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Season's Greetings!



Cooking Italian for the Holidays

**The Rampini Ornaments
of Gubbio**

**Torino's National
Risorgimento Museum**

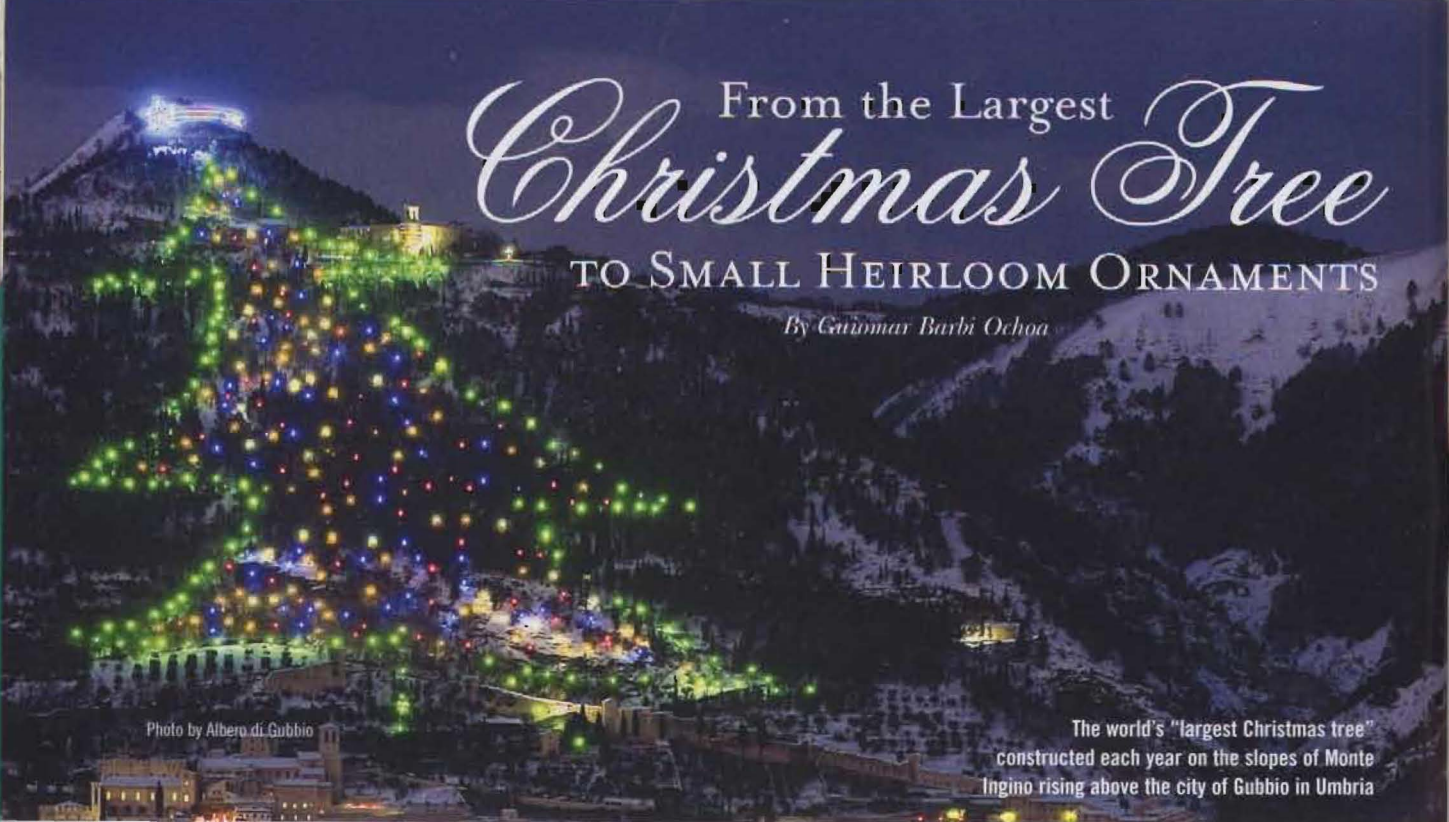
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From the Largest Christmas Tree TO SMALL HEIRLOOM ORNAMENTS

By Guimmar Barbi Ochoa



The world's "largest Christmas tree" constructed each year on the slopes of Monte Ingino rising above the city of Gubbio in Umbria

Did you know that the largest Christmas tree in the world is in Italy? This masterpiece is a lighting illumination, in the shape of a Christmas tree, installed on the slopes of Monte Ingino outside the city of Gubbio, in Umbria. The tree stands at over 2,000 feet high, 1,100 feet wide, and is covered with over five miles of multi-colored lights. The amazing site can be seen from a distance of 30 miles away.

