

ITALY

(Southern Europe) Italian American Food

Though Italian immigrants formed a demographically significant part of the population of the United States, it must nonetheless be said that their cookery has had a disproportionately important influence on the culinary culture of the nation as a whole, an influence which has been manifested at various levels (restaurant, fast food, home cookery) and which has steadily increased from the first halting acceptance of Italian American foods by the American mainstream during the World War I on to the current period in which elements of Italian American and Italian cooking, very often moderated to the American mainstream by Italian Americans, have become a central part of current American food trends. The strength of that influence has largely been due to the remarkable degree to which Italian immigrants and their children resisted culinary assimilation, maintaining a wide range of traditional foodways from Italy, sufficiently so that Italian American cuisine—at least as practiced among culturally conservative families in the twentieth century—could reasonably be regarded as a regional (extrametropolitan) Italian cuisine as much as an American ethnic cuisine.

Background

The Italian presence in North America during the colonial period and on into the early decades of the nineteenth century was limited primarily to individuals and individual families; only in the mid-nineteenth century do we find the beginnings of small Italian communities in some cities, communities that in many cases were dominated by immigrants from the region of Liguria and its principal city, Genoa. Demographically significant immigration from Italy to the United States began to develop gradually only in the 1870s but expanded dramatically in the 1880s, when the need for labor in the United States aligned with socioeconomic and political pressures in Italy

that gave rise to massive emigration from almost all parts of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy and coincided with large-scale emigration from other lands in southern and eastern Europe to the "New World." While immigrants from northern Italy favored northern Europe and South America, especially Argentina and Brazil, as their main destinations, immigration from southern Italy favored the United States: in the peak period from 1880 to 1920, more than four million Italians immigrated to the United States, and of these as many as 80 percent were from the south. The southern regions that contributed the most to this movement were Campania and Sicily, while Calabria and Basilicata also contributed particularly significant numbers; a southern region relatively less involved in immigration to the United States at this time was Puglia.

In the United States, Italian settlement was focused in the cities of two broad areas. The most important of these was a zone that comprised the north of the Mid-Atlantic region and southern New England. By far the greatest concentration of Italian settlement was in New York City and directly across the Hudson River in New Jersey; large urban communities of Italian immigrants developed also in Philadelphia, Trenton, Newark, New Haven, Providence, and Boston, with an outlier just to the south in Baltimore. The other broad zone of Italian settlement was in the Great Lakes region; here, as along the East Coast, important communities developed in a number of cities. The largest of these communities was in Chicago, but other concentrations of Italian immigrants formed in northern New York (Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo), western Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh), Ohio (Cleveland, Youngstown), Michigan (Detroit), Wisconsin (Milwaukee), Indiana (Indianapolis), and Minnesota (Minneapolis-Saint Paul). Though many small communities of Italian immigrants arose throughout most of the rest of the United States, there were few major urban concentrations outside of the East Coast and

Great Lakes regions just mentioned. The most significant ones were in Saint Louis and New Orleans, which were relatively isolated, and in San Francisco, which served as the point of diffusion for Italians to other communities in the Bay Area and in agricultural and fishing centers in nearby counties of central and northern California.

Three basic stages can be seen in the social history of Italian Americans which have direct bearing on the development of their culinary culture: (1) the Early Community Stage, which began with the initial establishment of Italian communities in the United States in the nineteenth century and continued until late in that century, when Italian immigration involved relatively few women and primarily single young men, significant numbers of whom returned to Italy; (2) the "Little Italy" Stage, comprising roughly the first half of the twentieth century, during which time Italian communities grew considerably but also stabilized culturally, thanks in part to a greater presence of immigrant women, and developed a distinctively Italian American culture through the interactions between Italian Americans of different Italian regional origins and through the interaction with mainstream American culture and the cultures of other immigrant groups; (3) the Suburban Stage, beginning roughly in the 1950s and continuing today, which has been characterized by the gradual reduction and even complete dissolution of the urban "Little Italy" communities with dispersal of their populations especially to suburban settings and ever-increasing exogamy.

Foodways

Historical Development of Italian American Foodways. There are two misconceptions about Italian American cuisine that are widespread in both popular and scholarly writing about the subject. The first involves the well-known diversity of metropolitan Italian regional cuisines: it is assumed that such diversity gave rise

to an immigrant cuisine that was to a significant degree a sort of jumble of regional dishes. The second is that Italian American cookery was rapidly Americanized to a significant degree.

