

From Spaghetti and Meatballs to Pizza:
The Invention of Italian-American Restaurant Staples by Immigrants, for Immigrants

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American Studies 252

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May 31, 2011

Amid the growing efforts of the American foodie culture to reclaim authentic, regional Italian cuisine, most Americans have come to recognize standard Italian-American restaurant dishes as highly derivative versions of food eaten in Italy.¹ The spaghetti and meatballs, pizza, and heros consumed in the United States reveal their American roots when compared to increasingly prevalent regional specialties like *pansoti con tocco de noxe* or *agnello alla venezia*.² Scholarship tends to attribute the creation of such adulterated dishes to immigrant restaurant owners who, trying to attract an American clientele, significantly alter traditional dishes to fit the tastes of their new customers.³ Chinese restaurant owners, for example, invented fried rice and chow mein entirely for the American palate.⁴ These dishes, and those that form the basis of many other ethnic restaurant offerings in the United States, were developed entirely outside of immigrant homes and were not consumed by the groups who originated them.⁵ Yet this paradigm fails to describe the development of Italian-American restaurant staples, which were first created and consumed outside of the restaurant setting and without concern for American tastes. While such dishes clearly belie the regional foods eaten in Italy, they represent food that immigrants developed and enjoyed within their own households long before Americans began eating them in restaurants. It was the availability of new products, the desire to eat foods previously relegated to the Italian upper class, and significant contact with cuisines from other regions of Italy that spurred immigrants to invent these dishes, not a desire to cater to an American clientele. Though both Italians and Americans further adapted these foods (most notably pizza) in the second half of the twentieth century for a wider American audience, Italian immigrants invented these foundational “Italian” restaurant foods exclusively for their own consumption.⁶

Italians changed their traditional foodways quickly and drastically upon reaching the United States.⁷ Peasants comprised the bulk of these immigrants whose food habits in Italy had consisted of supplementing regional staples (like rice, corn, or wheat) with little more than home-grown vegetables.⁸ The poor rarely ate meat, and the processed foods that they helped produce – like olive oil, wine, and

ricotta – went almost exclusively to the wealthy.⁹ Due to great variation in Italian culinary practices between and even within the country’s twenty regions, traditional foodways of Italians arriving in America were unified by little more than a pervading sense hunger and scarcity.¹⁰ Though food in the United States remained expensive for immigrants, the comparative cost of food fell markedly from an almost prohibitive 85% of income in Sicily to a more reasonable 50%.¹¹ This allowed Italians to purchase food products previously reserved for the wealthy, such as olive oil, cheese, meat, and macaroni.¹² The early emergence of Italian grocery stores made these commodities widely available for immigrant consumption in the form of imported or locally-produced goods.¹³ These stores also stocked the foods immigrants had eaten back home, so the rejection of these commodities for more luxurious ones represented an intentional choice.¹⁴ One prominent example of this change was the adoption of large quantities of meat. Whereas most members of the lower classes had almost never eaten it back home, Italian immigrants ate it weekly or even daily, adding it to stews, soups, and sauces.¹⁵ “Here I eat meat three times a day, not three times a year,” explained Antonio Ranciglio in a letter to his family in Italy.¹⁶ The prominence of meat in Italian-American restaurant food (where little existed in traditional Italian fare) therefore stemmed from changing preferences and practices within immigrant homes. Though these additions were consistent with American tastes and encouraged by the American habit of meat consumption, meat-heavy restaurant dishes – like veal parmigiano, heros, and meat-topped pizza – were developed to satisfy Italian immigrant penchants, not American ones.¹⁷

In addition to adopting the higher-class foods from their respective regions, Italian immigrants also began to acquire food practices from other regions in Italy. The erosion of regional distinctions among immigrant food habits was facilitated by substantial contact between immigrants from different regions of Italy, particularly in Italian neighborhoods of large cities.¹⁸ Within these “Little Italies,” immigrants “saw, smelled, and over time, tasted each others’ local and regional foods,” eventually adopting them into their daily menus.¹⁹ Women made changes to their staple diets by adopting polenta,