This luminary tradition started in 1981 when the people of Gubbio decided to celebrate in a unique way. In 1991, "The Guinness Book of Records" named the Gubbio tree "The World's Largest Christmas Tree." Every year, a group of more than 40 volunteers spend nearly three months preparing the tree, which is lit from December 7 through January 6, the feast of the Epiphany.

The Christmas tree is formed by various types of lights that create a unique chromatic effect. The lights mounted on wooden poles form the outline. More than 250 green-colored lights sketch the shape of the tree and the inside is filled with more than 3,000 multi-colored lights.

This year marks the 850th anniversary of the death of Saint Ubaldo, patron saint of Gubbio. To commemorate this historic feast, Pope Benedict XVI was scheduled to virtually "attend" the December 7 lighting ceremony, connecting to Gubbio using modern technology that webcast the event worldwide.

A small and well-preserved medieval town, Gubbio's historic center has a notable selection of Gothic and Renaissance monuments built of gray limestone. Most impressive about this town, is its breathtaking views of the Umbrian countryside.

Historically, Gubbio is known for being the place where St. Francis tamed the famous wolf. But it is also

famous for something else—its ceramics. In fact, the production of ceramics in the medieval town was its economic resource in the Middle Ages. Gubbio's idyllic geographic location attracted affluent aristocratic families during the Renaissance and contributed greatly to the development of arts and crafts. While the art form might be vanishing elsewhere, it remains vibrant and alive in this small Umbrian town.

Originating from Gubbio, ceramicist Pietro Rampini opened his bottega d'arte in 1962. The main themes represented in his innovative and imaginative works were Gubbio and its history, medieval miniatures, classical mythology, nature, and Umbrian saints.

Now run by Pietro's son, Giampietro, the Rampinis remain strongly grounded in the tradition of individually created ceramic pieces of high quality and artistic value. The Bottega d'arte Rampini is



A ornament display at Bottega d'arte Rampini in Gubbio



Giampietro Rampini and an assistant painting hand-made heirloom Christmas ornaments

recognized worldwide for the uniqueness of its products and working techniques. A number of renowned artists, including Australian artists Pippin Drysdale and Alan Peascod, have gone to the Rampini workshop to improve their craft.

The company prides itself in producing hand-made and hand-painted pottery in the Italian artisan tradition going back to the Renaissance. They have had a presence in the United States for about a decade now and are regulars at the prestigious New York International Gift Fair.

Among Giampietro's most unique creations are his ceramic Christmas ornaments. Created to celebrate his hometown and its prized Monte Ingino Christmas tree, each ornament is individually hand-painted and carefully glazed. The smallest and most simple decoration can be decorated in less than 15 minutes while the bigger, more intricate ones can take more than an hour.

The first phase is to form the ornaments. Rampini's potters use clay from the Tiber River to fabricate them. Once dry, the ornaments must be fired, at a temperature of almost 2,000 degrees, for the first time. The terracotta ornaments are then dipped in a white glaze so they can be decorated, and then fired once again at a lower heat so the glaze and paint can set. The result renders a shiny and glassy appearance. This technique is known as "majolica" and is recognized internationally. The more lavish ornaments containing touches of gold, platinum or mother-of-pearl are fired a third time.

Between the ornaments and dinnerware, Rampini produces about 2,000 pieces a month. Every model is prepared and decorated by hand. While the company's focus is on Italian and American markets, there is interest among European museums to develop custom-made pieces for their

gift shops. Many businesses are also using the ornaments as corporate gifts with their personalized logos on them.

"The idea for these Christmas ornaments came to me about eight years ago," says Giampietro Rampini. "I wanted to link this renowned art form, practiced and respected for centuries in our town, with the famous Gubbio Christmas tree."

Buon Natale!

Guionar Barbi Ochoa is a freelance writer who currently works at the National Endowment for the Arts. Previously, she has worked at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See in Rome, and for Discovery Communications. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and young daughter. ▲

The U.S. distributor for Rampini is Simpatico in St. Michaels, Md. Can't make it to the Eastern Shore before Christmas? Rampini's holiday ornaments, priced between \$25-\$50, can be found online at <http://www.simpaticostmichaels.com/> and www.napastyle.com. Giampietro Rampini can be contacted directly via e-mail at info@rampiniceramiche.com.



Photo by Carrie Hilbo