With regard to the culinary background of Italian American cookery, it is certainly true that the encounters of Italians from various regions led to a certain degree of culinary *koinization* or leveling of regional culinary differences in the United States. Working against this natural process, however, were the effects of chain migration, by which immigrants from particular towns or subregions in Italy tended strongly to settle together in particular immigrant communities in the United States. In this way, parochial associations from the old country continued, and aspects of local Italian culture (religious, linguistic, culinary) could be preserved among extended families and circles of friends living in close proximity in their American neighborhoods. Marriage outside of such small groups was originally discouraged but increasingly took place, though Italian Americans of the second generation tended still to marry within the Italian community. Given that the vast majority of Italian immigrants were from southern Italy, however, there was still relatively little need to compromise or adapt, for all the regional and subregional cuisines of the Mezzogiorno share to a great degree the same culinary foundations—gustatory aesthetics, preferred basic ingredients, cooking methods, meal structures, culinary calendar—and, additionally, they share almost all basic styles of dishes (e.g., pasta with legumes, sautéed bitter greens, stuffed vegetables, dressed flatbreads, baked pastas, etc.), so that compromise and blending could easily occur without involving any major changes.

With regard to the question of Americanization, many food writers, particularly those not belonging to the Italian American community, have taken the easily observed Italian American restaurant cookery, in which Americanized elements clearly have long been present, as being

representative of Italian American cuisine in general. In truth, Italian American domestic cookery, especially as practiced within culturally conservative families, was and to a considerable degree remains quite distinct from public cookery with only certain points of overlap.

That Italian Americans during the Early Community and Little Italy stages were, relative to other European immigrant groups in the United States, particularly resistant to cultural and especially culinary assimilation to mainstream American ways is well documented. It was widely believed by Americans before World War I that Italian foodways were not only uncivilized but also unhealthy, and even well-intentioned social workers active in Italian American communities felt that the adoption of American eating habits would be a key to helping cure the perceived shortcomings of this ethnic group. Indeed, mainstream America and some of the better-established immigrant ethnic groups considered southern Italians (but generally not northern Italians) exceptionally backward and commonly attributed to them a range of negative stereotypes: they were seen by many as inherently dirty, emotionally unstable, untrustworthy, and naturally inclined toward violence and criminality. They were so sufficiently marginalized that there were extended public debates about whether southern Italians could be considered "white," which, in the context of the even more virulent prejudices toward African Americans and Asians in the United States, is quite telling.

For the majority of Italian Americans such bigotry reinforced in-group social and economic ties that played an important role in strengthening the maintenance of traditional foodways. In this way, family and very local community relations became the center of Italian American life. The daily family meal and especially the Sunday feast were key institutions that fostered community and ethnic pride and served as a means by which traditional culinary knowledge was passed on to new generations,

not just as recipes for individual dishes but as a full cuisine, including the aforementioned culinary foundation (gustatory aesthetics, etc.). Furthermore, mainstream prejudice, which excluded them from many aspects of the business world, also pushed Italian Americans to develop the culinary infrastructure necessary to maintain their traditional foodways.

Within the Little Italies themselves, shopkeepers were needed who could obtain or produce Italian foodstuffs: Italian-style breads and pastries, cured meats (*prosciutto*, *salami*, *capocollo*) and fresh sausages, fresh cheeses (*ricotta*, *mozzarella*, *tuma*), particular seafoods (eel, squid, snails, salt cod), and meat cut according to Italian preferences. To obtain necessary imported foodstuffs (e.g., olive oil, grating cheeses, tinned anchovies, etc.), community members also entered the fields of wholesale imports and shipping. Demand for other foodstuffs that could be produced in the United States gave rise to further entrepreneurial and manufacturing opportunities. Most notable among these was the rise of the American dried pasta industry, in which Italian Americans played a leading role (e.g., Ronzoni in New York, Prince in Boston, etc.). Examples of packaged goods companies selling both domestic and imported products that started within the Italian American community are Pastene (originally a pushcart business in Boston) and Progresso (originally founded in the New Orleans Sicilian community). The Italian American communities of central California also played an important role in the network supplying immigrant communities around the country, developing businesses specializing in vegetables (e.g., artichokes, *rapini*), fruits, and nuts favored by Italians, as well as being instrumental in the rise of the California wine and olive oil industries.

