

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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THREATS TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

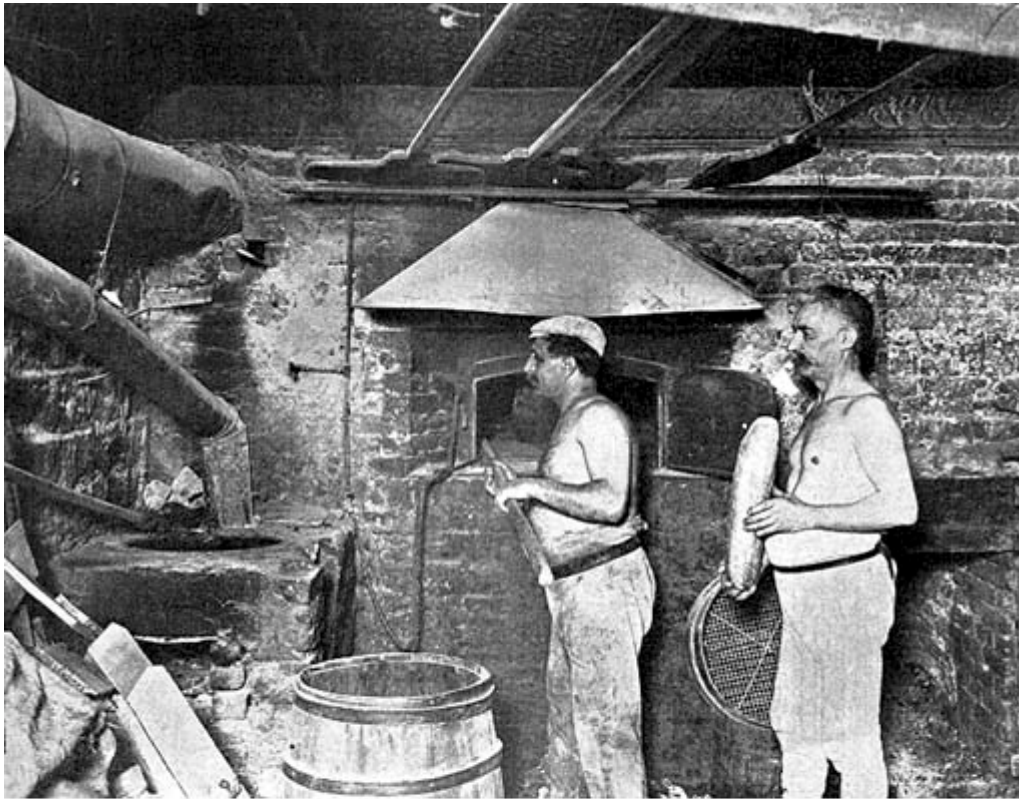
Italian foodways first aroused public attention in connection with city health and sanitation. As Chicago's population expanded, periodic waves of disease swept through the city. Until the germ theory became widely accepted by Chicago physicians, the "miasmatic" theory of disease was most often advanced as the cause of epidemics. Disease was believed to be incubated in filth and transmitted by contaminated air that wafted disease throughout the city. Fears over cholera in the 1830s helped prompt the establishment of the first Board of Health in Chicago and through the years, new epidemics inspired cleanliness campaigns, in which poor and congested neighborhoods were inspected for housing and sanitation problems. As germs for cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid and diphtheria were discovered in the late nineteenth century, the germ theory of disease gained broader acceptance and served to reinforce calls for sanitation as prevention for the spread of disease. [137]

During the 1880s and 1890s, the attention of Chicago's Department of Health was drawn to the Italian area developing along South Clark Street, where it conducted sanitation crackdowns and cleanups. In the mid-90s, the highest death rate in the city kept the Department's attention focused on the ethnic polyglot neighborhoods of the Nineteenth Ward. While reporters accompanying health inspectors frequently mentioned Italian food practices, the Health Department expressed concern not so much for private eating habits as for the public disposal of the remains of meals. Italians, it was reported, used the streets, the alleys, and the courtyards of buildings, as places to dispose of rubbish. One family was even said to be throwing their slops under the floorboards of their apartment. As one Tribune reporter put it, "They are troublesome to the health office because of the garbage and filth they collect about them, and though they eat a good deal of it they cannot eat it all. . . ." [138]



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Italian fruit and vegetable peddlers were often blamed for the creation of much of this excess rubbish. An 1898 Tribune report noted that "Italy Court" and "Poverty Flats" were "pervaded by the smells of rotten fruits, which the peddlers sort over and take out in their carts for sale after buying them up on South Water Street." What was not sold, it was suggested, found its way onto the neighborhood streets. This made the areas of Italian settlement rife with the possibility for the incubation of disease and its consequent spread to the general public. [139]



IN AN ITALIAN BAKERY.
Not only work, but bread, by the sweat of their brows.

Mary Brown Sumner, "A Strike for Clean Bread"
The Survey 24 (1910): 482

Photo by Lewis W. Hine

The storage of fruits and vegetables under the unsanitary conditions in Italian neighborhoods also brought criticism. An inspection of lodging houses by the Department of Health in 1893 included this account:

At 337 Desplaines street, found about 20 men sleeping on their fruit carts, surrounded on all sides by bunches of bananas, pears, large bags of peanuts, and an immense stock of street car goods in this place. They have staging built above the store floor, forming another floor, where there are more beds, fruits, cots and bunks. Those are occupied by the men who peddle fruit at night and sleep during the day. . . . [T]he upper room is reached by a ladder from the rear of store. The boards forming the floor are actually warped and bent from the weight of fruit, nuts, etc. Found defective water closet; bad odors all through.

