From Family Meals to Four Stars: 
The Establishment of Italian-American Cuisine in New York City

by

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Introduction

“When I cook, I cook with my heart.”¹ I am sitting at a table in New York’s Enoteca Maria with part-time cook and Italian-American nonna Carmelina Pica. She immigrated to the United States from southern Italy in 1964 when she was 24 years old and quickly made cooking a central part of her life. Her story is the story of many Italian immigrants to the United States, and her words, which have been so often repeated that they may seem clichéd, did not seem so when she spoke them to me. Italian-Americans for over a century now have been passionately devoted to the craft of home cooking. Ms. Pica’s passion for cooking was reflective of a well-established tradition among Italian immigrants to this country. Food, cooking and family have always been central components of life in Italy: a piece of identity, a matter of pride and a gathering point of community. To be an Italian living in America is likewise to appreciate food, cooking, and family. But for the Italian-American, food and cooking have assumed a new meaning since Italian immigrants began arriving on American shores in the late nineteenth century. A life in America meant adapting recipes and restructuring the family and the community to fit the bounty and the challenges of this new world. A new culture of cooking within the home and beyond began to emerge. This culture of cooking and consumption became a focal point of the Italian-American experience. It affected the dinner plate not only within the home, where food had always been a center of Italian life, but also within a burgeoning American marketplace increasingly hungry for a taste of Italian cooking and hospitality.

¹Carmelina Pica, Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2012. Pica is one of the many Italian “nonnas” who regularly cooks at the restaurant Enoteca Maria in Staten Island, New York.
John F. Mariani, an American food writer, entitled his recent book *How Italian Food Conquered the World*. It’s a bold title, but not without merit. Today, pizzas are available on the menus of restaurants from Poland to Peru. Bags of dried *fusilli* and *penne* sit side by side with sacks of basmati rice and chili powder in the traditional food markets of Northern India. But outside of Italy itself, nowhere has Italian food developed such strong roots as in the United States. From the drive-by windows of fast food pizza joints to the luminous dining rooms of four-star New York restaurants, for many of us the food of Italy informs our daily diets. Imported extra virgin olive oil is available at the drug store, spaghetti with tomato sauce is an *American* comfort food, and pizza is to the New Yorker more a birthright than a foreign specialty. Italian restaurants, particularly along the Eastern seaboard and in New York City in particular, have proliferated at an astonishing rate over the past century or so. The availability of prepared Italian foods at grocery stores has made it a staple of the American home. Italian food has become a cuisine so common and so accessible that we often forget it originated on the other side of the Atlantic.

But this has not always been the case. In a little over a century Italian food has progressed from a cuisine consumed solely in the kitchens of Italian immigrants to a foundational component of the American food system. America had historically maintained a resolutely Anglo-Saxon diet, but Italians would be the first to change that standard. How and why Italian food progressed from the relatively obscure kitchens of immigrant *nonnas* to a major food of American kitchens, of the prepared food industry and of the restaurant industry, as well as the cultural practices that underlie it, are the main concerns of this thesis. Examining Italian food in New York
City and the surrounding areas as representative of broader culinary trends occurring in the United States, we will look at this unique cuisine’s remarkable progress since Italians began immigrating to this country over a century ago.

Italian immigration to the United States began in the late nineteenth century following the unification of the Italian peninsula. The newly unified state heavily favored the North economically. As a result, the poor peasants, or *contadini*, of southern Italy and Sicily faced dismal economic conditions, including food shortages. As the story goes with most immigrant groups to this country, the *contadini* saw America as a land of wealth and opportunity. Seeking to improve their lot, southern Italians set their sights for America. With little or no money, sparse knowledge of this new world and little proficiency in English, they boarded ships bound for America. From 1880 to 1920, one in four immigrants to the United States originated in Sicily.²

At first, it was mainly men – fathers and husbands – who traveled here alone to earn a living. Eventually, these men brought their families to the United States with them, seeking to create a new life for themselves and their families on American shores. With families came the creation of vast and complex communities, Little Italies as they are often known, in major cities. These powerful, community-oriented centers of Italian life in America would rise to prominence as important hubs of commerce and culture – the American emblem of Italian-American life. By 1940 Italians were the largest European-based population of immigrants in the United States.³

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³ Marc Morelli, ""No Longer Italian-Americans but Americans ‘First, Last and Always’’": Between Italian Heritage and American Allegiance During World War II," Vassar College, 2011, 3.
While Italian-Americans would eventually become some of the great politicians, entrepreneurs and academics of the United States, integration into American life did not come without its difficulties. As Italians continued to find their way to America, parents worked or tended to the home while children navigated between their Italian home lives and their lives at school and in the city. Most of the first-wave immigrants lived in relative poverty and resided in crowded urban tenement housing. The labor available to Italian immigrants, such as large public works projects, was mostly physical, with long hours and rough working conditions. Additionally, Italian Americans were often unfamiliar with many American cultural practices, chief among them American eating habits, and cultural integration was often difficult for new immigrants. The pasta dishes available at almost any restaurant – Italian or otherwise – in today’s America were unheard of when immigrants first arrived to American shores. Spaghetti? What’s spaghetti? For the early Italian immigrant, America was no utopia.

But while this country presented its fair share of hardship, the economic opportunity and bounty which these new shores promised the uprooted immigrants from southern Italy and Sicily often delivered. Italians started finding a voice in local politics and opening small businesses. They adapted their Italian cultural traditions to their new homes in urban America. And food, a lack of which often drove many Italians from their homeland, was relatively bountiful and inexpensive in this new land. In New York City, where many Italians settled upon arriving in the United States, this culture of food and cooking played a particularly important role in the development of Italian-American life on a national level. Italian immigrants to the
United States settled throughout the country, but nowhere is more iconic of Italian immigration than New York City. Within the city, large groups of Italian-Americans, most from southern Italy, began to form a new style of home cooking which would soon help define the Italian-American experience.

Italian food would eventually spread beyond Italian-American homes to American kitchens and the prepared food industry, as well as to Italian restaurants in New York. This progression would help bring Italian culture into mainstream America via food. Food and cooking allowed Italian immigrants to the United States to enter into a sort of dialogue with American culture, with America influencing the way Italians cooked and Italian food eventually shaping the landscape of American food, cooking and eating out. In a relatively short period of time, spaghetti would become as common on the menus of American restaurants as apple pie.

