



BY KRISTIN D'AGOSTINO



Lori Bruno, the strega from Salem. Her family hails from the slopes of Mount Etna, the active volcano in Sicily.



Artistic depictions of real-life strega, Lori Bruno.
(Lightshed Photography Studio)

I first met Lori Bruno 15 years ago while working as a reporter in Salem, Massachusetts, covering the so-called Witch City's mix of art, maritime history, and vibrant pagan community. At the time Bruno, 68, was introduced to me as a true Italian *strega*, one who practiced Sicilian witchcraft. Bruno had just opened a new shop in town, and I was asked to cover it for a story. Having grown up in a religious home where even the Smurfs were forbidden for their mystical influence, I had some negative preconceived notions about witchcraft. But, during a sit-down visit to her home, Bruno quickly won me over. With her broad smile and Boston accent, she felt instantly familiar, like a long-lost Italian relative I'd never met. She called me "Bella," made me tea, and chatted with me for hours in her kitchen about our common southern Italian roots and its superstitions.

I recently picked up the phone to reconnect with the now 83-year-old Bruno, and soon we were chatting like no time had passed. These days, after a COVID-induced hiatus, the real life *strega* is back to giving psychic readings and running her Salem shop, Magika, which sells books, candles, and other new-age merchandise.

It's no surprise the long-time witch is thriving. Bruno's combination of grandmotherly warmth, Italian folk magic, and psychic ability has garnered much attention in the past five decades, including a spread in *The Wall Street Journal* ten years ago during the housing crisis, when she was hired by new homeowners to perform cleansing rituals on foreclosed homes believed to hold bad vibes.

A second-generation Italian American whose parents hailed from Sicily and Naples, Bruno grew up in Brooklyn in the 1950s in a neighborhood rich with cultural diversity. Immigrant



The inside of Magika. (Lightshed Photography Studio)

neighbors, many of them Italian, would regularly come to her house to visit her mother who was known for her healing powers.

“She would take away headaches and say prayers for the *evil eye*,” Bruno recalled. “She would do readings and tell people about the dead.”

Bruno’s own first supernatural experience came at age 12, when she looked over at a classmate in school and suddenly experienced a vision accompanied by a cold chill.

“Her lower back looked gray,” Bruno recalled. “I went home and told my mom and she said that little girl had cancer of the kidneys.”

Over the years, Bruno has built up her psychic abilities, using them to help the community. After working for NASA, creating technical drawings for nearly ten years in the 1960s, she gave up her career and devoted herself full time to psychic service. Since then, she has worked with police to find missing people, counseled married couples, and cast fertility spells on barren women.

Several years ago, a woman came to her unable to conceive and asked for help to have a baby boy. So Bruno accompanied her to a fertility treatment.

“The doctor came in, and I was giving her unsalted cashews,” Bruno said. “Have you noticed cashews look like a fetus?”

While the doctor performed treatment, Bruno cast a spell that she believes helped the woman conceive.

“She had a boy,” she said. “I am the child’s godmother. [The couple] is Christian but they have a Strega Nonna.”

Bruno’s healing practices are a witch’s brew of cultural beliefs. Roman, Egyptian, and Catholic statues all fill her Salem home. A typical workday may include prayers to Michael the Archangel, the Egyptian goddess Isis, or the Black Madonna—a dark-skinned version of the Virgin Mary that many believe holds unique healing powers. Bruno keeps a lit candle in front of the Black Madonna at all times and prays regularly to “the great mother,” before performing healing rituals.

Bruno attributes her healing powers to her Sicilian roots. The island’s cultural diversity through the centuries, she says, has made it fertile ground for magic.

“At one time, Sicily was a mix of Jews and Italians,” she explained.

“The Jews know all about bad magic, good magic. On the kabbalistic tree of light, witchcraft exists in the first three triads. Low magic works with earth currents and herbs. When you want to learn more, you climb the ladder. My family learned more.”

According to Bruno, two kinds of magic were practiced in Italy with the earliest recorded references to witchcraft dating back to the 16th century when many—mostly peasants—were put to death for their beliefs. *Benandanti*, Bruno says, is magic focused on healing and blessing people. Historically, those who practiced it blessed crops, marriages, and babies being born. *Melandanti*, on the other hand, is magic focused on inflicting harm upon others. One of the most well-known Italian superstitions, *malocchio*—or the evil eye—is believed to be brought on by an insincere compliment delivered by someone who secretly envies another’s qualities or possessions. It reveals itself in the form of a headache and can only be cured by someone gifted with healing abilities, usually a woman who whispers a secret prayer.