bread, or pasta where they had previously eaten only the commodities prevalent in their regions of origin.²⁰ From these dual forces of increased contact and adoption of more expensive foods, a unified Italian-American cuisine gradually emerged. Distinct from anything eaten in Italy, these foods – whose creation was prompted exclusively by immigrant desires and interactions with their new settings – came to form the basis of Italian-American restaurant food. The blending of regionally distinct elements into one dish, like pasta from the South and *bolognese* from the North, characterizes much of Italian-American restaurant food but was a popular practice within Italian homes long before reaching the American market.²¹ While some scholars claim that homogenized Italian-American food did not emerge until after World War II, when Italian restaurants rose in number and began to serve “only the easily-palatable noodles-tomato-sauce-meatball dishes preferred by American soldiers who had served in Europe,” regional blending had become “ubiquitous in...Italian household kitchens of all regional backgrounds” well before the war began.²² The merging of local foods seen in restaurant dishes therefore reflects dietary changes that Italian immigrants made within their households and later released for a larger market.

Spaghetti with meatballs, regarded by many Americans as the quintessential “Italian” food, became a prominent dish in this new Italian-American cuisine.²³ While wealthy Southern Italians had eaten spaghetti with tomatoes and cheese in their homeland, this version was invented in America and became an important dish in the households of immigrants from every class and region of Italy.²⁴ Anna Zaloha, who investigated Italian-American family customs in Chicago, found that by 1937, “100 per cent of Italian-American households served spaghetti with tomato sauce and meatballs at least once a week.”²⁵ As with many of these highly derivative dishes, spaghetti with meatballs took something from Southern Italy – pasta – and infused it with a commodity previously unavailable to the poor (meat, which represented both a luxury from back home and a product commonly consumed by Americans).²⁶ This amalgamation occurred entirely within immigrant households (independent of a restaurant setting),

as did the rise of the dish to its place as “the ubiquitous ‘Italian’ food” among all Italian immigrant groups.²⁷ The creation of spaghetti and meatballs was influenced by the new American environment (the availability of ingredients and the blending of regional practices), but not by a desire to please Americans themselves. While the dish does not represent food eaten by Italians in Italy, it reflects the new food practices of Italians in America.

Pizza, too, developed past its regional Italian form for an immigrant audience in America, not an American one. Originally a simply-adorned street food from Naples, it was brought to the United States in the late nineteenth century.²⁸ Traditionally eaten as a snack with the crust folded over, it expanded in size, got smothered in cheese and sauce, and acquired additional toppings that often reflected the regions of the United States that Italians had moved to.²⁹ The development of white clam pizza at Pepe’s Pizza in New Haven in 1925, for example, illustrates the changes being made to the dish.³⁰ These new pizzas, already altered past the Italian version, were consumed almost exclusively within the Italian immigrant community. The first known store to sell pizza, G. Lombardi’s in New York, opened in 1905 and became extremely popular among Italians immigrants from all backgrounds.³¹ Through the 1940s, by which time the pizza had already been reinvented, most Americans had never heard of pizza.³² “It will be the surprise of your life,” wrote New York *Herald Tribune* food columnist in 1939 about the dish, and the *New York Times* remarked in 1947 that “pizza could be as popular a snack as the hamburger if Americans only knew about it.”³³ While pizza became further altered after World War II for American palates – Ike Sewell, a Texas native, thickened the crust and added copious toppings to create Chicago deep-dish pizza in 1943 – it had already been transformed beyond its Neopolitan roots into a dish consumed by Italian immigrants.³⁴ These alterations occurred without regard for American tastes, since Americans did not begin to sample pizza until years later.³⁵ Like spaghetti with meatballs, immigrants first created this non-traditional dish for their consumption alone.