Italian American Domestic Cuisine. Poverty in southern Italy and parts of northern Italy during the period of the great wave of immigration to the United States was deep: hunger was a key motivation for many Italians to leave

their homeland. In all parts of Italy, the diet of the poor at this time included little fresh meat and generally very little fresh fish and seafood. The staple was bread, commonly containing a little wheat flour supplemented with flour from other grains and even milled legumes under dire circumstances. Other starchy foods of the poor in both northern and southern Italy were potatoes and *polenta* (corn meal). Dried pasta was eaten by the urban poor, but, as a purchased item, it was uncommon for the rural poor, whereas fresh pasta, as a food specific to various holidays and special occasions, was well known. Of central importance in the diet were legumes, greens, and garden vegetables and fruits. In mountainous areas, chestnuts were important, with chestnut flour being used to make up shortages in other grain flours. Lard was universally used, and olive oil very widely used for cooking and flavoring, though they were in short supply for the destitute.

Key flavoring agents were onions, garlic, and in southern and central Italy also hot chilies, as well as cultivated and wild herbs (parsley, basil, oregano, fennel, rosemary, marjoram, mint, etc.); pine nuts and raisins were also included in certain sweet and savory dishes. To the degree they were available, small amounts of umami-bearing agents were essential to flavoring dishes: salted anchovies, cured pork products (*pancetta*, *prosciutto*, *guanciale*, etc.), and hard cheeses for grating (*pecorino*, *grana*, *ricotta salata*). Wine vinegar was a particularly important product for flavoring and food preservation. Where possible, foraging was also an important source of foodstuffs for the poor, yielding mushrooms, wild vegetables and greens, medicinal herbs, snails, frogs, and more.

Though most Italian American immigrants to the United States had been poor and a great many had long endured limited and monotonous diets in Italy, they did not arrive in America without good knowledge of the ingredients and dishes that their daily routine had been lacking. With the relative prosperity that even

menial jobs in the United States offered—food prices in the United States were comparatively very low—they quickly were able to establish regimens very much akin to those of middling economic social strata in their home regions. The most obvious changes were the increases in Italian immigrants' consumption of meat and dried pasta, but these developments were in no sense elements of a process of Americanization; rather, they were simply instances of exploitation of improved economic circumstances that allowed the immigrants to enjoy dishes that were already part of their regional cuisines but unavailable to many for regular consumption on account of poverty. The inclusion of increased amounts of dried pasta and meat were still very much regulated by the culinary foundations brought over from Italy, and, indeed, with regard to meat, American observers in the early twentieth century were surprised by its measured role in the Italian American diet.

Though greater access to dried pasta and meat were noteworthy developments, an even more fundamental development was the greater access to high-quality bread, the true Italian staple food, made from all-wheat flour, and the bread bakery became without a doubt one of the most common and important of neighborhood institutions in Italian American communities.

Overlooked in discussions of the history of Italian American cuisine is the role of increased access to fresh fish and seafood, which constituted a more revolutionary development than the increased access to dried pasta and meat for the many immigrants who came from the mountainous interior regions of Italy, where fresh foods from the sea were all but unknown. Seafood was less important in the Italian American communities of the Midwest, but for those on the East, West, and Gulf coasts, it rapidly became an integral part of the diet, regardless of where in Italy their members hailed.

It should be noted that these culinary developments through greater prosperity—increased

consumption of dried pasta, meat, seafood, and wheat bread—can all be observed occurring in parallel fashion in the regional cuisines of Italy during the twentieth century.

For many culturally conservative Italian American families, as in Italy, there was a pattern to the appearance of foods through the week that bore a certain relation to the yearly culinary calendar: Sunday was a minifeast day, Friday and for many also Wednesday were days of abstinence from meat, while the remaining days were the “ordinary” days. On the “ordinary days,” meat could be consumed and often was, but meals could be composed primarily of pasta (or *polenta* or rice) and vegetable or fish dishes. On Fridays, fish or seafood was the norm as the main dish, and for many this was the case on Wednesdays as well, though on these days meals comprising vegetable dishes were also commonly enjoyed, including hearty pasta with legume preparations (pasta with beans, chickpeas, and others). On Sundays, a weekly holiday, more elaborate and abundant main meals were the norm, typically eaten in the early afternoon. For many Italian American families, this Sunday meal most often entailed a slow-cooked meat *ragù* prepared for pasta, with the pasta dressed with the sauce and the meat served separately after the pasta. In addition, a roasted meat dish with vegetable side dishes was common, though before roasted meats, the pasta dish could well be not with a *ragù* but rather some other special condiment, such as a mushroom sauce, or could entail a special form of pasta, such as ravioli or fresh noodles (*tagliatelle*, *fettucine*), fresh shaped forms of *maccheroni* (*cavatelli*, *fusilli*) or *gnocchi*, served with a simple sauce; baked pasta dishes (stuffed shells, *ziti* with meat sauce and cheeses) would also be appropriate. In any event, the Sunday meal had to be special and well differentiated from those of the ordinary days.