At its core, Italian food never lost its roots in la cucina casalinga (loosely translated as “home cooking”). In the years since Italians began immigrating to the United States, many Italian restaurants continue a tradition of la cucina casalinga, at times in practice and at times only in theory. But even today home-cooking and Italian cuisine go hand in hand in a way that other immigrant cuisines do not. Even when Italian food became a mainstream, mass-produced staple of the American diet, it would continue to bill itself as a product of home cooking – of the Italian family kitchen. “Everybody eats when they come to our house,” proclaims the slogan of
Bertucci’s restaurants, a modern-day, large-scale Italian food chain on the East Coast.¹

This thesis traces the development of Italian home cooking from within the homes of Italian immigrants in New York City to its acceptance in American homes and finally its popularization by the prepared food and restaurant industries. In time, Italian food would go from relative obscurity to become the first ethnic cuisine largely adopted and prepared in American homes. The first chapter provides background on American cuisine and Italian immigration to the United States. It then examines early cooking habits among Italian immigrants by contextualizing their cooking habits in New York City’s Little Italies. How early immigrants prepared Italian food, and with what ingredients, will allow us to understand the early culinary traditions of Italian-Americans and how those traditions came to influence American culture at large.

The second chapter incorporates the narrative of Italian home cooking into the broader context of changing home cooking trends in America during the rise of the prepared foods industry. I examine how and why Americans began preparing Italian food in their own homes with such enthusiasm. I argue that Italian food became so popular in American homes because it had already become Americanized in a way that appealed to existing American dietary customs. Increased consumption of meat and dairy products, eating family meals, and celebrating excess, all of which became characteristic of Italian-American food, already appealed to an American appetite. By

assuming those qualities once it reached American shores, Italian food found a popular following in American culture.

The final chapter addresses the rise of the Italian-American restaurant industry. Outside the home, Italian restaurants, like Italian home cooking, became widely popular among Americans, particularly in New York. In this chapter, I use home cooking as a point of departure to understand the rise of an important new industry. By forming an entirely novel dining out experience for American eaters, many of whom had never tried ethnic food before, Italian-Americans set the standard for modern restaurant dining. After examining the formation of early Italian restaurants in New York City and their increasingly central role in the city’s culture, I conclude by discussing the popularization of pizza, which, though rooted in Italian cuisine, became as American a food as there has ever been.

While many immigrant communities have brought their cuisines to America, the Italian story is one of particular importance. This is so not only because it has become one of America’s most beloved cuisines, but because it is one which has remained loyal to its roots in Italian culture while becoming a uniquely American story. As any Italian immigrant to this country can tell you with unwavering conviction, the Italian-American experience of food has never lost sight of its past on the Italian peninsula. But when Italian food came to this country, it established itself in an American way, one that pays homage to American ideals of life, family and culture. It has found such success as a cuisine of “home cooking” because in fact home cooking has always been a piece of American culture, even as today it loses ground to food prepared outside the home. Italian cuisine’s entry into American
cultural life both for the Italian immigrant and others presents a story of family, food and, often, good fortune.
1. Early Italian Immigration and Home Cooking Habits

a. Background on American Cuisine

When Italians began immigrating to the shores of America in great numbers in the late nineteenth century, they entered into a world which had already established its own traditions at the market, in the kitchen and at the dinner table. From today’s perspective, the landscape of American food and cooking would be largely unrecognizable. Italian ingredients ubiquitous in America today, like pasta or olive oil, would have been virtually unheard of. The vast array of international restaurants which today line the streets of every New York City neighborhood would not become commonplace until well into the next century. An Italian restaurant would have been inconceivable, in part because Italian cuisine was unknown to Americans at the time, and in part because the modern idea of a “restaurant” was not yet fully formed.

America was a land of Anglo-Saxon eaters. Even with the arrival of immigrants throughout the nineteenth century, the diet of the average American was markedly Anglo-Saxon, traditional and, by most modern standards, bland. Historically, America was a nation resistant to culinary influence from other cultures. From before its independence until well into the nineteenth century, the American diet progressed little from its roots in British culture. This diet was characteristically heavy and focused primarily on meats and starches while largely avoiding fresh vegetables and fruits. Of course, not all American diets were exactly the same. There existed, for example, the French influenced “Cajun” cuisine of southern states and

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5Harvey A. Levenstein, Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 4. German immigration did have some effect on the American diet, but as a northern European country the German diet was largely similar to the British diet.
“Pennsylvania Dutch” cuisine. But overwhelmingly American cuisine was the
cuisine of its British cousin, particularly in New England. What differentiated
American culinary traditions more than any other factor from those on the other side
of the Atlantic, however, was its abundance. Foreign visitors marveled at such excess,
but they also noted that it also encouraged waste and poor quality: “Virtually every
foreign visitor who wrote about American eating habits expressed amazement, shock,
and even disgust at the quantity of food consumed.” Nineteenth-century America
may have not ventured far from its British heritage, but for those new to its shores,
America really was the land of plenty.

More than any other group since the founding of America, it would be Italians
who would profoundly affect the way Americans eat. On the one hand this was the
result of the tenacity and pride with which Italians held on to their cultural tradition
and the significance of food within that tradition. Italians maintained a unique identity
within the great diversity of America. On the other hand, the Italians’ ability to tap
into existing American dietary habits allowed them to forge a strong and influential
culinary legacy in the United States. In the beginning they brought with them, among
other things, a decidedly Italian identity and a decidedly Italian palate. It would not be
long before they brought with them olive oil, Parmesan cheese and Italian wine too.

b. Early Italian Immigration to the United States

The story of Italian immigration to the United States begins in southern Italy
and Sicily, known as the Mezzogiorno. Throughout the course of the nineteenth

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7Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet* 7.
8Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet* 4-8.
century on the Italian peninsula, shifting political and economic forces greatly
disadvantaged the Mezzogiorno. The many provinces of the Italian peninsula were
undergoing unification through a series of revolutions and wars, a process referred to
as il Risorgimento. The movement was for the most part completed by the 1870s, but
the newly unified “Kingdom of Italy” heavily favored the North while largely
ignoring the plight of Italy’s “other half.” This monumental political shift had created
a “wealthier, more enlightened, more privileged North” while extending none of that
The people of the North ridiculed the Mezzogiorno’s darker-skinned inhabitants, believing them to be racially inferior, and left them at a great
disadvantage politically, economically and socially.\footnote{Cosco, Imagining Italians : The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910 9.}

