

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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FRUGAL SUSTENANCE AND CHEAP RATIONS

Italian immigrants to Chicago faced many drastic changes in their environments and way of life. The bustling new metropolis was very different from an Italian rural village. Yet, the core elements, which affected Italian diets--poverty, inadequate housing, and the need for simplicity and bulk in meals--were little changed by migration.

This was especially true for the mass of new Italian immigrants who entered the city in the late nineteenth century. Primarily men, early Southern Italian immigrants were either single or had left their wives and children back in Italy. Frugality was essential. Most workers, planning to return home, scrupulously guarded their wages to repay initial passage money, send funds to needy family members left behind, or save for the eventual purchase of land in Italy.

In the summers, many Italian laborers lived in railroad or mining work camps where food was either bought from, or provided by, the padrone, who recruited them. Though meals were often of poor quality, their isolation left workers with few options. In the winter, workers returned to Chicago where they frequently lived cooperatively, either cooking their own meals or sharing kitchen chores by turn. Men favored foods that were easily cooked and quickly eaten, and an 1895-96 study of the diets of single working men highlighted both the monotony and simplicity of their meals. Most stuck to a diet of round steak, bread, macaroni, peppers, fried eggs, and beans, frequently washed down with beer.

When possible, single men boarded with Italian families, a practice unknown in Italy. Boarding freed men from the necessity of doing any of their own housework, while providing supplemental income for the families who housed them. Lodging and boarding continued in Italian communities

until immigration was curtailed by World War One. At the beginning of the war, about 27% of Italians in Chicago were adults living with non-family members.

With time, many men had a new reason to economize. As months of saving stretched into years, and as some migrants decided to settle more permanently in the city, passage money was put aside for wives, children, and other relatives. As family members joined the men, filling, cheap, and simple to prepare foods continued to be relevant. While wages in Chicago exceeded those of Italy, the railway and street work at which many Italian men were employed was intermittent and low paying. Garment work, done at home by Italian women, added only a meager amount to the family income. Italian laborers did

much of the grueling ditch digging and manual labor which the growing city required. As in Italy, only the evening meal could be enjoyed at home but workers now carried their lunches out to the streets, rather than to the fields.

Women struggled to keep house in the cramped confines of tenement flats. Housing studies conducted in Italian neighborhoods revealed conditions which made housework and cooking problematic.



Bachelors' Boarding Flat near Hull-House, circa 1910.

Mary Lynn McCree, "A bachelor's working flat not far from Hull-House, about 1910. It was not uncommon for a man and wife to organize a 'family' of unmarried immigrants and act as 'bosses' of the group. The two men standing appear to be social workers."

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Small flats of two to four rooms were common. Sinks and toilets were sometimes located in yards, halls, or basements and water was unavailable when plumbing froze in winter. Basement and cellar flats were common due to the large number of homes below street level and "many a kitchen floor, the only playground of the children, was cold, damp, and water soaked." Storage continued to pose problems. Settlement worker Edith Abbot reported that in tenement homes without tin storage boxes, food was occasionally hung from the ceilings of homes to keep it away from the rats. The kitchen sometimes doubled as sleeping space for family members or lodgers. Natalie Walker found flats in which even the toilet was being used for food storage. As late as 1925, ice-boxes were uncommon on the Near West Side and window sills or a stream of running water were often the best means available to keep perishable food cold. Coal, necessary for both cooking and heating, needed to be bought in small quantities and was sometimes stored within the flat itself. Many buildings had small stores on their ground floor where living and storage space were combined and individuals slept amidst barrels of wine or bunches of bananas.

As city dwellers and renters, Italians lost the option of supplementing their diets with home-grown

foods. Many made valiant efforts to garden in the minuscule backyards, fire escapes, and porches of tenement homes, where tomatoes, peppers and parsley struggled for existence in the cramped space and polluted air of the city. Terese DeFalco, who grew up on the Near West Side, tersely recalled that there was no room for gardening amidst the densely packed housing in her neighborhood. "Our garden was the alley," she recalls, "The garbage." Most food was purchased and, like other immigrants, Italians spent a large proportion of their incomes on food.

Under these conditions, lessons learned in Italy remained relevant. Diets heavily reliant on breads, macaroni, and vegetables remained the norm among Italian immigrant families. Homemade Italian bread, with its thick crust and heavy texture provided bulk and stayed fresh enough for the evening meal or to be dunked in coffee in the morning. Working family members carried chunks of it to their jobs, along with peppers purchased from the numerous street vendors found in Italian neighborhoods or from neighborhood stores which sold familiar Italian ingredients. Phyllis Williams noted that one of the reasons Italians shunned the recipes taught in settlement cooking classes was that "Italians think many of the dishes prepared are too expensive for the amount of sheer bulk produced and bulk is needed to satisfy hungry children." In hot summer months, when putting on the stove would be unbearable in cramped tenement apartments, Rose Tellerino, born in 1899 and raised near Clark and Polk, remembered salads were the daily fare while macaroni was "all we ate" in the wintertime. Beans were another staple that was inexpensive yet filling. Wine, usually made at home, continued to be drunk at meals and milk and water shunned, much to the chagrin of reformers. Considering the quality of both in the Chicago area, this was not an imprudent choice.



Italian Home Finisher

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Interior of immigrant's home, Chicago, 1898

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