A writer for Scribner's, describing the area near the 12th Street viaduct, harked back to miasmatic theories of disease when he suggested the produce sold from these kinds of locations might be tainted by its environment. He wrote:

I once saw men carrying into one of the darkened entrances here an immense bunch of green bananas. . . . One can only fancy the atmosphere in which this wonderful fruit would hang to ripen, and hope that the ripening process is one of exhalation, not of inhalation, during the week or more which must elapse before it appears, yellow and mellow, to be sold from the wayside fruit-stand, or be dragged slowly about the streets in the wagons attended by the dark-skinned peddlers...

The author's sarcastic account pointed to a real issue of concern for many Chicagoans. Fears about the nation's food supply had been sparked by the "embalmed beef scandal" of the Spanish-American War, and continued to grow as newspapers and magazines published stories of widespread adulteration. While fears generally centered on the new large food processors, such as the meatpackers, small, local sources of supply were not without their critics. [140]

Ethnic businesses did not escape the scrutiny of city inspectors. *L'Italia*, a Chicago Italian language newspaper, reported in 1906 that investigations into the stockyards had inspired the city to begin the investigation of macaroni factories. At John B. Canepa and Co., an early Italian business, they found filthy conditions and were forced to order a "thorough cleansing." In 1895, factory inspectors reported that within cellar bakeries:

...the flour barrel and molasses barrel are centers of attraction for rats, beetles and roaches; and the black floors and discolored walls make the bakers' long fight against vermin a losing one. The peculiar smell which greets the inspector descending into a bread and cake bakery arises from the accumulations of lemon skins, apple parings, egg shells, contents of eggs rejected by the baker, and yeast remnants, piled upon the damp earth floor near the furnace door, awaiting the moment when the baker may find time and inclination for shoveling them into the furnace.

A campaign against cellar bakeries culminated in a strong city sanitary ordinance in 1910. Italian bakers, during a 1911 strike, however, still complained of filthy premises and suffocating temperatures. Many Italians were confectioners, and the Illinois Inspector of Workshops and Factories attacked candy kitchens in tenement homes for unsafe conditions and the inability to be successfully regulated and inspected. [141]

Retail stores were also criticized. The Department of Public Welfare described one such store: "Instead of the clean, sanitary up-to-date grocery you may find a small, unsanitary room with a quantity of macaroni and several cases of tomatoes." A Chicago Tribune description of the items in an Italian grocery store on Polk Street commented "Considering the historical value that many of these must have the price is astonishingly modest..." [142]

Italian businesses were also accused of endangering the moral health of the city. Italian restaurants were maligned as being places of assignation, and fruit stores and ice cream parlors merited an ordinance prohibiting curtained off rooms. In a report on the street trades, Mary Aydelott noted that over half of the children selling food on the street were girls, usually selling fruit from their father's stands. One Tribune story went so far as to suggest a direct connection between Italian fruit vending and violence when it reported, "The Sicilians are mostly fruit vendors. Each of them carries a knife. In times of peace the knife is used to cut lemons and bananas. When a quarrel arises and there is necessity for prompt action these knives are the best of weapons." The advent of Prohibition brought more bite to these stories, as Italian restaurants became notorious for their speakeasies and clientele from the criminal underworld. [143]

While critics found fault with all ethnic groups, Italians were often portrayed as the most worthy of their attention. An investigation by the Citizen's Association in 1883 advanced a hierarchy of housing and cleanliness in which Italians ranked lowest. They reported, that 50,000 Americans lived in "cleanly places," Germans lived in "small houses," and English and British North Americans had "a healthful home life," while Scandinavians were "rather crowded," Poles and Bohemians "huddled together," and 4,500 Italians "live in filth." "Several families of Italians share one room," they reported; "Their food is often little better than refuse." They concluded that the solution lay in model tenements although they also commented, "The Poles, Italians, and with a few exceptions, all the rest are seemingly content with the meanest and lowest habitations and surroundings. They show little if any desire for social improvement." [144]

Fears over Italian dietary habits were initially sparked by a concern that a previously private issue--what one ate--could have implications for the general population. To address this problem a variety of measures were attempted. Efforts to clean up the congested areas in which Italians had settled were often ineffectual but ongoing. The city sent out clean-up crews and, under pressure from housing reformers, slowly enacted tenement legislation. Yet, a series of housing investigations of congested areas in the city showed only small gains through the years. The South Clark Street area only ceased to be an unsanitary residential neighborhood when industry took over the neighborhood, forcing Italians to move west and south in the city. Efforts to establish a clean food supply were also on-going. The city investigated food manufactories, retail shops and stockyards, and passed ordinances regarding packaging and fair weights and measures. But while reformers increasingly pointed the finger at greedy landlords and inefficient city services, the earliest and most poverty stricken Italian immigrants had already established a lingering ethnic portrait. Although housing and living conditions would improve with time, Italian dietary practices would continue to be seen as a "problem" that endangered both the physical and moral health of the city. [143]

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