Meal structures in Italian American cuisine were generally as in Italy. Though some meals might feature pasta as the main dish, more

often pasta would be a first course, followed by a main meat, fish, or vegetable dish and one or more accompanying side dishes. A simple salad was normally included, dressed with olive oil and either vinegar or lemon, and always served after the main course. Italian bread would necessarily be available throughout the meal. For adults, wine, especially red wine, was the traditional drink, alongside water. After dinner, fresh fruit was commonly set on the table while espresso was prepared for the adults. Desserts were generally reserved for Sundays or other special occasions.

Thus, in all general ways, the basic patterns of eating for culturally conservative Italian Americans were in accord with those in a large part of Italy and especially in the south of Italy. The tradition of having the main meal of the day in the afternoon on weekdays and Saturdays, as well as on Sundays, was, however, impossible to maintain for most Italian American families, given the constraints of work and school schedules in the United States. Consequently, Italian Americans’ lunch habits began to resemble those of other Americans, as workers and students would often take along sandwiches made at home. But the constitution of the sandwiches often remained very ethnic—bakery-made bread filled with Italian cold cuts and cheeses, slices of leftover meats or sausages, omelets (*frittate*), tinned fish or prepared vegetables—and contrasted starkly with the mainstream’s slices of American bread with simpler, less aromatic fillings of cooked ham or peanut butter and jelly; lunchtime in school or at the workplace became, then, a place of ethnoculinary encounters that made lasting impressions on many.

Preparation

Cooking among Italian Americans was primarily the work of the women, with mothers playing a key role in the passing on of culinary traditions to daughters and daughters-in-law; the figure of the grandmother (*nonna*), how-

ever, held an especially revered position in the culinary life of the family. Given the centrality of foodways in the culture, Italian American men have commonly taken an active interest in cooking, and many became well versed in the preparation of at least basic dishes; men also played key roles in activities such as wine-making, gardening, and more. For many Italian American families in the earliest period, living conditions were cramped and kitchen facilities limited; families lacking ovens would take prepared dishes to the local bakery for cooking. When able to purchase their own homes, Italian American families often had two kitchens: one on the main floor of the house, which was used minimally, and another in the basement, where all serious cooking took place.

Everyday Meals

The breadth of Italian American domestic cookery and its general fealty toward Italian regional cuisines can be seen through the dishes popular within the community but less well known to mainstream America until recently, as a result of the current trend of interest in Italian regional foods.

First-course dishes: Pasta: While pasta dishes with marinara sauce and tomato-based meat sauces are iconic elements of Italian American cuisine, these dishes, though frequently consumed, appeared alongside many other pasta preparations in the domestic regime. Particular noteworthy is a family of very simple dishes made with spaghetti and a condiment featuring olive oil and garlic as the base (*spaghetti aglio e olio*); variations include hot chiles (*aglio olio e peperoncino*), anchovy (*con alici*), fried breadcrumbs (*con mollica*), and so on; traditionally, such dishes are not served with grated cheese. A great many combinations of pasta with a specific vegetable, with or without tomatoes, were also frequently consumed—with potatoes, cauliflower, eggplant, zucchini, *rapini*, cabbage, and others. Some simple dishes were thought to have restor-

ative qualities, such as pasta *cacio e uova* (with beaten eggs and grated cheese) or pasta with ricotta (pasta served just with some of its cooking water and fresh ricotta). Pasta dishes with seafood (clams, mussels, shrimp, periwinkle snails) have also had an important place in domestic cooking. A particularly beloved summer dish for many Italian Americans on the East Coast has long been spaghetti or linguine with a simple tomato sauce and blue crabs.

Polenta and rice: In communities and individual families of northern Italian origin, *polenta* and *risotto* dishes often played a greater role than dried pasta; among southern Italians, such dishes were known (especially *polenta*, served soupy with tomato sauce) but typically not consumed with great frequency.

