

BRIGIDINI: COOKIE OF POSSIBILITY

"Bricitini" were the thin round cookies my family prepared for holidays. The basic ingredients were eggs, flour, butter, and sugar; we added whisky, anise oil, and vanilla. As a child, I figured the Italian name "Bricitini" had to mean something--for example, chocolate chips cookies had chocolate inside; Brownies were brown; sugar cookies were mostly sugar. However, nobody could explain why Bricitini was Bricitini. I thought the word must mean flat and believed the cookie was a miniature gold monstrance, the spiky-edged, circular object that the priest paraded around the church on special occasions.

Several years ago, while doing research, I came across a paragraph about "brigidini," a waffle cookie named after St. Bridget. I photocopied the article for my uncles, aunts, and cousins to let them know that we had been mispronouncing the word for fifty years. "Imagine that," they said, shaking their heads. "Why would a cookie be named after a saint?"

Families are funny. Although for all the years we called the cookie "Bricitini," no one, as far as I can remember, ever wondered why other Italian families called the same cookies "pizzelle," "piazella," or most often "pit-sell."

According to food historians, pizzelles originated in a middle region of Italy in ancient times and were made to mark an annual celebration, "The Festival of the Snakes." The people celebrated by making pizzelle, after having chased the serpents from their serpent overrun village. Imagine! Had some lucky fellow just happened to have a pizzelle iron up his sleeve? Maybe he hit a snake over the head with it.

Perhaps more interesting is knowing that St. Bridget of Ireland, made a "virtual" pilgrimage to Italy. (Her close friendship with St. Patrick, the saint who ran the snakes out of Ireland, is well documented.) St. Bridget appeared in the hills outside Florence in the mid-800's, which was about 425 years after her birth. According to St. Donatus, the Holy See of Fiesole and also an Irish man, St. Bridget visited his deathbed to give him spiritual strength and comfort. His story, preserved in manuscript in the Laurentian Library in Florence, tells of this

miracle: the great saint flew to his deathbed, and before she touched him, St. Bridget hung her cloak on a sunbeam to dry. Could the sunbeam, because of its shape, be inspiration for the cookie? Or the miracle?

Maybe, maybe not. During St. Donatus's life as Bishop of Fiesole, two of his friends from Ireland, Andrew and another Bridget, hermit-pilgrim brother and sister, lived nearby in Sasso. This later St. Bridget, who was named after the first great St. Bridget of Ireland, lived in a valley cave. Her brother lived in another cave on the mountainside. Could the convent in the town of Brigida, named after this St. Bridget, be the location where the cookies were first baked?

For several centuries after the later St. Bridget died, Irish pilgrims and hermits continued to inhabit the caves in Brigida. The Virgin Mary also appeared twice in the caves. So think about this: Dante, who spent part of his childhood under the shadow of Sasso, visited the caves. He most likely heard Irish tales of the Otherworld, of both Bridgets, and of Purgatory, since it was the Irish who gave us the concept of Purgatory.

For sure, St. Bridget left her mark in Italy--on a cookie, in a church, a town, and in legends. In addition, some of her remains are in Rome. (FYI: Her hand, encased in a silver box, is in Lisbon; other parts of her are buried alongside St. Patrick in Ireland.)

Too, St. Bridget is the patron saint of both metal work and illumination. Could the Italians who thought up the cookie named it after this patron saint because she guarded over the flat-iron cookie mold? Moreover, could one of the original cast-iron cookie makers also be the same man who happened to have a pizzelle iron up his sleeve when the snakes took over his town? Maybe.

Most recently, I've realized that "Bricitini" was most likely a dialectal pronunciation of "brigidini," so we were all pronouncing the word okay from the beginning. My daughter, who has been eating "brigidini," since she was able to chew, thinks of the cookie as a snowflake that comes at Christmas time, an altogether different interpretation.