The Mezzogiorno was a rural society comprised mostly contadini who worked
on the land. Broadly speaking, life in the Mezzogiorno was not easy. The region,
which relied heavily on agriculture, faced both a harsh climate and a political system
which made land ownership difficult even before il Risorgimento. Life was lived just
above the poverty level and when times got tough, many contadini lived well below
it. A typical breakfast or lunch might have consisted of some bread, figs, and tomato,
and a typical dinner consisted of bread and a bean soup. A small amount of sausage
or salami might occasionally work its way into a meal, but for the most part luxuries
like meat, cheese and wine were reserved for feast days, at most once a month.\footnote{Richard D. Alba, Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985) 25-27.} The
changing political tides in Italy led to the decline of the feudalist structure on which
southern society was based in tandem with a rise in capitalist economic practices. The change in local economic conditions, together with a population increase and the introduction of competing American products into the European food market, left the southern contadini with little place to turn.\(^{12}\) In vast numbers, poor contadini found themselves with little access to food or work.\(^{13}\) Hungry and unemployed, those able to afford it left their homes for foreign shores. America promised many things, not the least of which was relief from hunger. The southern Italians strongly believed in the bounty of food which America promised.\(^{14}\) Angelo Pellegrini, an Italian immigrant and writer, recalled that “No one in this land [America] of cattle ranges and wheat fields appreciates more profoundly the meaning of abundance than the immigrant who came here in search of bread…he came here because he had been told that his labor would yield bread – tons of white bread. I know because I was one of them.”\(^{15}\) In more ways than one, America was the promised land. Those bound for America as their new home numbered no less than 4.5 million during the peak of Italian immigration to America between 1880-1921.\(^{16}\)

The first waves of Italian immigration to the United States, which started in large numbers during the 1870s, were comprised primarily of men. Initially, those who could afford to leave Italy did not come to America to start new lives but to find short-term work – many planned on earning money and sending it back to Italy, with hopes of eventually returning to Italy themselves. Such a trip was not easy, though,

\(^{12}\) Alba, *Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* 39.

\(^{13}\) Alba, *Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* 29.


and even then the cost of migrating to America was great. An early report from 1872 revealed that Italian immigrants were often forced to sell their homes and their farms to make the trip.\(^{17}\) Once in America, the desire for work led many of them to urban centers where employment, generally harsh manual labor, could be found.\(^{18}\) But even once they were employed, many immigrants did not find life easy. Many Italian men ended up under the *padrone* system, in which a group of men were economically bound to a single boss. The renowned journalist Jacob Riis in his classic 1890 publication *How the Other Half Lives* describes these “greedy” *padroni* as men who offered “false promises” to the Italian immigrants, unfairly forcing them to be both “a wage-earner and rent-payer.”\(^{19}\) The working conditions were bad, and did not improve quickly. According to statistics, in 1910 Italians were the lowest-paid of all ethnic groups in America, making only $10.50 per week.\(^{20}\) Life was not easy, and the majority of immigrants to urban centers lived in densely populated tenement housing, setting up their lives in conditions of “destitution and disorder,” as Riis described it.\(^{21}\)

The number of immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno* to the United States steadily increased. While some immigrants did return to Italy, many did not. As Italian immigration increased, small enclaves, some of which would become Little Italies, began to take shape. These communities of Italians would play an important role in the development of Italian cuisine, bringing together Italian culinary traditions from a range of Italian backgrounds into a more uniform Italian-American tradition. When

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\(^{18}\) Alba, Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity 47, 53.
\(^{20}\) Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World* 33.
Italians began immigrating to the United States, most of them did not think of themselves as Italian per se, but identified themselves with the specific village or region they originated from. The creation of Little Italies eventually brought together a diversity of Italian backgrounds into a more unified Italian-American identity.

Take, for example, the forming of Italian enclaves in New York City. New York City holds special prominence in the study of Italian-American culture for many reasons. The culture of Italian immigrants in New York City has profoundly influenced that of Italian immigrants in the rest of the country. This resulted from a variety of factors, including the unique character of New York City and its far-reaching influence on national culture – a complex topic fascinating in its own right but beyond the scope of this thesis. But the obvious fact that such a large number of Italian immigrants to the United States arrived and settled in New York City cannot be overlooked. Indeed, New York City holds an important place in the creation of collective Italian-American identity nation-wide. In fact, 97.4 percent of Italians arriving in the United States between 1899-1900 came through New York. And by 1930, 17 percent of New York’s population would be comprised of Italian immigrants. For many early Italian-Americans, based in New York City or elsewhere, New York remains a central point of shared experience and a heavy influence on the broader Italian-American experience.

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22 Alba, Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity 30.
24 Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 34.
As more Italians arrived in New York City, many settled there since they lacked sufficient funds to move elsewhere. Many Italian communities sprang up throughout New York City and its environs. There were strong Italian communities in East Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan, each with its own character and diversity of Italian immigrants. By 1890 the Mulberry District of Manhattan was the largest of those and has proved one of the most lasting and influential Little Italies through today. But to think of the Mulberry District or any of the Italian communities at this time as “Italian” would be to misunderstand the nature of Italian identity in the early years of Italian immigration. As already noted, the immigrants came from regions throughout the Mezzogiorno, and typically associated more with the village or region they emigrated from than with Italy as a whole. Campanilismo, the Italian term denoting a sense of belonging to one’s birthplace, was largely recreated in the streets of New York. Certain streets or sections of streets would become “village clusters” with families and friends from one village or area of the Mezzogiorno taking over a certain part of the neighborhood. One description gives a clear sense of these culturally distinct groups within a neighborhood:

Mott Street between East Houston and Prince held the Napolitani; the opposite side of the street was reserved for Basilicati. Around the corner the Siciliani settled Prince Street, while two blocks away the Calabresi lived on Mott between Broome and Grand. Mulberry Street was strictly Neapolitan, and Hester Street, running perpendicular to Mulberry, carried the local color of Apulia.

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25 Alba, Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity  47.
26 The geographic area of the Mulberry district at its height was between East Houston St. and Worth St. on the north and south, and Broadway and the Bowery on the west and east. Today it has been largely overtaken by Asian immigrant communities. See: Pozzetta, "The Mulberry District of New York City: The Years before World War One,"  17.
28 From The Golden Door by Thomas Kessner, reprinted in Alba, Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity  49.
In its beginning, Italian-American life still heavily reflected the *campanilismo* of Italy. Such an arrangement would have recreated some of the contours of life from Italy in this overwhelming new place. For those hoping to return to Italy, this arrangement allowed them to avoid assimilation into American culture or even trans-Italian culture.\(^{29}\) It would also have a long-lasting effect on the development of Italian food in the United States. Immigrants from Sicily and Campania, which comprised a majority of Italians living in America at this time, came from a diet of “tomatoes, onion, oil, cheese and garlic.”\(^{30}\) Today those ingredients are often understood to be the staple ingredients of the entire Italian nation. In fact, they are components of a diet brought from specific regions of the *Mezzogiorno* and popularized by early Italian immigrants to America.

