hauled out of her side-chapel and placed on display in the main nave. Her followers bought some white flowers from a desk to the right, touching them against the glass containing her mummified body. A verger gave us a commemorative *immaginetta*.

Saint Zita, patron saint of that increasingly rare species, the domestic servant (and, perhaps more usefully for most of us to be invoked for help in finding lost keys, thus avoiding that boring dialogue: *You've got the car keys. No, I haven't! Yes you have.* etc.) was a poor peasant girl born near Monsagrati, where there is a chapel dedicated to her. I visited it a few years back when it was being painstakingly restored. She was taken into employment by a rich family as a scullery maid. Through plain hard work she became principal housekeeper. (Saint Zita believed that a hard graft rather than prayer was the way to produce results – which I would certainly not disagree with!) She was generous to the poor and needy and on one occasion was accused of having stolen bread to give to them. Zita was searched but instead of the stolen goods they found beautiful flowers in her apron pockets (hence the appositeness of having that market fair on her day).

Saint Zita should also be patron saint of those, like me, who use bread-making machines, since on one occasion she had to leave kneading the morning loaf to visit a sick relative. Her fellow servants went into the kitchen and found a host of angels baking the bread instead! These and other miracles are depicted in large canvases on the walls of the chapel dedicated to her. I should add that although an uncorrupted body is regarded as a sign of sainthood a beautiful appearance is not: gazing on the saint's mummified face I was reminded of that unflattering Luccan expression *E' brutta come Santa Zita* (She's as ugly as Saint Zita, which could more idiomatically be translated as she's as ugly as sin!).



For those with connections to the Emerald Isle it may come as a pleasant surprise that the Basilica of San Frediano was built by an Irish prince: Frigidianus was the son of King Ultach of Ulster and his remains are beneath the high altar.

As a result of a pilgrimage to Rome he became, first, a hermit on the Pisan mountain separating Lucca from Pisa and then appointed bishop of Lucca in the 6th century. Among his miracles was that of diverting the Serchio river (running through the Garfagnana and Mediavalle, joined by our own river Lima at Bagni and then skirting Lucca to reach the sea near Marina di Vecchiano) and saving Lucca from flooding by merely using a rake which the waters followed without harming him. A fresco on a side chapel wall in the left aisle of the basilica illustrates this story. Actually, San Frigidianus would be sorely needed today since the Serchio has caused grievous damage to industries and farmland by breaking through its banks in 2009 and 2010 and yet again creating serious concerns in November 2013. Perhaps hydraulic engineers and those silly enough to build on flood-plains should adopt him as their patron saint.

San Frediano's basilica should, anyway, be seen just to admire its pure Romanesque architecture, its noble proportions, the grand baptismal font and the wonderful mosaic by the great Luccan artist Bonaventura Berlinghieri on its façade.

– by Francis Pettitt

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