

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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RETAIL STORES

The retailing of foods within Italian neighborhoods was the most publicly visible evidence of Italian's desire to eat what was familiar and to purchase it from their compatriots. Food was everywhere on the streets of Italian neighborhoods and the gathering of all of these food-related enterprises gave Italian neighborhoods a distinctive character, which contemporary descriptions seldom failed to note. In a description of the Sicilian settlement on Chicago's North Side, Marie Leavitt wrote:

In the entire district there was no food for sale that was not distinctly foreign; it was impossible to buy butter, American cheese, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, green corn, etc., but in season artichokes, cactus fruit (fichi d'India), pomegranates, cocozella, and various herbs and greens never sold in other parts of town were plentiful. [74]

A survey done in 1913-14 in the Chicago Commons community neighboring the Sicilians found 161 Italian businesses, excluding saloons and taverns. Grocers, meat market, bakers, fruit and candy stores, and ice cream vendors were among those noted. "The Italian bakery and the Italian delicatessen, if you want to call it that, were probably the two most important stores in an Italian community," according to Leonard Giuliano. On the Near West Side, Anthony Sorrentino recalled that almost every corner had either a candy or grocery store. "Everything was Italian in those days. Every grocery, every barbershop, every saloon, there wasn't nothing that wasn't Italian," stated Louis Panico. Food spilled out of businesses onto the street. Fruits and vegetables were displayed outside of groceries and live poultry in front of butcher shops. "Fruit stands help to fill up the sordid streets," reported a Hull-House resident, "and ice-cream carts drive a thriving trade." [75]



Jefferson Street grocery store owned by Pacifico Castaldo's relatives. He boarded here when he first arrived in Chicago.

From the Family Collection of Ann Castaldo Iandolo and James Castaldo

Storekeeping was one of the hidden areas of women's work, seldom recognized by statistics, or acknowledged by Italians themselves. Many women, however, made important contributions to family businesses behind the counter as well as in the kitchen. While Mr. 58 Auriemma sold produce from his wagon in other neighborhoods to avoid infringing on another peddler's territory, Mrs. Auriemma minded the store. In the Bonavolonta family, the husband's heart trouble meant that the wife was the one to take a horse and wagon into the streets of Chicago to peddle the produce from their Melrose Park farm. In 1919, the Department of Public Welfare reported that "...small stores are often attended by women, whose husbands work during the day and take care of the store in the evening." [76]

Selling food products could be justified as the extension of women's accepted role and even the Women's Club of Chicago responded to a Tribune contest for suggestions of how women could open a business with a small capital outlay, with suggestions such as opening a candy store or a lunchroom. Women and sometimes children, too, contributed to area businesses by preparing some of the products offered for sale. In 1906, the National Consumer's League found women and children in New York engaged in making macaroni, nut picking, candy making and wrapping, and the manufacture of ice cream. [77]

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