

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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FOOD: FOCAL POINT FOR EXTENDING TRUST AND AFFECTION

In the Italian community, food was a primary way to offer help and assistance to neighbors in need. Luigi Villari reported that in Italy, "The poor will often go without food to feed those who are poorer." I.W. Howerth found of Chicago's Italians,

...as long as they have anything to share Italians keep their relatives and friends. Sociability is one of their strong characteristics. Formal visiting among them is not frequent, but they are so well acquainted that they are accustomed to walk into each other's home whenever they please, even without the formality of knocking. Such close relationships, although fatal to privacy, necessarily give rise to friendship with its consequent claims. Hence in time of need an Italian family, as a rule, looks first to friends. Last winter it was not uncommon to find two or three families living together in order to save rent, and often the burden of support rested on one family alone. [60]

Storekeepers lent credit to poor risks, doctors made free housecalls and neighbors brought food to those in need. The LoDolce family accepted rent payments of food items for years from a tenant who had a sick child. Money was charity and was to be accepted with shame and humiliation. The extension of food, however, was an expression of the social bond between family and friends. [61]



**Antonetta Tiberi with her Son in their Backyard.
(She is dressed in the costume she brought with
her when she emigrated from Amaseno, Italy.)**

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Italian American Collection, IAC neg. 40.16

Stinginess with food was a sign of bad character or bad intentions. To give less than your best could bring scorn and derision. In 1894, *La Parola Dei Socialista* reported the complaints of lodgers in the Parist-Consular Lodging House in Chicago. The lodging house was sponsored by the Italian Consul and run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

They claimed that the soup is bad and scanty. In it are cooked any kinds of entrails (sic). One of the men showed us a broken tooth caused by biting on a nail which he found in the monastic soup. They told us that all the left-overs from the hospital are served to the Shelter inmates, left-overs that leave the stomach emptier (sic) than before, because the "good Sisters" are measuring the bread with a rule.

The attack on the quality of food was an indirect attack on the politics and religious adherence of the sponsors of the lodging house. By suggesting the food was impure and substandard, the paper was signaling its readers that the sponsors had no respect for the community. They chose to speak in a language their readers would quickly understand. To offer one's neighbors bad food was to reveal yourself as uncaring, irresponsible, and self-serving. [62]

While food could help to bring people together, it was also a vital way to tell them apart. Italy had only recently become a nation, an event that had barely touched many immigrants lives. Most Italians identified strongly with individual villages or regions. On the Near West Side of Chicago, the first question you were asked was "Where are you from?" If you hailed from anywhere other than Naples or Sicily, you were suspect. This sense of campanilismo was described by one Sicilian, "You can trust members of your own family first, relatives second, Sicilians third, Italians fourth, and forget about the rest of them." Rosa Casettari, a Northerner, had her own version: "The people from Toscana they're not good like the people from Lombardia. But they're not bad like the people from Sicilia-I should say not! The people from Piemonte are a little more bad than the people from Lombardia, but they come next. Lombardia is the last in the world to do wrong things." [63]

There were strong regional differences in the types of foods Italians ate and in the ways they were prepared and these differences were often used as markers of identification and exclusion. Neapolitans were known as *Aspaghetti eaters* and the Sambucare were labeled "snail eaters" because they ate boiled snails dipped in sauce. Whether one served macaroni or polenta, and how it was prepared was an instant indicator of one's origins. Certain foods were so equated with specific areas that they were considered a birthright. The Calabrese, according to Louis Panico, were the ones who knew how to preserve prosciuto, salami, and capicol. "You know they just were born with it," he commented. [64]

Unfamiliar foods, whether that of other Italians or other ethnic groups, were initially regarded with fear and suspicion. Rose Clementi, who lived in a small Italian community in Chinatown, was warned that if the Chinese caught you, they would chop you up and put you in chop suey. Mary Candice's mother was given a small pitcher of oysters by a friendly neighbor. Both she and her daughter were so confused by the gift they threw it away. Families also used the rejection of someone's food as a way to brand them an outsider. Shunning food cooked by those outside the family served to strengthen family bonds, while belittling the food giver and denigrating their status. How could you respect someone whose food you wouldn't eat? [65]

