SPAGHETTI and MEATBALLS

REFLECTIONS ON A MISUNDERSTOOD DISH

By Anthony F. Buccini

Though I am an Italian-American, I have never eaten the most emblematic dish associated with Italian-Americans, 'spaghetti and meatballs.' Growing up in North Jersey, where Italian-Americans are very numerous, and in a family where we ate our traditional foods almost every single day of every year, I of course consumed regularly both spaghetti in various ways and meatballs in various ways, but the two never once appeared together on our family table and the absence of this dish in my life has continued on as I approach the end of midlife. When occasionally confronted with the dish in institutional or other contexts, I have spurned it, though not specifically because a combination of pasta and meatballs is inherently objectionable but rather out of an awareness that any sort of 'Italian' food made by unknown people of unknown culinary background is likely to be at best a disappointment and possibly a form of gustatory torture. In other words, had I been presented this dish in the home of an Italian(-American) friend or relative here in the States or Italy, I would have tucked into it, bemused yet appreciative, but in all my years on this earth, that situation has never come to pass.

Spaghetti and meatballs.

As the emblematic dish of Italian food in America, 'spaghetti and meatballs' has received a certain amount of attention from food writers of different sorts, from the academic to the journalistic to the amateur food-enthusiast. Though some are knowledgeable enough to see connections to traditional southern Italian dishes, there is nonetheless a consensus opinion that the dish is uniquely American and many make the claim that this 'Italian-American' preparation evinces shock and horror in native Italians. For example, in the context of a discussion regarding culinary appropriation and authenticity, a justly renowned food scholar, Ken Albala, wrote of this dish: "We say spaghetti and meatballs is Italian-American, worthy of respect in its own right, though it makes 'real' Italian people shudder in horror." Similarly, the journalist Corby Kummer, in an Atlantic article of 1986 intended to teach us all about pasta—an effort which now might be regarded as a bit of culturally appropriative hubris—starts off with a header "An inquiry into a few fundamental questions: How did spaghetti and meatballs, a dish no Italian recognizes, become so popular here?…" I have yet to find a well-informed discussion of the topic.

Native Italians are notoriously proud of their traditional cuisines and vociferously object to the violence that outsiders perpetrate on them—garlic in *all'amatriciana*? cream in *alla carbonara*? Those are simply not admissible variations. But so too are Italian-Americans who grew up in a culinarily traditional setting—loose ground meat in a *lasagna alla napoletana*? Grated cheese on linguine with clam sauce?—unacceptable violations of taste and tradition. In point of fact, culturally conservative native Italians and Italian-Americans have always agreed on a great many fundamental culinary issues and if one aligns the two groups for regions of origin in Italy, the agreement extends to myriad details of particular preparations as well. All would agree on issues of meal structure—(antipasto/) primo/secondo/salad (/dessert)—as well as general contours to the weekly meal plan and the basics regarding which special events one celebrates at table and how one does so. When some forty years ago I travelled to my grandfather's hometown in Italy to reestablish a several decades long hiatus in contact between the American and Italian branches of the family, I was flabbergasted at how similar—in many respects identical—the cuisine with which I grew up was to what my cousins enjoyed. The major differences were their stricter adherence to seasonality and access to better versions of many basic ingredients, both of which are related to the fact that they live in direct contact with a particularly rich agricultural countryside and the one in which our shared cuisine came into existence. For example, their home is where the buffalo roam, but not too far, as they must be milked each day for the production of exquisite mozzarella and ricotta, even better than the excellent cows-milk analogs available in Jersey.

Like language, music, religion, dress, etc., cuisine is a cultural domain, which is to say it is not simply a set of ingredients, dishes, meals, cooking procedures, etc. Rather, it is a set of ideas, of rules and preferences, of beliefs, regarding the regulation of how, what, when, and why one properly eats within a given cultural community; the ingredients, dishes, etc. are the physical manifestations of that underlying body of shared mental constructs that resides in the minds of members of that community. This body of culinary knowledge is, like language, learned and in most communities throughout history the primary locus of the transmission of this knowledge has been the family and proximate, allied families who all share similar living conditions; the predominant transmission has been from parents and grandparents to children through explicit instruction and modeled behavior along with the sensory experience of the children themselves. In the United States and now in many other 'modern' societies, culinary knowledge is increasingly transmitted to a far less degree in this traditional manner than elsewhere: American culinary discourse is largely oriented outside the family and proximate social group, open to ever-expanding influences through media and impersonal discourse and experience (e.g. in restaurants). And in mainstream American society this has been an increasing trend since the 19th century.