The Mulberry district soon flourished in activity as the residents began starting businesses, forming Italian societies and clubs, and holding *feste* and other social events.\(^{31}\) But life was not always easy for immigrants to these neighborhoods. In the district, disease, tough work and crowded living conditions were a daily reality for many of the immigrants. Around the turn of the century, overcrowding and disease led to abnormally high death rates for adults and children. One contemporary observer reported that Italian tenement housing provided less space per person than most hospitals or prisons.\(^{32}\) And American onlookers did not always meet these communities with enthusiasm, finding ample reasons to criticize the immigrants for their way of life, social institutions, eating habits and level of education: “the Italian

\(^{29}\) Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* 51.


learns slowly, if at all.” Additionally, as early as the late 1800s, a tendency to identify all Italians with the mafia created a negative image of the immigrants in American minds and stigmatized them as criminals. In addition, the issue of race was a prominent one for Italians living in America. Many Americans doubted the “whiteness” of Italian immigrants. As the contours of Italian life in America began to take form, the Italians were a wholly foreign people to the American population at large. Such a view of Italians contributed to the isolation of Italian immigrant communities, and delayed their absorption into mainstream American culture.

It was within such communities that the first Italian restaurants in America would open their doors. But it is home cooking, always at the heart of the Italian family and culture, which gives us insight into Italian food as it first existed in the United States, and how it would eventually come to shape the American food system. The tradition of Italian-American home cooking, and how it has endured and changed, allows us to understand how a cuisine prepared in the private homes of Italian immigrants came to redefine the culinary landscape of a nation so resistant to outside influence. To understand the influence of Italian food on America more broadly, it is first important to understand how Italian food existed within the homes of the immigrants. Had Italians not upheld many of the traditions of their cuisine with such conviction within the home, it would have never expanded beyond it.

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33 Riis, How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York 42.
34 Alba, Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity 67.
35 Alba, Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity 59.
c. Food and Home Cooking Among Early Italian Immigrants

Naturally, Italians had to make adjustments to their cooking habits once they settled in America. Not all the foodstuffs which they had access to in Italy were available in the United States. But the availability and affordability of food in the United States was beyond comparison with the poverty-stricken conditions of Italy. The American diet, which prided itself on copious portions of meat and dairy products, would have been unimaginable in Italy. The consumption of meat, rarely available to the poor from the Mezzogiorno, became a matter of pride and a symbol of American prosperity to Italian immigrants. Leonard Covello, a historian and leader in New York’s Italian community, was told by one immigrant: “In Italy we were poor, always on the verge of starvation…Who could afford to eat spaghetti more than once a week?…In America no one starved…Don’t you remember how our paesani here in America ate to their heart’s delight.” Excess came to define much of the Italian immigrant’s experience in America. And while life was hard for immigrants to this new world, it was “cushioned” by an abundance of food inconceivable to the poor population of southern Italy.

But consuming the Anglo-Saxon food of America would not do for the Italian immigrants, who strongly identified with their Italian culinary heritage. Italian immigrants found various means of obtaining the ingredients they needed to create the dishes of Italy, maintaining certain aspects of their cuisine while adapting and Americanizing others. Though early Italian-Americans made little money, food was

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37 Diner, Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 48.
comparatively more affordable in the United States, and in general they ate well.

While *paesani* in Italy spent up to 75 percent of their income on food, in America that number was only 25 percent.\textsuperscript{38} The promised bounty of the American table was an attainable goal for many Italian immigrants. A life of poverty and hunger was left firmly in Italy: America was the land of plenty. Hasia R. Diner argues that this aspect of home cooking alone transformed the Italian-American experience. The bounty and availability of certain foods like meat, reserved for holy days or for the wealthy back in Italy, became a fixture of daily life in America. All Italian immigrants, despite diverse backgrounds, could come together around the bounty of the American table. To be Italian-American was to eat well – very well – in the land of plenty.\textsuperscript{39}

The story of Italian home cooking in America is as much about the products available to Italian families as it is about the skill and dedication of the families preparing the food. Within Little Italies, specialty Italian food shops which became important cultural institutions in these communities began to open up. As immigrants formed an American market for Italian goods, foods were both imported from overseas and increasingly produced within the United States to meet the new demand.\textsuperscript{40} The shops imported many of their goods from Italy, as many Italians objected to purchasing certain American-produced foods – namely pasta, olive oil and cheese – “fearing that to use inferior American substitutes would be regarded as a sign of not caring for the family.”\textsuperscript{41} The ability to provide sufficiently for one’s family was strongly tied to matters of food and diet. The shops sold a wide variety of

\textsuperscript{38} Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World* 36.
\textsuperscript{39} Diner, *Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* 49.
\textsuperscript{40} Levenstein, ”The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930,” 3.
\textsuperscript{41} Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet* 108.
goods, from olive oil to meats, cheeses, breads and pastas, their goods often spilling out into the bustling streets.\textsuperscript{42} Often on the ground floor of tenement buildings, these shops also served as social centers where women would gather. Gossip and news would be traded while buying ingredients for dinner.\textsuperscript{43} These shops were deeply embedded in community life, and personal relationships between patron and owner meant patrons could buy food on credit, critical for many poor workers.\textsuperscript{44} Also significant, the immigrant-owned shops became a way for enterprising Italian-Americans to work for themselves and escape a life of hard work for low wages.\textsuperscript{45} By 1938, the number of these Italian owned shops had climbed to 10,000 nation-wide.\textsuperscript{46} They made it possible for Italian immigrants from all walks of life to consume the foods of Italy. A 1908 study reported that even unskilled Italian workers “purchased imported pasta and cheeses and built their daily lives on meat, sardines, tomatoes, potatoes, oil, beer and wine.” And as the Italian-American story so often goes, the report goes on to note, “The Italians consume better quantity and variety of foods than in Italy.”\textsuperscript{47}

What the shops could not sufficiently offer, the immigrants found other methods of obtaining. One such method was through the purchasing of goods from street pushcarts. During the early years of Italian immigration, pushcarts became

\textsuperscript{42} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 35.
\textsuperscript{43} Pozzetta, "The Mulberry District of New York City: The Years before World War One," 24.
\textsuperscript{44} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} 64.
\textsuperscript{46} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 35. One such shop, which Mariani notes, the first Italian cheese shop, Alleva Dairy, opened in New York in 1892. While cheese makers at the time were not able to make the mozzarella of buffalo’s milk as they had in Italy, they found ways of adapting their recipes to American ingredients.
\textsuperscript{47} quoted in Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} 51.
common in Italian communities in New York City. They sold foods catering to Italian needs, providing immigrants with everything from fruits and vegetables\(^{48}\) to bread and ice cream.\(^{49}\) The pushcarts would become an icon of the Little Italies of New York City, and by 1906 they were so prevalent there were reports of large-scale “pushcart tycoons” trying to capitalize upon the pushcart business.\(^{50}\) They formed an informal marketplace creating an easy, accessible method in which immigrants could purchase certain goods. Like the shops, the pushcarts also provided employment to new immigrants. Pushcarts were so popular in part because a “relatively easy way for any immigrant to begin a new life in the city was to sell food, principally to his own people.”\(^{51}\) In one classic story of American entrepreneurship, immigrant Gennaro Ottomanelli manned a pushcart selling sausages in 1900. He soon returned to Italy in the hopes of becoming a butcher, and eventually came back to America to open his own butcher shop. Today, over a hundred years later, this pushcart peddler’s shop continues to be regarded as one of New York City’s premiere butcher shops, and it is still family owned.\(^{52}\)