Lori Bruno’s shop in Salem, Magika. (Lightshed Photography Studio)

As a healer, Bruno has often helped relieve victims of *il malocchio*. The process, she says, involves pouring three drops of olive oil into a bowl along with a sprinkle of salt. She then punctures the drops of oil with a lit match and waits for the oil to form a line or a circle, which indicates the gender of the person who brought on the bad luck. The victim is then blessed with a secret prayer. In Italy, Bruno says, the most superstitious individuals have learned to ward off the evil eye before it happens, wearing talismans or making the symbol of horns with their hand.

I'm not sure how I feel about the evil eye, but I know I carry superstitions of my own. The last time I saw Lori Bruno for our kitchen interview, I remember being surprised when, at the end, she took down a painted Italian pitcher from a shelf and handed it to me as a parting gift. Convinced the vessel may hold some secret spell, I left it on the "free" table in the newspaper's employee break room.

These days, I like to think I'm a little more open-minded. Having never experienced a psychic reading, I recently decided to give it a try and asked Bruno for a phone consultation.

The results were amazingly right-on. After giving a creepily accurate read of my love life, she honed in on other things.

"You will always be creative. I see things growing all around you," she said. At the end, in typical Strega Nonna-style, she added, "I love you, honey. God Bless."

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LA BEFANA: ITALY'S WITCH OF WINTER

Who needs Santa Claus, the stodgy old man in the sleigh, when there's an Italian witch on a broomstick to bring presents to the bambini?

La Befana, according to age-old Italian legend and tradition, makes her appearance on January 6, the day the Wise Men are believed to have arrived at baby Jesus's manger. This day, known as The Feast of the Epiphany, is a national holiday in Italy and marks the end of twelve days of Christmas and New Years' festivities.

The Night of La Befana was mentioned as early as 1549 in a poem by Agnolo Firenzuola. In the poem, La Befana was portrayed as an ugly, old woman flying over houses on a broomstick, entering through the chimneys, and leaving sweets for good children or garlic and coal for bad ones.

La Befana's roots are a mix of pagan and Christian beliefs. Some scholars believe that her story originated with the Roman festival of Saturnalia, a pagan celebration starting just before the winter solstice. At the end of Saturnalia, Romans went to the Temple of Juno on the Capitoline Hill to have their fortunes read by an old crone.

Others point to her Christian roots. "Her name derives from the word for epiphany: Epifania," says Art History Professor Rocky Ruggiero. "Legend has it that she showed the three magi hospitality on their way to Bethlehem."

According to folklore, La Befana was invited to join the Wise Men on their



A depiction of Italy's beloved old witch, La Befana. (vctre)

journey to find the Christ child, but declined their invitation, choosing to stay home and attend to her housework. Later, when she realized the child's importance, she regretted her decision. Legend has it that since then, she's roamed the earth searching for the Wise Men, rewarding good children and gently admonishing bad children.

Unlike Santa Claus (or Babbo Natale as he's called in Italy), La Befana has been a holiday tradition in Italy since the 13th century. Though some Italians embrace the American tradition of Santa Claus, Christmas in Italy is far less commercialized, and La Befana remains a more popular figure. Her arrival on January 6th is celebrated with traditional Italian foods such as panettone, special cakes, and cookies called *befanini*. In honor of the Three Wise Men, Italians go to church and enjoy spending the day with family. Children who have been well-behaved receive candy while those who have misbehaved get lumps of coal—or these days, more likely, black rock candy.

La Befana is most associated with Rome and central Italy, however, the custom spread to the rest of the country during the 20th century. Today, there are festivals throughout Italy, including a four-day festival from January 2-6 in Urbania (Marche region) and a large Befana Christmas market in Rome's Piazza Navona.

Salem strega, Lori Bruno, feels a special kinship to La Befana, reaching out to her when she encounters a mother or child in need.

"Now that I'm a grandmother I talk to her," says Bruno. "I say, 'Befana, we need you to help the children.'"



La Befana flies on her broom over the small Tuscan hill town of San Gimignano and delivers gifts to children on the eve of Epiphany. (antonpix)