

Being Italian

Courtesy of Nick Belli



To all my Italian friends--that includes the half Italians, almost Italians, those married to Italians and those interested in Italian Culture and Heritage.

I am sure for most second generation Italian American children who grew up in the 40's and 50's there was a definite distinction between us and them. We were Italians, everybody else, the Irish, the Germans, the Poles--they were Americans.

I was well into adulthood before I realized I was an American. I had been born American and lived here all my life, but Americans were people who ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on mushy white bread. I had no animosity towards them, it's just I thought ours was the better way with our bread man, egg man, javelle man, vegetable man, the chicken man, to name a few of the peddlers who came to our neighborhoods. We knew them, they knew us.

Americans went to the A&P. It amazed me that some friends and classmates on Thanksgiving and Christmas ate only turkey with stuffing, potatoes, and cranberry sauce. We had turkey, AFTER antipasto, soup, lasagna, meatballs and salad. In case someone came in who didn't like turkey, we also had a roast of beef. Soon after we were eating fruits, nuts, pastries and homemade cookies sprinkled with little colored things.

This is where you learned to eat a seven course meal between noon and 4PM, how to handle hot chestnuts and put peaches in wine. Italians live a romance with food.

Sundays we would wake up to the smell of garlic and onions frying in olive oil. We always had macaroni and sauce. Sunday would not be Sunday without going to mass. Of course you couldn't eat before mass because you had to fast before receiving communion. We knew when we got home we'd find meatballs frying, and nothing tasted better than newly cooked meatballs with crisp bread dipped into a pot of hot sauce.

Another difference between them and us was we had gardens. Not just with flowers, but tomatoes, peppers, basil, lettuce and "cucuzza".

Everybody had a grapevine and fig tree. In the fall we drank homemade wine arguing over who made the best. Those gardens thrived because we had something our American friends didn't seem to have. We had grandparents.

It's not that they didn't have grandparents. It's just they didn't live in the same house or street. We ate with our grandparents, and God forbid we didn't visit them 5 times a week I can still remember my grandmother telling us how she came to America when she was young, on the "boat".

I'll never forget the holidays when the relatives would gather at my grandparents' house, the women in the kitchen, the men in the living room, the kids everywhere. I must have a hundred cousins. My grandfather sat in the middle of it all smoking his DiNobili cigar so proud of his family and how well they had done.

When my grandparents died, things began to change. Family gatherings were fewer and something seemed to be missing. Although we did get together usually at my mother's house, I always had the feeling grand mom and grand pop were there.

It's understandable that things change. We all have families of our own and grandchildren of our own. Today we visit once in a while or meet at wakes or weddings.

Other things have also changed. The old house my grandparents bought is now covered with aluminum siding. A green lawn covers the soil that grew the tomatoes. THERE WAS NO ONE TO COVER THE FIG TREE. SO IT DIED.

The holidays have changed. We still make family "rounds" but somehow things have become more formal. The great quantities of food we consumed, without any ill effects, is not good for us anymore. Too much starch, too much cholesterol, too many calories in the pastries.

The difference between "us" and "them" isn't so easily defined anymore, and I guess that's good. My grandparents were Italian-Italians; my parents were Italian-Americans. I'm an American and proud of it, just as my grandparents would want me to be. We are all Americans now...the Irish, Germans, Poles, all U.S. citizens.

But somehow I still feel a little bit Italian. Call it culture...call it roots...I'm not sure what it is. All I do know is that my children, nieces, and nephews, have been cheated out of a wonderful piece of our heritage. They never knew my grandparents...

Buon Appetito!

Please send recipes, comments and suggestions to

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