Besides serving a practical role of providing immigrants with food and work, the symbolic importance which the pushcarts held in Italian-American life should not be overlooked. One account from Little Italy in Harlem recalls pushcarts filled with watermelon, sweets and other goods at a \textit{festa} in honor of the Madonna of Mount Carmel.\(^{53}\) The ready access to these treats sold in the streets emphasized the idea that

\(^{49}\) Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 35.
\(^{50}\) Pozzetta, "The Mulberry District of New York City: The Years before World War One," 17.
\(^{51}\) Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 35.
\(^{52}\) Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 35.
\(^{53}\) Alba, \textit{Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity} 49.
food was available to all in America. Indeed, for a new immigrant once told that American streets were paved with gold, the abundance of fruit and sweets sold on the streets might have nearly fulfilled such a fantasy.

And what could not be bought or sold, Italians grew on their own. The Italians were no strangers to the soil, and they brought their passion for farming with them to America – even when that meant planting a garden in the urban jungle of New York City. They found ways to grow fruits and vegetables everywhere – in patches of their front yards in Brooklyn or on windowsills and on the roof when there was no yard to speak of. Naturally, the Italians had to adapt to the availability of certain products in America. The *peperoncino* of Calabria, for example, was replaced by varieties of Mexican chili pepper. Urban foraging was also widely practiced. Women could be found searching the city’s parks and vacant lots for greens, mushrooms and berries. The Italians found ways to bring livestock into the city as well. Goats and even pigs could be spotted in the kitchens or basements of tenement houses. Rabbits and chickens were raised in New York Italian communities to cook for family dinners. Food was clearly an important part of daily life for the Italian people who immigrated to America. Growing and raising that food on their own only reinforced their connection to the food they ate and the pride they could take in providing for their families.

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55 Mariani, *How Italian Food Conquered the World* 37.
56 Diner, *Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* 61.
57 Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat : Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* 52.
58 Diner, *Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* 62.
The immigrants also demonstrated proficiency with a variety of preserving techniques, canning, pickling and, of course, making their own wine.\textsuperscript{59} Preserving techniques had to be adapted to American realities, however. Take, for example, the southern Italian practice of making a dried tomato paste with the season’s tomatoes. Such a practice in Italy might have taken place in the open fields of Calabria. Immigrants in the city, however, would concentrate tomatoes into a thick paste by laying them out to dry on the fire escape or in the city streets.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, when they could not grow and preserve enough produce or raise enough livestock of their own, the Italians “constructed vast networks linking truck farms around the major cities, large fruit and vegetable operations in California, and the wholesale and retail markets of the major cities.”\textsuperscript{61} All in all the Italians showed an ability to adapt to their situation in America, not to mention a remarkable dedication to sourcing the foods of Italy in this new land.

The dedication of the first generations of Italian immigrants to raising and growing their own food, as well as providing bountiful meals for their families, should not be looked upon as mere hobby or cultural oddity. Indeed, this practice reflected a significant change which America had afforded the Italian immigrants. Hasia R. Diner argues that the growing of food in Italy reinforced a structured class system: the\textit{ contadini} were forced to work for a patron to whom they were economically bound. If they grew food, it was only with the patron’s permission and a tax was paid on produce. In America, the ability to grow one’s own produce, even in tiny city plots, represented liberation from the unjust economic system of southern

\textsuperscript{60} Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 37.
\textsuperscript{61} Levenstein, Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet 107.
Italy. Diner makes an insightful point, but it does not fully encompass the significance of home grown food in America. Not only was the ability to grow one’s own produce and raise one’s own livestock liberating, but it helped shape the notion that *home cooking* – in large quantities, for many people, of high quality and grown on one’s own land – was something distinctly Italian-American. It could not have existed as such in Italy, and so it was a great point of pride in America: “Every day during the season, each brought bags of tomatoes and ate them as one eats apples. For dessert they would eat in common several pounds of peas and Windsor beans,” writes one Italian-American immigrant, celebrating his ability to grow his own food in America. 62 Indeed, it was not common for just any New Yorker to plant artichokes on her roof or raise pigs in her basement. But Italian-Americans did so with gusto, seeking to recall the food of their homeland while signifying the importance of home cooking in America through their dedication to growing, raising and sourcing their food. 63

Of course, this commitment to home cooking must be examined within the *kitchens* as well. This can be observed starting with the first waves of Italian immigration, those which consisted primarily of men immigrating to find work. During the early periods of Italian immigration, Italian men who came to America to work sought out the flavors of their homeland. In Italy, food preparation was left mostly to women. Many of the men who immigrated to America found themselves cooking on their own, in part as a way to save money but also because they longed for the familiarity of Italian foods. Some formed systems in which they rotated cooking

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62 Pellegrini, *The Unprejudiced Palate: Classic Thoughts on Food and the Good Life* 59.
duties or cooked in pairs. Others boarded with families and ate at the family dinner. Others still ate at the proto-restaurants which sprang up around boarding houses and small hotels where they lived. Enterprising Italians would open these establishments to meet the demand of single, hungry men. They sold affordable, supposedly “Italian” food to the immigrants. Cured meats, fish, beef, veal and spaghetti with tomato sauce could be found at the tables of these early Italian-American eateries. Such dishes would have been foreign and unappealing to the American population at large. But to the Italian men they offered a taste reminiscent of home, recalling authentic Italian cuisine while incorporating American products – principally, meat. The home-style food they served would pave the way for the Italian restaurant industry long after the population of single men declined.\textsuperscript{64}

It would be women, though, who played the most important role in elevating the status of home cooking in Italian-American life. As whole families arrived to meet their husbands in America, wives took on the role of feeding their families.\textsuperscript{65} As women dedicated a greater percentage of their time to preparing food for the family, home cooking emerged as a focal point of the American experience for Italian immigrant families.\textsuperscript{66} Women were now not just expected to provide enough food for their families, but to see to it that it was particularly good food as well.\textsuperscript{67} Italian women in America became symbols of good housewives who possessed a unique culinary skill. To be a good wife and a good female member of the community was to

\textsuperscript{64} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} 74-76.  
\textsuperscript{65} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} 76.  
\textsuperscript{67} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 37.
be a good cook.\textsuperscript{68} In Italy, women provided for their families through the preparation of food. But the myth of the Italian \textit{mamma} or \textit{nonna} presiding over the family kitchen, cooking in great quantities and feeding great numbers of people on a daily basis, was in great part formed in America. Such a reality would have been inconceivable in the poor regions of the \textit{Mezzogiorno}. One Italian-American writer characterizes the image of the Italian mother well: “Mamma is Queen of the Feast.”\textsuperscript{69} But such an image of the Italian woman developed over time on American shores – it was not simply adopted from Italian custom.