The great wave of (overwhelmingly southern) Italian immigrants that came to the States between 1880 and 1924 were mostly peasants and non-elite urban dwellers and the culinary culture they brought with them was very much traditional in nature. In the old country their poverty had dictated limited consumption of muscle meats, fresh fish, and pasta—these were foods typically only consumed by most on festive occasions, which might include Sundays if one were not terribly poor. The attraction of America was primarily economic and the greater purchasing power Italian-Americans had naturally led to an increased ability to enjoy the aforementioned triumvirate of festive foods, a natural development soon paralleled in southern Italy itself amidst increased prosperity in the mid-twentieth century. In the U.S., a degree of leveling of southern Italian regional differences took place and all the newcomers were subjected to similar new environmental conditions of life in America; out of these processes, there began to develop for a time for a time a new sort of southern Italian regional cuisine(s) in the Northeast and Midwest centers of Italian settlement, neglecting some of the elements of *cucina povera* and making former holiday dishes more quotidian in nature, but the heart of their un-American cuisine remained.

Abiding and deep mainstream prejudice toward southern Italians and, at least initially, a language barrier inhibited assimilation, but many southern Italian immigrants also chose to resist assimilation to the mainstream with regard to some domains of life and this was especially so in family life and the culinary culture which was inextricably linked to it. To a far greater degree than with some other immigrant groups, culinary culture became a central pillar of ethnic pride and identity. Nonetheless, socioeconomic realities have worked against the long-term stabilization and preservation of this Italian-American cuisine. Intermarriage with non-Italians has played a part but more significant are the many forces in American society that work against the maintenance of a tight family and neighborhood association, the context needed for the transmission of traditional culinary knowledge. Some Italian-Americans have consciously and willingly assimilated to mainstream culinary culture but for many more the break in generational transfer of culinary culture has been an unintended consequence of the demands of participating in American socioeconomic institutions and the concomitant weakening of family bonds, the loss of the crucial family- and group-internal discourse about food on which, by definition, traditional culture depends. The newer generations—the second or third or fourth American-born, varying by family and location—who identify as 'Italian' but who have acquired little or nothing of their ancestors' cuisine beyond a few recipes for individual (mostly festive) dishes, might be more appropriately referred to as 'Americans of Italian descent' rather than 'Italian-Americans.' This development, parallel and related to the loss of Italian dialects as 'heritage language,' is typically fairly abrupt and we should therefore not speak of Italian-American cuisine changing so much as of 'culinary death,' just as we speak of 'language death' in a given community, and of replacement of it by the mainstream cuisine.

So then, what is it about 'spaghetti and meatballs' that allegedly induces shock and horror in native Italians? First, we must wonder who these shocked and horrified Italians are and it is my suspicion that they are of either of two types. Many Italians (like many other peoples) bear a cultural prejudice against America, especially in connection with things culinary, and an Italianate but non-Italian dish from America would naturally engender a negative reaction. One must also wonder whether these horrified consultants are northern Italians, for meatballs eaten together with pasta is a decidedly southern Italian thing. To be sure, from a traditional southern Italian standpoint, a plate of spaghetti topped with large, round meatballs is also strange and objectionable but hardly a source of horror in itself: Legitimate horror might be evinced if the tomato sauce is of the over-garlicky or kitchen-sink American style or if the pasta is overcooked or if the meatballs are rubbery and excessively and peculiarly seasoned, as American takes on *polpette* often are. But with the components all properly prepared according to tradition, what is objectionable about the American dish is simply this: For Italians, when one eats pasta, the pasta is the featured item in a separate course—it is not a side-dish to meat, as Americans often consume it, and when pasta co-appears with meat, the meat is part of the dressing, processed in such a way that one can eat a forkful that contains both elements of the dish, without recourse to the use of a knife. If pasta is dressed with a sauce made with substantial pieces of meat, the meat is set aside and served apart as the second course.

