Lunch for the Guest

Concezione, still in bed, had heard her mother’s godmother bursting in; godmothers of San Giovanni since they had met, brides and on their honeymoon, at a country festival and, while their husbands drank and played morra, they had become friends, switching their handkerchiefs, knotted seven times. She was happy for the diversion that the guest brought into the little house.

You always had fun with Maria Giuseppa: with her stories, her conflicts, her superstitions, her noisy and honest behavior. Her presents, then, were wonderful and refined. She had brought uncommon things for the young girl: fresh grapes, pears, almond cakes, and a jar of honey; and for the godmother, a whole ham and dry curdled cheese.

To get free of her thoughts, she stood up, although she felt really cold, and she told her mother that they needed to prepare at least a good lunch for their guest. She kneaded some flour with eggs and lard, and she made a lot of little plaits out of it. Then, after frying them, she spread some honey on them: yes, she really felt as if she was a child again. Her mother was also busy: good scents spread around the little house – scents of hospitality, and therefore almost of festivity. The horse wasn’t neglected either: Giustina gave him some water, mixed some straw with the barley from the bag, and patted him on the head. It was a good and patient
animal, it seemed to be made of black varnished wood, so
that the aggressive rooster, completely yellow and red like a
flame, used to peck at his legs, almost as to see whether they
were real or fake. (…)

“Do you know that stuff that is in my house? I don’t
know it precisely either, actually. Wardrobes full of bed
sheets, table covers, and ancient canvas; chests full of
woolen, cotton, and silk blankets. Actually, I want to give
one of them to you as a present, so that you can see their
manufacture. Good stuff, not spider webs like the ones they
sell in the shops. And we have golden and silver things that
make up a treasure: rings with carnelians, and earrings and
coral necklaces, and a filigree rosary, with golden beads and
a cross in which you can see the real image of Christ. It is a
talisman, and they say it comes from the Holy Land, and it
protects from bad death. Then I can’t tell you the supplies:
every kind of God’s good is awaiting you: ollas full of olives
and wheat and flour, and almonds and legumes, lard and dry
fruit. We even have jujube and dry olives that look like
plums. When the stallholders arrive at the village, the house
where they download their goods is ours: but what is it
worth, if nobody takes advantage of that?”

“My husband only wants spelt soup, and I like barley
bread and salted codfish. Children are necessary to crack
nuts and chew dry chestnuts; and young people to eat roasted
lambs and pork’s liver. A house with no people, like ours,
I’ll say that again, is the sacristy of a cemetery: there is no
fire to keep it warm, nor bags of money to keep it merry.”
“It’s true and sacrosanctly true,” admitted Maria Giuseppa, and feeling a bit charmed and also a bit moved to pity by the mournful accent of her host, she also looked at the relentless Concezione with pleading eyes. She had finished her grape, and she was nibbling at one of the cakes she had made. The ones brought by the guest, although they were covered with sugar and in vague shapes of little birds and flowers, made her feel sick. And she felt suffocated just at the idea of having to live in a house full of the stuff of the rich country lady.

(from the novel The Church of Solitude, 1936)

Concezione, back home after she has been diagnosed with cancer, resumes her life as a seamer with her mother, refusing every suitor, the continental Aroldo and the son of the rich Maria Giuseppa, her mother’s godmother.

In the text, I wanted to underline some recipes of Sardinian cakes, well known and appreciated even today, made of flour and honey. Deledda also remembers the Sardinian tradition, according to which the day of Saint Giovanni is particularly favorable for love bonds.

Maria Giuseppa, visiting at her godmother’s house, brings to the young Concezione almond and honey cakes as a present, while she gives a ham to her godmother. In the strict economy of the country society, the useful present is particularly important, not the superficial one. What can be better than food?

To reply with similar generosity, Concezione also prepares a “good lunch for their guest.” Fried honey plaits,
made in the shape of little birds and flowers, and also for the horse, abundant straw and barley!

When Maria Giuseppa has to convince Concezione of the convenience of the wedding with her son, she not only reminds her of the gold and necklaces they own, but with similar plenitude, she also describes the supplies that may be even more valuable: oil, spelt, wheat, legumes, almonds, dry fruit, and olives.