Many examples speak to the importance of women in home cooking in America. Proof of their dedication to home cooking is evidenced by the rise of the family meal, which became a central practice in Italian-American family life. For most immigrants, gathering at the dinner table each night and especially each Sunday became a cornerstone of family life in America – not simply a daily practice but a unique symbol of the Italian-American experience. The practice was virtually obligatory in most Italian homes. In a 1930’s study of Italians living in Harlem, 96% of respondents believed “having dinner together” best exemplified family unity.\textsuperscript{70} The centrality of the family meal highlighted the importance of the mother’s role in preparing food. The role of the wife, the family meal, and an emerging Italian-American identity were all closely intertwined. In certain ways, the mother sat quietly at the head of this new identity, integrating her Italian knowhow in the kitchen with

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\textsuperscript{68} Cinotto, "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York," 518.
\textsuperscript{70} Cinotto, "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York," 512.
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the bounty of the American marketplace. The importance of the mother, of home cooking and of family meals was not merely symbolic. Rather, it informed identity in real and lasting ways. One author describes this phenomenon as such: “Most Americans also have some direct experience of their own ethnicity…For some, that experience is part of childhood, perhaps sitting at a grandmother’s table on a Sunday afternoon, surrounded by cousins, aunts, and uncles and the aromas of grated cheese and garlicky tomato sauce.”

The tradition of family meals and other new practices were in many ways distinctly American and solidified the immigrants’ new lives in America. The practice of a family meal was not contrary to American customs – in many ways it was in line with them. In this way, it served a dual purpose. The ritual of regularly gathering around the dinner table integrated a more American way of life into Italian experience while maintaining the ability, through food, to “recall tradition” of native Italian culture.

Additionally, the very foods Italians consumed in America helped to bridge the gap between Italian and American ways of life, and to highlight the increasingly important position of home cooking in Italian-American life. Meat in particular symbolized the pride with which Italians practiced the tradition of home cooking. As Italians began to earn higher salaries, meat was the first item on which they chose to spend their extra income. Immigrant and author Angelo Pellegrini states that a new Italian immigrant to the United States “concentrates his talents on beef, pork, lamb

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71 Alba, Italian Americans : Into the Twilight of Ethnicity 1.
73 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 56.
and fowl.” Immigrants also regularly consumed breakfast and drank coffee, pleasures rarely enjoyed in Italy by the contadini. Italian-Americans prided themselves on their dedication to the kitchen, to preparing Italian dishes, and to the dinner table, while forging a new and increasingly American identity.

Additionally, meals were openly shared with outsiders as well as with the public at large. Back in Italy hospitality did play an important role; it was commonly a measure of one’s standing in the community. But in reality such hospitality, particularly the offering of food, would have been largely unpractical in southern Italy where food came at a premium and excess was rarely available. The simple ability to offer food to outsiders would have been uniquely American for many Italian immigrants, who took pride in their newfound ability to do so. Outside the home, Italian feste – large public gatherings or parties in which food often played a central role – publicly endorsed the tradition of home cooking. These community events emphasized the importance of food, family and cooking in Italian-American life. Such events occurred in Italy and would have been among the few times per year that the contadini had access to such rarities as meat or sweets. In America they upheld the American notion of “plenty,” while also introducing Italians to the home cooking of other regions in Italy, a small step towards a more unified Italian-American cuisine. At one such festa in East Harlem, one could find “sausage, pies filled with tomato, red pepper and garlic, bowls of pasta, hot waffles, fried and sugared dough,

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74 Pellegrini, The Unprejudiced Palate : Classic Thoughts on Food and the Good Life 35.
75 Gabaccia, From Sicily to Elizabeth Street : Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930 92.
boiled corn, ice cream” and much more. The feste also gave curious Americans an idea of Italian cuisine even if they found the foods themselves unfamiliar. A 1906 New York Times article reporting on the festa in honor the Lady of Mt. Carmel in East Harlem’s Little Italy describes “mysterious-looking pies” and goat-cheeses formed in “fanciful shapes.” Familiar to American tastes or not, the practical and symbolic importance of home cooking was central to these feste, which displayed Italian home food to the public at large. The whole community could take pride in the shared dedication of its members to cooking and good food.

As time went on, despite their increasing assimilation into American culture, the Italians’ commitment to home cooking and to the maintenance of the tradition of Italian cuisine did not decline. While the cuisine of many immigrant groups was completely subsumed by the longstanding Anglo-Saxon cuisine of America, Italian food avoided such a fate. In fact, the Italian-American community increasingly associated food and home cooking with their Italian-American identity, even in the face of outside criticism they would come to receive. Food, particularly at large public events like feste, was an important part of life in Italy. But it would be inaccurate to assume that the tradition of home cooking which came to define such a great deal of Italian life in America was carried over from Italy. Life in America altered the way Italians experienced food on a daily basis. Although certain traditions of Italian cooking were honored – certain dishes recreated, certain customs maintained – that did not mean they stayed the same once they reached American

79 Levenstein, ”The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930,” 2.
shores. Italian communities increasingly found a new diet – still Italian but increasingly a product of American eating habits – at the heart of their emerging identity:

The practices of daily life and face-to-face interaction in the immigrant enclave, together with the unprecedented quantity and variety of foods available in the New York market, defined a community food pattern **utterly American** upon which immigrants built an important part of their new identity as Italians.\(^80\)

In America, home cooking came to represent one of the distinct qualities of the American experience as superior to a life of relative poverty in Italy. Food, once scarce and almost always the product of hard labor, could now be prepared from a vast range of ingredients and consumed with a relatively unrestrained appetite.

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2. The Modern Table: The Changing Tides of Home Cooking in America

a. Soup-Can Cooking: Prepared Food Enters the Kitchen

To comprehend the way in which Italian food developed as a style of home cooking in America, we must look at the broader culture of home cooking into which it entered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. America and its economy were undergoing great change around the turn of the century. Once a country with a primarily agricultural economy, the United States would increasingly find itself a growing industrial power. As a result of industrialization, the shift which would alter America’s cooking habits most dramatically during the twentieth century was the increase in production and consumption of prepared and processed foods. What once was made from scratch could increasingly be bought in a can or pulled from the shelf in the frozen food aisle of the supermarket. The commercialization of prepared foods would drastically influence the way in which Americans cooked their meals. Without an impetus to make food from scratch, many people turned away from long-held cooking traditions. But the shift towards processed foods was accelerated by a number of other economic and cultural changes at this time – including but not limited to changing gender roles as women entered the workforce, and increased immigration. The story of Italian cuisine was heavily influenced by these trends, but also helped to define and shape them in certain ways.