Yet exposure to new foods was inevitable. No Italian community was ever homogeneously Italian, and on the streets of the city Italians were exposed to new influences in their diet. For men on their jobs, or in the saloons where they ate their lunches or relaxed after work, exposure to the regional foods of other Italians was inevitable. Ann Sorrentino recalls that women living in the close confines of tenement buildings could, of course, smell each other's cooking and would often ask about what was being prepared and how. [51] Marietta Interlandi, who grew up at Morgan and Grand Avenue in the years before the war, was asked about the differences among her neighbors: "Just the cooking. Just the cooking. They had their own cooking, but they liked ours and we liked theirs." [66]

Italians of one region continued to cook the foods they knew best but they were now exposed to the specialties of other regions. Valentino Lazzaretti's parents were born in Italy in the 1880s and first moved to an Iowa farm before traveling to Chicago. Even in their rural home, his mother was exposed to new ideas.

She learned different methods. She met other Italians from different regions of Italy and picked up some of their cooking habits, such as making cakes and pies. ...She kept to main cooking customs, such as stews and, you know, and polentas and the breads and so on...we baked ourselves, but then she incorporated other peoples methods...other people's customs...She didn't do much of that until she came to the United States.

In Chicago, whether in the shops of the neighborhoods or at the peddler's wagon, women exchanged cooking advice and ideas. As men and women intermarried with Italians of other villages and towns and even non-Italians, women expanded their cooking repertoire. Southern Italian food predominated but it cast a wider net than it ever had within the villages of Italy. [67]

For some immigrants, Chicago was not the first stop in their journey and they brought knowledge of other foods to be eaten by their families and shared with their neighbors. Rose, the neighbor of the Giovangelo family, came to Chicago by way of England and served afternoon tea, chop suey, and chili. Mr. Giovangelo enjoyed French toast, which he had learned to enjoy as a soldier in Marseilles. Valentino Lazzaretti's father worked in Germany for several years where he learned to enjoy sauerkraut. During WWI, Italian men often chose to enlist in the U.S., rather than the Italian army, for its superior pay. Nationwide, over 300,00 Italian men served in the armed forces. In mess halls in the U.S. and abroad, they were exposed to the bland, mass-produced diets of the American army. [68]

Children, as they mingled in the streets and on the playgrounds brought home knowledge about American foods and occasionally cajoled their parents into trying them. School lunch programs also brought exposure to new foods and at the Montefiore School on the North Side, 1,800 children, primarily Italian, received free lunches in 1919. Children were the first to demand Wonder Bread and butchers, recognizing the coercive power of small shoppers sometimes offered children a free hot dog as an initiation into this American food. Family members who attended settlement house social activities were introduced to American foods. Bowen Country Club, Hull-House's summer camp, sponsored marshmallow toasts and hot dog roasts around open campfires. The banquets for Chicago Commons Boys and Girls Clubs featured ham, scalloped potatoes, meat loaf, and hashed browns, while the spaghetti served at the 1924

Women's Club dinner was accompanied by a salad of Jell-O, pineapples, green cherries, marshmallows, and whipped cream.

Exposure to new foods, however, could come at a painful cost. "Sometimes as a kid I used to feel ashamed of where I came from because at Hull House I met young girls from another background," Florence Scala remembers. "Even the kinds of food we ate sometimes...you know, we didn't eat roast beef, we had macaroni." [69]



Boys Club Picnic

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But whether eating pasta or hot dogs, food retained traditional associations for most Italians. It was both a way to identify strangers and to accept them. To share food among friends and neighbors was to temporarily extend the family embrace. As within the family, the symbolic importance of food existed at various levels, expressing joy, sympathy, gratitude, identity, or rejection. While binding the community through shared experiences and traditions, it also gently guided it towards the new.

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