

Community Connect

The Contradas of Siena – Background Information

Siena, a town like Rome, built on seven hills. From its center, the Piazza del Campo, radiates a town built around several smaller communities called *contradas*. To understand Siena you must know something of the contrada system of neighborhood wards that helped provide militia support for Siena's defense.

It is important to understand that every Sienese is first of all a member of his Contrada, which becomes a second family and the place where he conducts all his everyday activities.

Currently there are 17 Contrade in Siena, considerably reduced from the original 59 in the 1300s. The number of Contradas was successively reduced from the original 59 of the fourteenth century until the current 17 contrade were fixed about 1700. Within these seventeen *contrada*, there are several groups of allies and adversaries.

Early in Siena's history, young men from each contrada comprised the city's military, serving to protect the fledgling community from attack by neighboring cities, particularly Florence. Originally, the divisions served administrative and military purposes, but over the centuries, each *contrada* has developed into a tightly-knit community with a fierce sense of loyalty to its own members. Even today, celebrations are organized by contrada and marrying out of one's own neighborhood is discouraged.

Each Contrada is like a small state within the city and manages its own recreational activities, administration, its archives, a museum containing works of art and the costumes for the processions, and a Sala delle Vittorie containing all the Palio banners won through the centuries. Some of these banners date back to the 17th century.

Each Contrada is governed by a Council, which is democratically elected every two, three and sometimes four years. The Council is called Seggio or Sedia. The most senior member of the Council is called the Priore Capo della Contrada and he is assisted by a secretary known as the Vicario Generale. All matters concerning the Palio are managed by an elected Capitano, who is assisted by two Tenenti, or Mangini.

Each contrada has always been responsible for its own residents. The contradas no longer play an official role in the city's administration. Each Contrada is empowered to conduct the so-called questua to gather funds for the public feasts in Piazza del Campo.

You are born into the contrada of your parents, are baptized in your contrada's open-air font, learn your contrada's allies and enemies at an early age, go to church in your contrada's oratory, almost invariably marry within your contrada, spend your free time hanging out in the contrada social club, and help elect or serve on your contrada's governing body. Even your funeral is sponsored by the contrada, which mourns your passing as family. In a way, it's like a benevolent form of Hollywood's mythical Mafia--but no contrada tolerates unlawfulness, and as a result Siena has a shockingly low crime rate.

The Palio (horse race)

Perhaps the strongest symbol of contrada affiliation is the Palio, a horse race that occurs on July 2 and August 16 every year. Each of the participating horses wear the design of their home contrada: Dragon, Eagle, She-Wolf, Panther, Ram, Unicorn, Owl, Porcupine, Giraffe, Goose, Tortoise, Snail, Caterpillar, Forest, Shell, Tower or Wave.

Every year, the famed Palio horse race takes place in Siena's Piazza Del Campo, a large shell-shaped square with the 14th century Mangia Tower soaring 300 feet above.

Ten contradas are chosen by lot each year to ride in the July 2 Palio (established in 1659). The other seven, plus three of the July riders, run the even bigger Palio on August 16 (which dates from 1310). Although both races are technically equal in importance, the August Palio gets the most attention, partly because it's older but mainly because it's a sort of rematch, the last chance to win for the year.

Actually, chance really is what wins the Palio: Your opportunity to ride, the horse you're given, and the order you're lined up on the track are each chosen by separate lots; even your jockey is a wild card. He's always imported-traditionally a Maremma horseman, but many come these days from Sardegna and Sicily as well-and you'll never know how well he'll ride, whether the bribe one of your rival contradas may slip him will outweigh the wages you paid, or if he'll even make it to the race without being ambushed. If your jockey does turn on you, you'd better hope he's thrown quickly. The Palio, you see, is a true horse race-the horse is the one that wins (it's hoped no rivals have drugged it), whether there's a rider still on it or not.

The jockey's main job is to hang onto the horse's bare back and thrash the other horses and their riders with the stiff ox-hide whip he's given for the purpose. The Palio may at this point seem pretty lawless, but there actually is one rule: no jockey can grab another horse's reins.

Apart from the official races, five trials also take place in the days before the finals. These dress rehearsals give the jockeys (*fantini*) a chance to practice with their horses and negotiate deals with the other riders.

As an Italian proverb goes "money is the shit of the devil" and as in life, it remains a very real distraction in the festival.

Everyone seemed to be wearing some sign of their contrada. Men brandished tattoos of their totemic dolphin and women wore scarves or skirts regaled in blue and white.