The story of home cooking in America is not a straightforward one. Indeed, conceptions concerning the role of home cooking have changed considerably in the

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81 The growth of a “food industry” led to the industrialization of agriculture itself.
past century in this country. Home cooking at one time was the only practical method of preparing food. Today, it’s often dismissed as a relic of another time, a “lost art.” The practice of women spending long hours cooking a family dinner has been replaced to a great extent by purchases from drive-through fast food chains and microwavable dinners. While some find themselves nostalgic for an era of home cooking now long gone, one must consider the implications of freeing women from their place at the stove, which often involved long hours of intense work. Likewise, while home cooking is not what it used to be, to write it off as lost forever would be inaccurate. Home cooking has never been entirely abandoned in America, though today its place is more precarious. The rise and development of Italian food fits centrally into the changing narrative of American home cooking during the twentieth century.

A surging reliance on prepared foods strongly affected the way Americans bought, prepared and consumed food in the most fundamental ways. The trend started in the second half of the nineteenth century. New technologies invented during the Civil War gave rise to a canned foods industry in the United States. Additionally, new railways allowed for the transportation of foods as never before. Now fresh fruits and vegetables could be consumed out of season in urban centers by transporting them in iced rail cars. With the rise of these new technologies, home cooking would be extensively reinvented by American businesses, which sought to make prepared foods a staple of the American diet.  

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In short time, the processed foods industry became big business, and canned, premixed, prepared or otherwise pre-made foods were finding their way into the kitchens of Americans across the nation.\textsuperscript{83} Between 1859 and 1899, food manufacturing increased by a factor of fifteen while general manufacturing increased only by a factor of six.\textsuperscript{84} Cooking literature reflected this shift in the American marketplace. Magazines like \textit{The Ladies' Home Journal}, which had made a comeback following the Civil War, spoke to the advantages of processed and prepared foods. Prepared and canned food companies seeking to promote their goods likewise began printing literature and recipes including their products. Canned foods were quickly catching on: by the 1880s, cooking literature listed the can-opener as an indispensable item for the kitchen.\textsuperscript{85} In an 1889 article from \textit{The Ladies' Home Journal}, the writer praises canned goods for their affordability and ease: “These in great variety are so good, cheap and easily prepared that a selection should be kept on hand…Among the vegetables, tomatoes take the lead as being the most useful.”\textsuperscript{86} Americans from all walks of life were making use of prepared foods and incorporating them into their daily lives. This included Italian-American immigrants, who would use canned tomatoes to popularize tomato sauce in America.

The effects of an increasingly processed diet were far-reaching for the average American consumer. That, combined with new technologies for transporting fresh foods, redefined the possibilities for American cookery. The notion of “seasonality” no longer applied. Corn could be bought year round in New York City, either canned

\textsuperscript{84} Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans} 55.
\textsuperscript{85} Barbas, "Just Like Home: "Home Cooking" and the Domestication of the American Restaurant," 44.
or transported fresh from Texas. Longstanding ideas about what foods could be consumed when were changing. The food historian Harvey Levenstein observes:

On the one hand, their success has often been built on providing consumers with new foods or older foods prepared in new ways, which had added variety to the diet. On the other hand, their mass production and distribution techniques have contributed mightily towards standardizing the national diet.

The reshaping of the American diet increased the diversity of products available to many Americans while simultaneously limiting that diet to a more uniform – and increasingly nationalized – set of ingredients. Food was becoming available in new ways as it was increasingly prepared outside of the home – often in large-scale factories. Home cooking was suddenly on the decline, evidenced by the rise of such products as “ready-to-eat cold cereal” in the nineteenth century. Americans now had a choice: they could continue cooking in the traditional manner or they could opt for the more convenient method of using prepared foods. In another article from The Ladies’ Home Journal dating from 1890 entitled “Some Practical Dishes,” the author directs the making of tomato soup with “tomatoes fresh or canned.” Cooking itself was outsourced beyond the home. The prepared food industry, eager to sell its products, sought to convince women that the choice between homemade and prepared was simple. It was a choice between, on the one hand, hard work and uncertainty, and on the other hand, ease and assurance. A 1907 advertisement for Blue Label Soups proclaims that their canned soups “relieve you of the uncertainty and disappointment

88 Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty : A Social History of Eating in Modern America 27.
89 Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat : Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans 58.
90 Louise M. Knight, "Some Practical Dishes," The Ladies' Home Journal (1889-1907) 1890.
of home soup making," while adding, "Of course you know how to make soup – but why bother when Blue Label Soups assure you every quality you demand – and save you all the work?" The benefits of prepared food were publicized far and wide. And so in great numbers, Americans embraced prepared food as they began a slow retreat from made-from-scratch cooking. The advantages of an industrialized marketplace were simply too appealing for the American home cook to disregard them.

The shift towards processed and prepared foods produced long-term effects on the role of the American housewife as well. The dramatic shift in eating habits sweeping America forced the American housewife to rethink her position as cook and provider. But the move towards prepared foods for women was understood as “less a retreat into a kind of culinary barbarism than an important step forward.” Prepared foods were supposed to provide the modern American woman with saved time and energy. And less time in the kitchen meant that more time was available for other chores. The tradition of home cooking which had existed for generations across America was undergoing great change. The role of the mother as cook and provider had to be reevaluated, influencing gender roles through the present day. Indeed, cooking and food are so central to daily life that a changing diet fundamentally impacted family life as well. By the 1930s, when processed food was a fully established norm in America, the modern American housewife no longer looked to her mother or grandmother for advice about cooking – once the norm. Instead, the

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91 Advertisement 80 -- No Title," The Ladies' Home Journal (1889-1907) 1907.
93 And while studies indicate that women may have spent less time in the kitchen, the hours per day spent on household work increased between 1926 and 1929. See: Barbas, "Just Like Home: "Home Cooking" and the Domestication of the American Restaurant," 46.
housewife looked towards media – particularly women’s magazines. Media, backed by industry, were restructuring family roles and family ties. The good American housewife – for better or worse – had long been associated with proficiency in home cooking. But home cooking was less and less a product of family tradition and talent in the kitchen. Rather, “home cooking” was increasingly poured from a can, heated, and brought to the table.

