

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

PEASANTS, PASTA AND PROGRESSIVES: CHICAGO ITALIANS AND THEIR FOOD

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OLD WORLD ASPIRATIONS AND NEW WORLD PRACTICE

Italian immigrants had not come thousands of miles merely to replicate the poverty many had experienced in Italy. Although frugality was the norm for early immigrants who planned to return to Italy or buy their own home in Chicago, Italians were not adverse to supplementing their diets with more variety and higher status foods when possible. The Italian peasant diet was not the diet of all Italians; certain foods were eaten by the middle and upper class that were rarely eaten by peasants. Williams speculated that while workers rejected the advice of middle class reformers in America, they were most anxious to reproduce the diet of the middle class of Italy. For Rosa Casettari, who cooked for miners in a camp near St. Louis before moving to Chicago, there was an immediate difference in the foods of America--abundance. Bread! White bread! Enough for a whole village! And butter to go on it! I ate until I no I ate until I no longer had any pains in my stomach. Then I went back by the stove to watch Gionin. He had built a fire and was making coffee. Never in my life had I made coffee and I would have to learn if I was going to cook for these men in America. Meat, coffee, and sugar were more readily available, and immigrants consumed them whenever possible. An 1895-96 Department of Labor study of Italians in Chicago despaired at the lack of meat in Italian diets, yet reported laborers eating as much as a pound of round steak per day for their breakfast and lunch. Natalie Walker found several pigs, four goats (one kept in the kitchen), two cows, one lamb, rabbits, ducks and pigeons in her survey of Italian housing. Chicago's Italians also drank real coffee at breakfast, rather than the ground grain beverages which substituted in Italy. Sugar, to the frustration of reformers, became a more conspicuous element in the Italian diet, although never matching the average American family's consumption. Settlement worker Sophonisba Breckinridge reported the unchanging breakfast of one representative Sicilian family: strong coffee or chocolate, toast, and Italian cookies.



Interior of immigrant's home, Chicago, 1898

Chicago Historical Society Collection
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Macaroni, always a part of the Southern Italian diet, now became a daily staple in the diets of even the poorest immigrants. Bread could now be made from wheat flour rather than the coarse grains or maize used in Italy and a family of six might consume a barrel every six weeks. Eggs, cheese, and poultry appeared with more regularity, and Chicago's position as a railway nexus not only allowed immigrants access to many desired fruits and vegetables but also opened the possibility for off-season produce.

Hunger, however, could still stalk families. A lay-off from work or an illness in the family could spell disaster for families living on the edge of their incomes. Rosa Casettari recalled the crisis conditions in Chicago during the depression, which followed the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition:

In that time the city hall was giving food to the people. The people were standing in line there on Clinton Street where the rope pulled up the streetcar. We used to get for one week a piece of salt pork and some dried peas and the loaf of bread and some coffee or some tea. Sometimes we stood there half the day and when it's our turn they had no more left to give. One day I was standing there early, early in the morning, so I would come in before the food was gone. Us poor women were frozen to death; we didn't have the warm clothes, and there was such a

storm with the snow and the wind! Eight o'clock, when the door opened, all the people were pushing to get in. There came the police with their clubs and they were yelling like we were animals. Then one of those police hit the woman next to me on the head with his club. I didn't see her, but I don't think she pushed. The people behind were pushing us, that's all. When I saw that, I said to myself, "Better I starve before I let that policeman hit me!" And I ran home from that line. And I never, never went there again.

Another place the people were waiting in line was the police station. Every day they gave a little pail of soup and a piece of bread for each family. I used to send my Domenico and Visella. But Visella was so little she couldn't stand it-she chewed up half the bread before she came home. ...

Once in that poor time I was crying and praying. All the night I was praying. I said, "Oh god, if I can only have a crust of bread for these children! I have not one crumb in the house--not one thing!"

As additional family members were brought over, extra wages supplemented incomes, and extreme frugality paid off for some families. Industry overtook some of the worst housing in the early settlement area of the First Ward and Italians began to move into the slightly better housing west of Halsted Street after the turn of the century. The North Side colony also spread west, while some Italians left the Italian settlements entirely and began to integrate into other neighborhoods. World War I ushered in increased unionization and higher wages in many industries. Most Italians saw no drastic rise in their incomes yet workers enjoyed a quantitative gain on their diets in Italy. In 1919, the Department of Public Welfare reported that while Italian laborers ate 300 pounds of cereals and 30 pounds of meat in a year, Chicago Italians ate 400 pounds of cereals and 60 pounds of meat. Leila Houghteling's 1925 study of the diets of working-poor families in Chicago, diagnosed nutritional inadequacies among the diets of several ethnic groups, attributable to both low incomes and injudicious food choice. Among Italians, she found the problem exacerbated by the use of luxury items such as store-bought pastries and out-of-season strawberries, artichokes, grapefruit, and fresh tomatoes.

Italians did not unequivocally reject change in their diets. They were not averse to making changes which they felt to be improvements. Yet the ingredients forming the core of the Italian diet changed little. Bread and macaroni, easily affordable on a street cleaner's or railway worker's income, fulfilled the main requirement for family members who worked long hours at physical labor--they were heavy and filling. Interviews with Chicago Italians who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s suggest diets that were simple and based on the same basic ingredients the earliest immigrants had eaten. The foods of their homeland still seemed relevant and functional to Italian migrants, even within the new urban environment of Chicago.

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