Soups: In addition to vegetable soup (*minestrone*) and simple beef and chicken soups, a distinctive and popular Italian American preparation is Italian wedding soup, which features escarole and/or other leafy greens and very small meatballs in chicken stock.

Second-course dishes: Meat: The triumvirate of meatballs, Italian sausage, and *braciole* (rolls of thin beef slices, filled with seasonings such as garlic, parsley, *pecorino*, sometimes pine nuts and raisins) is important in Italian American cooking; each of the meats could be prepared alone and function as a main course or could appear alone or in combination, cooked in a tomato sauce used to dress pasta. Italian sausage can be fried, baked, or grilled; the combination of sausage and peppers is widely consumed and often appears in outdoor settings (street fairs, cookouts, etc.). Certain offal dishes, such as tripe, liver, *zuffritt*’ (pig’s pluck stew with a spicy sauce), and *capuzzelle* (cloven lamb’s head, seasoned and baked), were part of the cuisine but have declined considerably in popularity in recent decades. Of more enduring popularity are many sautéed veal preparations (*alla Milanese*, veal and peppers). Noteworthy is chicken *alla cacciatore* (“hunter style”), in which chicken pieces are sautéed, then braised

with herbs, wine, and vinegar, but also commonly included are tomatoes and peppers. An old dish that often formed part of the Sunday dinner was chicken cut in pieces with potato wedges, roasted in the oven with olive oil, garlic, rosemary, white wine (or lemon juice), and peas; lamb cut in pieces received similar treatment. Of pork dishes, sautéed pork chops with vinegar peppers accompanied by fried potatoes is an old and popular Italian American preparation. Similarly beloved is steak *alla pizzaiola* (pizza-makers style): thin slices of beef braised in an oregano-flavored tomato sauce.

Fish: A regional Italian American specialty of San Francisco is the fish and seafood stew *cioppino*, related to the Ligurian *ciupin*, brought to the Bay Area by Genoese immigrants. On the East Coast there appears a similar dish, *zuppa di pesce*. Fried squid was surely popularized by Italian Americans in the United States, where squid was formerly little consumed and very cheap; also popular among Italian Americans were stuffed squid. Salt cod (*baccalà*), a staple in Italy, remained popular in the United States, and was prepared in a variety of ways—fried or cooked in a tomato sauce with olives and potatoes. A typical seafood dish at least on the East Coast was conch (*scungilli*), often served boiled and sliced in a salad with celery, onions, etc.

Vegetable dishes: Aside from such well-known dishes as eggplant *alla parmigiana* and stuffed peppers, we call attention to *ciambotta*, a summer vegetable stew resembling *ratatouille*. With Sicilian families, the vegetable medley *caponata* made its way to the United States. Sliced zucchini (fried) and eggplant (fried or boiled) could be made *alla scapece*—that is, dressed with olive oil, garlic, vinegar, and mint. An example of a regional Italian American vegetable dish is "Utica greens," popular in Utica, New York, and the surrounding area, which augments basic sautéed greens (esp. escarole) with garlic and hot peppers with chicken stock, chopped *prosciutto*, grated *pecorino*, and breadcrumbs.

Sweets: Many of the most interesting traditional sweets made in the Italian American community are associated with major holidays and other feast days, but throughout the year some families produce a range of baked goods (e.g., lemon or almond cookies, *biscotti*, and various pies and torts). Neighborhood pastry shops (*pasticerie*) were formerly very numerous, and those remaining still are important sources for specialties such as *cannoli*, *sfogliatelle*, and *pasticiotti*, as well as for rum cakes and *ricotta*-filled cheese-cakes. *Spumoni*, a molded ice cream containing three bands of different colors and flavors (usually cherry, pistachio, and chocolate), is closely associated with Italian Americans.

Holiday Feasts

The vast majority of Italian immigrants were Roman Catholic, and their families have generally remained faithful to the church, or at least to the intimate cultural associations that grew out of the religion and marked the rhythm of weekly meals and the observations of major and minor holidays.