The hero further exemplifies this immigrant-initiated mode of food development. The sandwich, flanked by Italian bread and filled with cheese (like mozzarella or provolone), meat (like ham, beef, meatballs, or chicken), and lettuce and peppers, was never eaten in Italy but became extremely popular in Italian immigrant communities within the United States.³⁶ Leonard Covello, who arrived in the America in 1896 from the Lucania region of Italy, remembers the “bulky sandwiches of crusty Italian bread heaped with salami, cheese or Italian sausage” that he brought to school in New York.³⁷ The development of this sandwich in the early twentieth century was contained within immigrant communities; like other adulterated “Italian” dishes, Italian immigrants created and consumed the hero long before Americans began to sample Italian-American cuisine. While Bohemian Americans began to trickle into Italian restaurants beginning in the late 1920s, “the general American public was not the intended customer,” (a point illustrated by the fact that many restaurant menus were written entirely in Italian) and few other non-Italians patronized these restaurants.³⁸ Even by the 1930s, when “New York claimed roughly 10,000 Italian restaurants,” these establishments served almost exclusively as meeting places for Italian immigrants.³⁹ It was not until after World War II that most Americans became familiar with Italian-American cuisine, yet by this point the highly-altered Italian fare that went on to comprise the foundation of Italian-American restaurant menus had already been developed for the immigrant household.⁴⁰ Though Italian-American restaurants further adapted these dishes throughout the 1950s and 60s to more thoroughly align them with the tastes of their American customers, these staples had already been invented.⁴¹

The common model for the invention of ethnic restaurant staples (immigrant restaurateurs adapt their traditional foods for an American audience) certainly holds for some cultures. Yet to apply it to Italian-American fare like spaghetti and meatballs and pizza discounts the importance of these foods in the lives of Italian immigrants. The Italian immigrant community developed these dishes in a collective, concerted manner and regarded them with much pride.⁴² Ascribing their creation to a few restaurant

owners who wanted to please Americans and make a profit deprives these dishes of their rightful status. Not all invented ethnic food was created for Americans alone, and assuming this mode of development places too much importance on American palates while ignoring the tastes of immigrant communities. Italian immigrants did not create these dishes out of deference or subservience toward Americans, but as a celebration of their newfound prosperity and community. In establishing the true location of the development of these foods – in the Italian household – we recognize the independence and agency of immigrants in the development of their ethnic restaurant cuisines. While the dishes that now make up quintessential Italian-American restaurant fare were created in America and influenced by that new environment, immigrants developed them for their tastes alone. In creating this food, immigrants reacted – not pandered – to their new homeland.

Notes

1. Virginia Gerst, "Beyond a Regional Doubt," *Restaurants & Institutions* 115, no. 6 (2005): 29.
2. Ibid.
3. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 102; Liora Gvion and Naomi Trostler, "From Spaghetti and Meatballs through Hawaiian Pizza to Sushi: The Changing Nature of Ethnicity in American Restaurants," *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 6 (2008): 958.
4. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 102.
5. Ibid.
6. Hanna Miller, "American Pie," *American Heritage* 57, no. 2 (2006): 33.
7. Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 48.
8. Ibid., 25.
9. Ibid., 32.
10. Ibid., 48.
11. John F. Mariana, "Everybody Likes Italian Food," *American Heritage* 40, no. 8 (1989): 123.
12. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 56.
13. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 51; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 66; Tracy N. Poe, "The Labour and Leisure of Food Production as a Mode of Ethnic Identity Building Among Italians in Chicago, 1890-1940," *Rethinking History* 5, no. 1 (2001), 142.
14. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 141.
15. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 56-57.
16. Antonio Ranciglio, quoted in Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57.
17. Harvey Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930," in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 76.
18. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 140.
19. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 53.

20. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 141.
21. Mariani, "Everybody Likes Italian Food," 25.
22. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 140-141.
23. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 53.
24. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 133; Diner, *Hungering for America*, 53, 58.
25. Poe, "Labour and Leisure," 151.
26. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 54.
27. Ibid.
28. John F. Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2011), 44.
29. Ibid.; Diner, *Hungering for America*, 61.
30. Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, 44.
31. John F. Mariani, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, March 24, 2011.
32. Miller, "American Pie," 34.
33. Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, 45; Miller, "American Pie," 34.
34. Mariani, "Everybody Likes Italian Food," 126.
35. Miller, "American Pie," 36.
36. Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, 46.
37. Leonard Covello, quoted in Simone Cinotto, "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 2 (2004), 504.
38. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 100; Diner, *Hungering for America*, 75; Frank E. Buttolph, "Bill of fare held by Cristoforo Colombo Restaurant at New York, NY" (1924), NYPL Digital Gallery, The Buttolph collection of menus.
39. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 81.
40. Ibid., 100; Diner, *Hungering for America*, 75.
41. Gvion and Trostler, "From Spaghetti and Meatballs," 950.

42. Levenstein, "The American Response," 88.

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