

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

PART 1: FOODWAYS AND EMIGRANTS

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“What He Can Dig From the Ground”

Italian peasants lived in crowded villages and towns, where housing conditions were poor and cramped and water was often available only from the town fountain. One observer noted:

The dwellings of the Sicilian peasants are little more than hovels. They usually have only one room, often windowless, or lighted only by the door, for windows are a luxury in Sicily; good glass is very expensive and cheap glass cracks in the hot sun. The floor is of worn stone, the walls are rudely plastered and the only heat in winter comes from the small charcoal brazier that is used in preparing the food....But the Sicilian peasants have learned the art of living out of doors. The street is their drawing room.



A view of one of the village streets in Pietrogalla, Potenza Italy during the autumn of 1923.

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Italian American Collection, IAC 136b

Italian foodways had roots in a long experience of scarcity and poverty in Italy, which continued to be relevant even after migration to the U.S. The majority of Italians who came to Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were peasants who had barely eked out a living by traveling several miles each day to the tiny, overworked plots of land surrounding their towns. Leasing was more common than ownership and many peasants were part of the huge group of day laborers who planted and harvested the more fertile farms of remote landowners. In the years before WWI, male agricultural laborers in Italy averaged less than fifty cents a day in earnings. Women farm laborers generally made half that amount. City dwellers did not fare much better: in Northern Italy, where wages were ordinarily higher, even skilled master mechanics made only about \$1.60 per day. Yet while incomes were low, the cost of living was not. In 1911, the U.S. Immigration Commission found that despite lower wages the cost of food in Italy was similar to that of the U.S., with high taxes and protectionist policies inflating the cost of many necessary food items. Writer Francis Clark, who traveled to Italy in 1919, reported that salt was so precious that when he spilled some at lunch in an Italian railway station, the station master hurriedly scooped it up to take home for his own dinner. Availability was affected by an inadequate transportation network, which kept not only the people, but the products of various regions, isolated from each other.[5]

Storage space was scarce, as a description by the Royal Italian Agricultural Commission noted, "Often 8 or 10 people of various ages and both sexes sleep in one or two beds, in the midst of pigs and chickens. Under the beds are stored the produce, usually potatoes and corn, which must support the family through the winter, when there is little or no work." [6]

Italians required food that was inexpensive and readily available, portable enough to be easily carried out to the fields, and simple to prepare for busy housewives with meager cooking and storage facilities. Most importantly, food needed to be filling enough to sustain men and women who worked long hours in the fields and ran households without conveniences such as running water, electricity, or adequate space. [7]



Women and Men Gathering Wheat at Pietrogalla, Potenza, Italy, Autumn 1923

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Bread, the main staple of the Southern Italian peasant diet, satisfied all of these needs. Crusty, heavy loaves of bread made from coarse maize, wheat, rye or barley flour provided the inexpensive backbone of daily meals. Bread was baked once or twice a week in ovens outside the doors of homes, where women could socialize as they worked. A woman from Basilicata, a region which sent many immigrants to Chicago's river wards, recalled that hired hands on a large landholding began the day with a breakfast of bread and cheese, followed by the walk to distant fields and a break for bread and bacon. At ten o'clock, bread, cheese, and peppers were eaten and at four, bread, cheese, and wine. Bread might be supplemented by macaroni, prepared at home or purchased in a wide array of shapes and sizes, but even this basic food was often beyond the income of many peasants. In the North, cornmeal, cooked as *polenta*, was more common and one writer noted, "To the ill-fed peasant it gives a sense of repletion, and he will eat it by preference even when better food is available." [8]

Meat was a rarity, seen only on Sundays or holidays. When available, it was often preserved with spices and made into sausages, since the cost of salt was so prohibitive. In 1901, Bolton King reported the average yearly consumption of meat by Italians at 25-39 lbs. per person, while that of the average English workhouse pauper was 57 lbs. Whenever possible, small vegetable gardens were cultivated. James Whelpley wrote of the Italian peasant, "what he can dig

from the ground is generally the limit of his bill of fare.” Legumes, greens, peppers, onions, and potatoes were common. Vegetables were eaten fresh or as the basis of *minestre*, a thick vegetable soup, which formed the other staple of peasant diets. Soups could be made in one pot and simmered all day allowing women to work in the fields or do housework at home. Meals were sometimes accompanied by homemade wine, often watered down for consumption by the entire family. Goat's milk was drunk only by children, or the very ill, and cow and sheep's milk was generally made into cheese.[9]



The Lazzaroni as they Live in the Street of Naples, Italy.

Courtesy of Mary Ann Johnson

Not all Italians, of course, lived and ate identically. Coastal areas supplemented their diets with a wide variety of seafood including devil fish, squid, cuttlefish, octopus, shark, and porpoise. City dwellers benefited from the variety which better transportation allowed and from slightly higher wages. Cooked foods could often be purchased from the numerous vendors who roamed the streets of towns and large villages. Fruits and vegetables varied from region to region and even town to town. “The Northern group know as little about the foods of the central and seacoast groups as they do of their dialects, and *vice versa*,” reported a dietician at the Boston Dispensary.[10]

Class could have as important an effect as geography, however. Artisans' wives in Sicily, according to historian Donna Gabaccia, enjoyed paid household help, extra room for storage, and more variety in their diets, while poorer workers spent more time away from their homes and had less

opportunity for shared family meals. A description of a Neapolitan *maccaronaro*, a vendor of macaroni, suggests the difference class could make in purchased meals: [11]

He has two tall stoves on which stand two ample pots forming the front of his booth at the road side. Standing straight up behind, like an orchestra conductor, is our macaroni man. He wears an apron and holds a long-handled ladle. On his right is a bench with a platter of grated cheese, a large pan of tomato sauce, a pile of bowls, and a wooden box of forks. His customers eat on the spot, the richest take cheese and sauce, others only cheese, while the poorest content themselves with a little water from the pot.[12]

Poverty equalized the diets of the poor. Bread or polenta, soup, vegetables and wine were a typical peasant diet throughout Italy and while starvation might not occur, hunger was chronic. Rosa Casettari, who grew up in Northern Italy and later lived in Chicago said of her childhood:

We were always hungry--me and Catarina and Toni. Sometimes when we thought of those people in front who ate the minestra every day we would run there and look through the iron bars of their gate and see if we could see them--people so rich they could have rice soup every day! ...

Once I heard an old woman in our court telling about a poor widow who was crying and praying all night that God would send her a crust of bread so her children wouldn't starve. In the morning when she got up, there on her table she found a whole loaf of bread--one of those big round loaves of black bread! So then I told Caterina and Toni and we all started praying, asking God to send us something to eat. But we didn't ask for a crust--we asked for a whole loaf for each of us and a bowl full of soup besides. But God knew we weren't starving and He never sent us anything.

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