The most distinctive, and for many the most popular, holiday meal of the Italian American calendar is on Christmas Eve. What is particularly distinctive about this meal is that the occasion is one of the most joyous of Catholic holidays while also being anciently a day of strict abstinence from animal products (meat, cheese, and eggs). Though many families have long moved away from observing the abstinence rules, others maintain them directly, or, since traditional dishes all conform to the rules, indirectly. Consequently, the Christmas Eve feast centrally involves a variety of fish, seafood, and vegetable dishes, giving rise in recent decades to the term *the feast of the seven fishes*, although traditionally no such specific number was required. A typical meal might begin with some vegetable-filled fritters or bits of pizza dough stuffed with cooked cauliflower or anchovies and fried in olive oil, alongside

some crudités and olives. Typical pasta dishes are simple and usually include fish or seafood: spaghetti with clam sauce, spaghetti with anchovies, with tuna, and more. The main course includes a range of different fishes, with some fish receiving multiple treatments (frying, baking, boiling); particularly common are salt cod, eel, whiting, smelt, squid, octopus, and shrimp. Vegetable side dishes are always included, and for many families broccoli or *rapini* are essential. To finish the meal, fresh fruits and nuts are on offer, as well as imported nougats (*torrone*) and fried, shaped dough bits dressed with powdered sugar or honey (e.g., *struffoli*).

Christmas day feasts are more variable in their composition but also follow the pattern of *antipasti*, a special pasta course (ravioli, a baked pasta, tortellini in broth, etc.) and then roasted and boiled meats, followed by fruits, nuts, sweets, and then a varied dessert course, usually including *panettone* (an enriched sweet bread).

The Easter day meal follows the same pattern, but the most traditional meat served is lamb. The most distinctive dishes of the Easter period are the various savory pies: on Good Friday (a fast day), *pizza di scarola* (filled with escarole, anchovies, olives, pine nuts, and raisins) used to be commonly eaten in families with ties to Campania. On Easter Saturday and Sunday, savory pies featuring pork products, cheeses, and eggs are traditional (e.g., *pizza rustica*, *pizza chena*, *scarcedda*, etc.). Elaborate special desserts include the Neapolitan *pastiera* (*ricotta* pie with wheat berries) and the Sicilian *cassata*.

Italian Americans have generally embraced the central elements of the American Thanksgiving meal but incorporated these dishes into the structure of an Italian festive meal. Thus, the first course would commonly be an elaborate set of *antipasti*, including sliced Italian cold cuts and fresh and aged cheeses, olives, and various vegetables (cooked, pickled, and raw), accompanied by Italian bread. The next course would be a substantial, festive pasta dish, such as lasagna, followed then by a full roast turkey

dinner (sometimes with other meats served as well) with the appropriate side dishes and trimmings. The dessert course would often bring together both the traditional American pies and Italian sweets.

It is difficult to say to how widely Italian American cuisine as described above survives today. Without doubt, there are families that maintain the tradition largely intact, especially among those living in the remnants of urban Little Italies or in suburbs in which there are substantial Italian American populations and/or for whom family and old community networks have remained close. But the great diaspora from the urban communities to the suburbs starting in the 1950s has led to far-reaching Americanization: though many families maintain various particular Italian American dishes, their culinary foundation has shifted—often abruptly—from the old basis of Italian foodways to an essentially American set of aesthetics, rules, and attitudes about food. In other words, the trend is for Italian Americans to move from cooking Italian American cuisine to cooking American cuisine, albeit with some abiding traditional dishes included in their cookery and perhaps an ethnically inspired inclination to favor adoption of (more or less Americanized) dishes of Italian origin that were not part of the Italian American repertoire and have been learned not through family or community tradition but through visiting restaurants, reading cookbooks, or watching cooking shows on television. Many of the specific changes that this culinary shift entails are reflected in the public cookery of Italian restaurants and celebrity chefs in the United States.

Italian American Public Cookery

Contrary to general belief, Italian American restaurant food is not indicative of Italian American cuisine as a whole: rather, restaurateurs have focused on celebratory traditional dishes, eschewing most ordinary homey dishes, and have invented many new concoctions, such as veal

parmigiana and *penne* with vodka sauce, which have come to be thought of as quintessentially Italian American. The iconic pairing of spaghetti and meatballs likely began in the simple “spaghetti houses” of the early twentieth century, meeting non-Italian expectations of meat and starch served together in one course. Particularly important, Italian American contributions are the informal or fast-food dishes: sandwiches of various types (subs, New Jersey’s Italian hot dog, Chicago’s Italian beef, Philadelphia’s cheesesteak, New Orleans’s muffuletta) and pizza. Though pizzerias have existed since the late nineteenth century in Italian American neighborhoods, pizza’s enormous mainstream popularity dates from the post–World War II years. Regional pizza differences have developed in the United States, though East Coast styles share the trait of no fat or only a little olive oil in the dough, while Chicago styles (thin crust, deep dish, and stuffed) use a short dough.