At the neighborhood chapel ritual blessings to the horse and jockey are made. It is a sign of good luck if the horse poops inside the church. The horse is draped in an ornately designed contrada colors and led to the center of the chapel. The jockey stands to its left decked out in his racing uniform. The priest makes a short blessing and sprinkles both with holy water as a crowd cheers.

This is a list of preparations carried out by every Contrada prior to the annual Palio:

- April: flag throwers and drummers classes begin and continue through to the first week of June.
- May: The Contradas draw lots for who will take part in the July 2nd Palio. Putting out of the flags at the trifore windows of the Palazzo Comunale, as prescribed by the Regolamento del Palio.
- July: July 2nd Palio: putting out of the flags throughout the Contrade, as prescribed by the Palio regulations. On the evening of July 1st those Contrade who will be racing the

next day organise a propitious dinner. On July 2nd the horse and rider receive their blessing. The Contradas draw lots for the August 16th Palio. Putting out of the flags throughout the Contradas, as prescribed by the Palio regulations.

- August: Preparation for the Feast of the Assumption. Putting out of the flags in the cathedral. Ceremonial for the August 16th Palio.
- September: Great victory dinner held in the winning Contrada, with the horse and jockey.
- November: Annual closing banquet.
- December: From December 15th oratories in each Contrada begin the 9 day celebrations prior to Christmas.

The seventeen contradas are:

- **Contrada del Bruco**. *Patron saint*: Visitation of Mary the Virgin (feast day July 2nd). Oratorio del Santissimo Nome di Gesù in Via del Comune.
- **Contrada dell'Aquila**. *Patron saint*: Holy Name of Mary (feast day September 12th). Oratorio di San Giovanni Battista, Casato di Sotto.
- **Contrada Priora della Chiocciola**. *Patron saint*: St Peter and St Paul (feast day June 29th). Oratorio dei Santi Pietro e Paolo in Via San Marco.
- **Contrada Priora della Civetta**. *Patron saint*: St Anthony of Padua (feast day June 13th). Oratorio di St Anthony of Padua in Via Cecco Angiolieri.
- **Contrada del Drago**. *Patron saint*: St Catherine of Siena (feast day April 29th). Oratorio di Santa Caterina del Paradiso in Piazza Giacomo Matteotti.
- **Contrada Imperiale della Giraffa**. *Patron saint*: The Madonna del Fosso (feast day third Sunday of July). Oratorio, Chiesa del Suffragio in Via delle Vergini.
- **Contrada Sovrana dell'Istrice**. *Patron saint*: St Bartholomew Apostle (feast day August 24th). Oratorio dei Santi Vincenti e Anastasio.
- **Contrada del Leocorno**. *Patron saint*: St John the Baptist (feast day June 24th). Oratorio di San Pietro al Buio in San Giovannino della Staffa in Piazzetta Virgilio Grassi.
- **Contrada della Lupa**. *Patron saint*: St Rocco the Confessor (feast day August 16th). Oratorio di San Rocco in Via Vallerozzi.
- **Contrada Nobile del Nicchio**. *Patron saint*: St Gaetano of Thiene (feast day August 7th). Oratorio di San Gaetano da Thiene in Via dei Pispini.
- **Contrada Nobile dell'Oca**. *Patron saint*: St Catherine of Siena (feast day April 29th). Oratorio di Santa Caterina in Via di Santa Caterina.
- **Contrada Capitana dell'Onda**. *Patron saint*: Visitation of the Virgin Mary (feast day July 2nd). Oratorio di San Giuseppe in Via di Fontanella.
- **Contrada della Pantera**. *Patron saint*: St Giovanni Decollato (feast day August 29th). Oratorio del Carmine in Pian dei Mantellini.
- **Contrada della Selva**. *Patron saint*: Assumption of the Holy Virgin (feast day August 15th). Oratorio di San Sebastiano in Piazzetta della Selva.
- **Contrada della Tartuca**. *Patron saint*: St Anthony of Padua (feast day June 13th). Oratorio di Sant'Antonio da Padova in Via Tommaso Pendola.
- **Contrada della Torre**. *Patron saint*: St John the Apostle and St Anne (feast day July 25th). Oratorio di San Giacomo in Via di Salicotto.
- **Contrada del Valdimontone**. *Patron saint*: Maria Santissima del Buonconsiglio (feast day April 26th). Oratorio della Santissima Trinità in Via di Valdimontone.

Through the Palio the tradition and loyalty of residents has remained as strong over centuries.