



The Presepe—the Italian Nativity Scene..... but there's more to it than you might expect!



One of the most loved Christmas traditions for Italian families is the *Presepe*. A *Presepe*, or *Presepio* as it is sometimes called (both are correct), is a Nativity scene, but there's more to it than you might expect!

The *Presepe* Family Tradition

On December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Italian families start to build their *Presepe*. All the familiar characters are present—Mary, Joseph, the Wise Men and the shepherds—but that's just the beginning! Outside is the entire village of Bethlehem, after all Italians take pride in creating beautiful and detailed scenes with a host of minor characters populating the village. The most important detail is the manger, which remains empty until Baby Jesus makes his entrance and is finally placed in it on Christmas Eve. *Presepi* traditionally stay out on display in Italian homes until after the Epiphany on January 6.

Here are a few pictures of some family Nativity scenes.



So how is a *Presepe* made? A less elaborate scene might be made with gathered materials like moss, grass, sand, foil and cellophane. A more elaborate one would require cardboard, pieces of wood, styrofoam, paper

mache, clay and more. Once the structure is build, purchased figurines and items are placed throughout, including lights. [Click here](#) to see a short video of the construction.

History of the *Presepe*

The tradition of Nativity scenes dates back to the 13th century. St Francis of Assisi is credited with popularizing the *presepe* when, in the year 1223, he built a manger in a cave in Greccio using real animals and people and celebrated Christmas Eve mass.

The city of Naples is world famous for its Nativity scenes. These are known as *Presepi Napoletani*. The first Nativity scene in Naples is thought to go back to 1025 and was in the Church of S. Maria del Presepe (Saint Mary of the Nativity). This was even before St. Francis of Assisi had made Nativity scenes very popular!

One special thing about Neapolitan Nativity scenes, is that they always have extra every-day people and objects, such as houses, waterfalls, food, animals and even figures of famous people and politicians!

Naples is also the home to the largest Nativity scene in the world—the *Presepe Cuciniello*—which has over 600 objects on it! Can you locate the manger? The answer is at the end of this message.



Via San Gregorio in Naples

Naples is known for creating some of the most elaborate and artful Presepi in Italy. Via San Gregorio is a street that has become famous for the craftsman who hand-carve and paint figurines from wood and terracotta. They construct *Presepi* of all sizes, some costing hundreds of euros. Take a stroll down the street by [clicking here](#).

Trust us when we say that you haven't seen a Nativity Scene until you've seen an Italian *Presepe*. If an Italian family welcomes you into their home during Christmastime, bring along a panettone and be ready to compliment their *Presepe*!

Answer to "Can you locate the manger?"--it's the colorful area slightly up and left of center.

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