By the 1970s, a new trend of “northern Italian” restaurants began, scorning the older “red-sauce joints” and claiming to be authentically Italian. Ironically, most newer “Italian” restaurants make just as many concessions to American expectations—serving salad as an appetizer, compressing the primo and secondo into a pasta dish topped with meat, excessive use of butter, cream, and garlic, and streamlined versions of festive dishes such as lasagna. All of these deviations from traditional Italian and Italian American foodways can be found in the cookery of American families of Italian descent for whom the connection to the old tradition has been largely broken and a shift to an essentially mainstream American culinary foundation has occurred—in other words, this style of cooking is not really Italian American, but rather an American take on traditional Italian and Italian American foods.

Place in American Culture

While Italian American restaurants and adapted forms of Italian American dishes remain ex-

tremely popular with the broader American population, followers of gourmet or “foodie” trends tend to regard Italian American cookery simplistically and negatively, comparing it unfavorably to “authentic” metropolitan Italian regional cuisines and especially those of central and northern Italy. As a consequence, many traditional Italian American dishes of southern Italian origin are inappropriately compared to similar dishes from elsewhere in Italy, and names of southern Italian foods, preserved in correct dialect forms among Italian Americans, are absurdly disparaged as “corruptions” of the cognates in standard Italian. The image of Italian American cuisine has also been distorted through its appropriation by industrial food purveyors and the chain-restaurant industry (e.g., Olive Garden, Buco di Beppo, etc.), where Americanized versions of Italianate dishes that often bear no relation to traditional Italian American domestic cookery are offered while being marketed through stereotypical notions of Italian American ethnicity.

For culturally conservative Italian Americans, the recent explosion of interest in Italian regional foods in the United States is a mixed blessing: a far broader range of high-quality traditional (and new) ingredients are now more widely available than ever before, even in basic grocery chain stores, but this trend coincides with and is partly related to the continuing disappearance of the small, Italian American-owned food shops that were so much a part of the ethnic community’s life. On the other hand, just as mainstream American cookery has benefited recently from the incorporation of Italian regional ingredients, dishes, and cooking methods, so, too, has Italian American cookery, in which the traditional culinary foundation makes it all the easier to adopt naturally elements from other related cuisines of Italy.

Images of Italian Americans in popular culture are heavily stereotypical and often negative, with an extreme focus on organized crime. As a consequence, the use of family and culinary tropes in films such as *The Godfather* and *Good-*

fellas and television series such as *The Sopranos* have reinforced long-standing misconceptions about Italian Americans in the United States. While some Italian Americans actively use these associations in marketing their restaurants and other food-related businesses, many within the ethnic community find this linking of family, foodways, and criminality in pop culture extremely offensive. Some works focusing on foodways without reference to crime do, however, exist: Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the film *Big Night*, in which the clash of American and Italian culinary cultures is explored.

Noted Restaurants and Chefs

There are many well-known Italian American chefs active in both the restaurant business and food media who have a deep knowledge of Italian American food traditions, though they may focus professionally on other culinary specialties; for example, Michael Lomonaco (New York), Tony Mantuano (Kenosha/Chicago), and Michael Chiarello (Napa Valley). More widely known Italian American food personalities are Rachael Ray and Giada De Laurentiis, but, while their cooking draws heavily on Italian ingredients and dishes, their cooking styles are purely American. The most famous Italian American celebrity chef today is Mario Batali, who, after spending three years in Italy, returned to the United States and marketed himself as an expert on Italian regional cuisines in his television career; his cooking draws heavily on Italian tradition, but he often presents traditional dishes adapted to American tastes and/or altered in accordance with his personal style. Among high-profile Italian American celebrity chefs, Lidia Bastianich stands out for having a deep knowledge of Italian and Italian American foodways and for treating both with respect for tradition.

Italian and Italian American restaurants in the United States number in the thousands and span the entire range of price, atmosphere, and quality. The vast majority of the higher-end restaurants offer or claim to offer Italian (as opposed to Italian American) cooking. Examples of critically acclaimed restaurants that unabashedly embrace their Italian American identity are vanishingly few; the best-known example is Rao’s in East Harlem, New York.

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