

IN THE VICINITY OF HULL-HOUSE AND THE MAXWELL STREET MARKET: CHICAGO 1889-1935



VARIETIES OF ETHNICITY AND RACE ON URBAN STREETS

ITALIAN-AMERICANS ON TAYLOR STREET

PAESANS, PASTA AND PROGRESSIVES: CHICAGO ITALIANS AND THEIR FOOD

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CONCLUSION: NEW LIVES, NEW FOODS: RECREATING TRADITIONAL ITALIAN FOODWAYS

Social workers, home economists, and nutritionists continued to despair over the unrelenting persistence of the traditional Italian diet, which seemed impervious to change, well into the 1920s. Investigators were so convinced of the unalterability of Italian foods that they used the same information and the same numbers without variation throughout the time period. For example, in 1897, 1919, and 1937, three separate investigators all reported that 69% of Italian women baked their own bread. Rather than an indication of the stability of Italian practice, however, these numbers indicate the fixity of reformer notions about Italian life. Italians themselves were convinced that while other aspects of their life had drastically changed with their migration, food was the one stable element. In 1937, settlement worker Anna Zaloha found that many Italians were convinced their mothers cooked the same way their grandmothers had in Italy. When Louis Panico, in 1970, was asked if his mother cooked differently in the United States than in Italy, he replied "No she made the same thing. She cooked the same way. In fact my wife today does the same thing. She cooks exactly the way my mother used to cook." [215]

Reformers believed that because Italians were not eating roast beef and mashed potatoes, they had failed to adjust to their new lives. Italians believed that since they still ate macaroni, they had avoided the influence of their new environment on this important aspect of their ethnic identity. Neither recognized that the picture was not so simple and that change and tradition could co-exist.

Food was at the core of Italian family life, and the Italians' ability to retain this close association assisted in holding the immigrant family together. Traditional food provided a point of continuity and a symbol of family cohesion.

It reinforced the bonds between parents and children, which were

continually threatened by the social mores of their new environment. It also created bonds outside the family by providing a basis for social life and cultural exchange with fellow countrymen who had previously been unrecognized as such. As they exchanged recipes at the peddlers' wagon, entertained in their kitchens, or shopped in ethnic stores, Italian immigrants were socializing each other to both the meaning of Italian identity but also to survival in their new homes.

An ability to retain the traditional core of their diet was aided by their environment. Located at the crossroads of railroad lines from east, west, and north, Chicago's Italians had access to a wider array of foods and products than they would have in a small town. Their strong presence in the population as well as their tendency to congregate together created markets that made appeals to their tastes both feasible and lucrative. As Italian businesspeople responded to these tastes by creating a network of ethnic businesses they learned to operate in the business environment of the city.



Grand Avenue Cooking Class

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Photographer Unknown

Some aspects of the Italian diet had changed by the time the flow of immigration was halted by quota laws in the 1920s. Women had altered their shared housekeeping patterns and now worked in the isolation of their kitchen. They cooked familiar ingredients on unfamiliar stoves and shopped in stores that offered a greater variety of foods than many had

ever dreamed possible. They added American elements to their diets, but also dishes from other regions of Italy that had previously been just as foreign. Their diets encompassed their allegiance to their hometown's cuisine, a new awareness of the range of Italian foods, and new American methods of preparation and ingredients. It was a mix of Italian tradition and American abundance.

Reformers, who had believed American foods were a necessity to successful Italian adjustment, were disappointed by the strength of Italian traditionalism. Yet they failed to recognize that Italians had indeed become a part of both the business culture and the consumer culture which America offered because they had done it, not by abandoning their past but by recreating it in their new homes. Not only food suppliers but also Italian consumers were participating in a way of life that actually placed them within the mainstream of American cultural values.

In *Adapting to Abundance*, Andrew R. Heinze stresses the often ignored role of the consumption of material goods as an element of cultural identity. "Material possessions," he believes, "are intrinsic to human identity" and, as such, their use and symbolic meanings shape culture. While modern societies are characterized by diverse choices in consumption options, Heinze concludes, a belief in consumption itself, "the belief that individuals should expect an increasingly rich choice of products," differentiates American culture. [216]

Italians, at first glance, would seem to have rejected the abundance of America and its promise of plenty. Yet, in terms of food they actually had not. The flexible social and business structure which praised the ambitious, self-made man, and the existence of an extensive transportation system capable of affordably transporting almost any kind of goods made it possible for Italians to create an extensive food supply system. It allowed some to earn a respectable middle class status and a smaller fortunate few to create great wealth. Although many Italians never escaped the oppressive, daily reality of poverty, their settlement in the large urban center of Chicago opened up the possibility of choice within their diet. Anthony Sorrentino wrote: We realized as the months went by that this new land had many things to lure and attract us. The innumerable shops and stores displayed the greatest variety of foods and attractive packages of candies and sweets, gay and colorful boxes, cans and appliances,--all were in abundance--at least for all to see, if not to have - in practically every neighborhood store. [217]



Housekeeping Center

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Photographer Unknown

What was deceptive about the Italians' embrace of American abundance was that the foods they strove the most to consume were those of their homeland. Italian's chose a richer, more varied diet but one that had it's roots in the traditions, familiarity, and cultural meanings of their homeland. Their ability to re-create "traditional" foodways was a product of their increasing knowledge and manipulation of their new urban environment, learned by daily life and contact within their ethnic neighborhoods. It was also an expansion of their self-identity, as Italians learned to see themselves as migrants from individual villages, members of the Italian nationality, and as beneficiaries of American bounty. Their food reflected and enhanced these multiple identities.



**Boys at Hull-House Cooking
Class in Labor Museum**

University of Illinois at Chicago
The University Library, Department of Special Collections
Wallace Kirkland Papers, JAMC neg. 565

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