Against widespread belief, pasta and meatballs *are* closely associated in traditional southern Italian cookery, but always in conformity with the just mentioned conventions. To this day, in the outlying regions of the old *Regno* of southern Italy—Abruzzo, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria—there are many preparations of *pasta asciutta* dressed in a tomato sauce in which the meatballs are cooked *and* served in the bowl with the pasta. But, crucially, the meatballs are tiny, cherry-sized or smaller, *polpettine* and thus these dishes conform perfectly with traditional conventions. The festive nature of this style of dish is made manifest by their traditional inclusion of special forms of fresh pasta, e.g., *pasta alla chitarra* in Abruzzo, *sagne torte* in Puglia, etc. In the core region of Campania, *polpettine* appear first and foremost in baked pasta dishes, *al forno*. A classic version uses *ziti* and a simple, quick tomato sauce in which the meatballs are briefly cooked after being fried, with further ingredients (*scamorza*, hard-boiled eggs, etc.) added to the sauced pasta before baking. Also necessarily containing *polpettine* is the aforementioned *lasagna alla napoletana*, one of our most festive dishes, laden with cultural associations and eaten only on a couple of well-defined occasions per year. Indeed, for me personally, one of the objections to 'spaghetti and meatballs' is aesthetic: A dish with *polpettine* seems festive, and spaghetti, as wonderful as they are, seem too ordinary for the pairing.

Polpette—ordinary sized meatballs, traditionally not spheres but flattened for easier pan-frying and typically smaller than their American counterparts—are also associated with pasta, though not necessarily so. The main association comes via a kind of sauce for pasta in which the meatballs are cooked, often along with *braciole* (stuffed, rolled slices of veal or beef) and/or sausage. Following convention, however, the sauce dresses the pasta, but the meats are served thereafter as the *secondo*. *Polpette* are also traditionally made outside of any association with pasta and can appear *in umido* (fried and then cooked in a simple tomato sauce) or simply fried and served with lemon wedges. *Polpettine* are also used in a soup with escarole (now erroneously called here 'wedding soup'). For me, as an Italian-American, all of these uses of *polpettine* and *polpette* have been common fare since earliest childhood… but not 'spaghetti and meatballs.'

Fusilli napoletani con polpettine.

Where and how did this dish, in violation of a basic rule or convention of both Italian and Italian-American culinary tradition, arise? We do not know but I would suggest the following possibilities.

In the period of mass immigration, many Italian men came alone to the States to earn money (and many ultimately returned to Italy) and, being without family, they resided in cheap boarding houses which also served meals—spaghetti with *polpettine* was likely a favorite, but conceivably the placement of larger *polpette* together with the pasta arose in this no-frills setting of cheap eats for hard workers. Whether this be true or not, I suspect that the real establishment of serving spaghetti and large, round meatballs together as a hearty one-dish meal occurred in the next stage of Italian eateries, when the intended audience was as much or more non-Italians than single *paesani*—indeed, Italian-Americans with families long remained particularly disinclined to eat in restaurants of any sort. In essence then, I posit on the part of early Italian-American restaurateurs a conscious effort to adapt an inexpensive meal of their tradition to the conventions of mainstream American cuisine, where meat was the center of a meal and appeared together on a plate with its starchy accompaniment. Bigger meatballs, exotic but tasty spaghetti, a nice one plate meal.

In this sense, 'spaghetti and meatballs' is American, a product of cultural interaction in the U.S., but given the older, traditional southern Italian association of pasta with *polpettine* and *polpette*, the dish—if properly made—can hardly be regarded with shock or horror, at least not by someone with a southern Italian culinary culture such as myself, for whom it remains merely structurally objectionable. For Americans of Italian descent, whose culinary 'grammar' is American, it seems normal and genuinely Italian.

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MY FRANKEN-FISH

By Phillip Foss

It was back in 2010 when Asian carp first dragged my high-striving culinary mind into the deep end. The invasive species, brought into the southern U.S. to clean algae in catfish farms, flooded over into main waterways and quickly worked their way north. The fish reproduce voraciously and overtake pretty much every ecosystem they enter. They had already arrived in Illinois waterways, and there was great fear that they would eventually enter Lake Michigan, causing much greater ecological and economic damage.

There was much discussion around a potential solution, and food journalist Mike Sula of the *Chicago Reader* was asking why nobody was considering eating the problem. So he reached out to several chefs around town to see how they might dish it up, and I was among them. I was the chef of Lockwood Restaurant at the Palmer House at the time, and had no idea how thoroughly this invasive species would invade my life.

At first I turned my nose up at the notion of eating Asian carp, probably like you just did. The carp I knew of were bottom feeders with an oily, yellow flesh, used to make the gefilte fish I disdained eating growing up as a Jewish kid in Milwaukee. So I was skeptical at best, but accepted the challenge.

But when I cut into the invasive carp for the first time, I was taken aback by the color and firmness of the flesh; it was a clear and vibrant white, and resembled sea bass more than the carp I knew of. I later learned that unlike our indigenious bottom feeding fish that eat anything on the water's bed, Asian carp are filter feeders, fueling themselves off the algae in the water. As we all are what we eat, the flavor of the American carp is more acrid and muddy, while the invasive species is more mild and vegetal. So far, so good.

But as my knife dug deeper into the fish, the dilemmas began. On account of the thick bones that run nearly the entire length of the flesh, it was impossible to remove the bones and keep the fillet in one piece. This meant that I wouldn't be able to serve a typical 'steak' style portion most diners were used to. So contrary to the laws of supply and demand, the low yield of usable meat actually made our cost per portion closer to the range of the pricier salmon or halibut.

But when I put the fish to the fire for the first time, I loved it. In fact, aside from the aforementioned obstacles, I would be willing to even put it on our menu. Sensing the media windmill that might come with cooking and serving an invasive species, I discussed my thoughts with hotel management, and they gave me the green light. We all agreed nobody would actually order it, so the plan was to give it away as a complimentary course at the beginning of the meal.

I stretched my culinary chops around the fish, preparing it in as many ways as I could; we served it as a tartare, carp-accio, broiled, fried, crab crusted, just about every way you could conceive. People were eating it all and enjoying it, and the attention started flowing in.

After the *Chicago Reader* article came out, Phil Vettel, the then food critic with the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote glowingly about our experiment. In the next couple months, I appeared on Fox News, WGN, the Today Show, and went on an Asian carp fishing trip with a journalist from *The Wall Street Journal*.

My ego quickly inflated from my fifteen minutes of fame, and I doubled down on the fish, deciding to offer it for sale on our menu. Not surprisingly, we didn't sell a single order on the first night.

I was in the office with my sous chef after service and we were discussing the stigma of the name.

"What if we just changed it?" I offered.

Examples of this are plenty: Orange roughy was once known as mudfish. Black cod isn't even in the cod family. Most notably, Patagonian toothfish was a little known species until its name was changed to Chilean sea bass. Then it became incredibly popular, expensive, and overfished to near extinction.

"Why don't we call it Shanghai bass?" he suggested.

My eyes lit up. Sure, it's completely illegal to change the name of a fish without FDA approval. But it felt like a legitimate solution, and shouldn't the end justify the means?

I was on a mission to show everyone that they were wrong about this fish, so I just did it, typing up a new menu for our next service on the spot.

Our 'Frankenfish' took on a new life as Shanghai bass, and it began to sell extraordinarily well. Our server checked in with every portion sold, and every plate came back cleaned and with compliments. Nobody commented on never having heard of the unusual bass varietal.

I'm not sure how long I would've kept up this stunt, but the hotel soon pulled the plug. It wasn't on account of renaming the fish; instead they had grown uneasy with the attention it brought, believing that I was becoming known as the "carp chef." Although I was a little bitter, in time I saw they were right. The fish (and fame) had become an obsession.

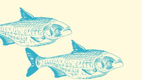
DO YOUR PART

EAT A CARP

BIGHEAD AND SILVERFIN CARP THREATEN TO OUTCOMPETE THE NATIVE FISH OF THE GREAT LAKES. IT MIGHT BE TOO LATE.

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM EAT 'EM

Illustration by Eric May



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