However, it is important not to write off the role of home cooking altogether. While the contours of cooking were most definitely changing in America, home cooking still maintained an important role for many. This is particularly true among new immigrant groups – perhaps most significantly among the Italians. Their adherence to tradition in this case was a reflection of certain values which the immigrants carried over from their homelands. While the American marketplace was becoming increasingly standardized, many recent immigrants to this country continued traditional cooking methods. They continued to grow their own vegetables and buy from local shops even as canned and prepared food steadily made inroads into the American diet. And the family meal continued to require participation from all Italian-American family members even as the family meal of many American families was undergoing change. That said, the changing landscape of American food production did have implications for the immigrant diet. Italians began to rely on the increasingly widespread availability and affordability of processed white sugar and flour. Pasta, for example, was increasingly made using processed white flour. The increased consumption of meat, too, a product likewise popularized by new

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95 Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* 61-62.
processing and transportation technologies, meant that Italian-Americans continued to eat their traditional dishes but in an increasingly modern American way. As such, they maintained “an American standard of eating,” by indulging in processed starches, sweets and meat.\textsuperscript{96} Industrialization of the food system furthered the immigrants’ ability to indulge in the plentiful foods like meat and sweets that American markets had to offer. They continued their Italian home cooking practices, but in a way which more closely resembled American dietary standards.

\textit{b. Italian Home Cooking Develops in America}

The major changes to the American diet as a result of commercial, social and economic upheaval around the turn of the century, as well as the impact of World War I and the Great Depression, would set the stage for the development of Italian home cooking during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and its acceptance by Americans. While Italian-American food remained and remains today a distinct cuisine – never subsumed by the otherwise staunchly Anglo-Saxon diet of this country – it was heavily influenced by the progression of the American diet at large. For better or worse, Italian food and home cooking underwent an extensive process of Americanization, most forcefully in the first few decades of the twentieth century. It was during this process that the food became the “Italian-American” cuisine – a distinct cuisine all to itself – that we know today. Both a product of the home kitchen and of the restaurant kitchen, Italian-American cuisine would become a cornerstone of the American catalogue of ethnic foods, in part because of the way in which it appealed to the existing American diet.

\textsuperscript{96} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} 58.
And in time, many would claim that Italian-American staples like pizza and pasta were simply American foods in their own right.

In the beginning – even before the advent of prepared food – adapting home cooking habits to an American way of life was not always easy for Italian immigrants. Italian parents faced challenges both within the home, from their children, and outside of the home, from social reformers, in asserting their traditions of cooking, food, and family. Early Italian-American food culture, and home cooking in particular, highlighted the tensions that often arose between parents and children of immigrant families. Italians, not unlike other immigrant groups, found it difficult to balance their traditional family values with American customs. Cuisine played a critical role in this process – with eating customs an important point of negotiation in this delicate process. School in particular led many Italian-American children to embrace a more American way of life. A quote from the Covello papers describes the situation in one family from the perspective of a young girl from Italian East Harlem:

> My mother showed opposition to the teacher’s recommendation about food… I felt that I needed milk in the morning more than anything else…this made me very sad, for she ruined my dreams of becoming a real American…But my mother…insisted that this was not according to good customs; that milk was poison.  

Another quote from Covello describes a father furious when his son was sent home from school with an example of a model American breakfast: oatmeal. “What kind of food is this? They give us the food of animals and send it home with the children!”

Moreover, consuming Italian food in public was initially a source of embarrassment.

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for Italian children. Accounts from school children assert that though the Italian-American students preferred Italian food to American food, they shunned Italian food in public and opted for socially acceptable American food instead.\(^99\) The inevitable process of Americanization immigrant children underwent in the United States influenced the way they ate and the foods that were introduced to their Italian families. Though often upsetting the older generation, immigrant children were able to act with a certain amount of autonomy regarding the food they consumed in public, while inside the home, the food they ate was more strictly Italian.\(^100\) In balancing their public and private lives, Italian-American children began introducing American foods into the Italian diet and in so doing helped redefined aspects of that diet.

Outside pressure to reform came not only from schools and children but also from established social reformers who treated Italian eating habits with contempt and sought to impose a more American diet upon these new immigrants. Immigration from Europe, particularly that of darker skinned people from southern Italy and Sicily, concerned many Americans. Understanding the interplay of food, culture, and society, social reformers focused on diet reform in an effort to Americanize immigrants. Beliefs at this time dictated that complicated, heavily spiced foods – even dishes made with onions and garlic – were unhealthy and even dangerous. Concerned with the foods Italians were eating, foundations offered American cooking classes, reformers set up exhibits in New York geared towards reforming Italian eating habits, and social reformers like Jane Addams encouraged the teaching of American cooking

\(^99\) Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* 81.  
\(^100\) Cinotto notes that private family customs like the family dinner were not necessarily contrary to American standards and Italian children often found it acceptable because they observed this phenomenon among their peer group. See Cinotto, "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York," 515.
in public schools. In one particularly outrageous claim, a Boston man who headed a settlement house in the early twentieth century blamed the Italian diet for a rise in the death rate between first and second generation immigrants. He added that he believed the most important step in reversing this trend was to Americanize the Italian diet. For the arbiters of society around 1900, to be an acceptable American citizen was to eat like one. Italian home cooking did not, in their eyes, meet American standards. These reformers fought hard to impose an American standard of eating on Italian immigrants. But the Italians would not be so easily won over. 101

A public health official in 1899 observed that Italians “cling to their native dietary habits with extraordinary persistence.”102 For Italian women, who so closely linked their proficiency as a provider and mother with their ability to cook, admitting the need to reform would be tantamount to admitting their incompetence as the caretaker of their family.103 While certainly not the sole reason Italian food resisted overtake by the American Anglo-Saxon diet, this strong-minded adherence to culinary tradition by Italian mothers was in part responsible for the success of Italian-American food. To cook and eat well signified a prosperous life in America, and this experience of culinary excess was a common point of pride for Italian immigrants in America: “Italian immigrants placed a high premium upon eating certain foods and eating them well.”104 But what reformers failed to understand was that Italian immigrants and women in particular were in fact already eating in a distinctly American way as compared to their lives as contadini in Italy. By increasing their

101 Levenstein, Revolution at the Table : The Transformation of the American Diet 104.
103 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 78.
104 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 51.
consumption of certain foods like meat and dairy products, adopting certain processed foods, instituting a mandatory family meal and celebrating excess, Italians were not out of line with existing American practices. The form of their consumption was very American, while the content of their consumption – the recipes they prepared and the style in which they cooked – remained largely Italian in kind. Contrary to social reformers’ concerns, Italian immigrants did not unequivocally resist all efforts to reform to a more American way of eating. It is only that they wished to eat well as Americans – by eating more meat, instituting family meals, sharing food with outsiders and reveling in excess – in a distinctly Italian way. It was in this way, by interpreting American eating habits in a manner which honored Italian ingredients and respected Italian tradition, that a new cuisine was formed. Italians celebrated this American interpretation of their cuisine, which would soon be known as Italian-American food. Likewise, Americans would soon cling to and even adopt this cuisine as their own, which, though based on different ingredients and recipes, appealed to existing American culinary customs because it was in many ways a reflection of them.

c. America Tastes Spaghetti: The Popularization of Italian-American Home Cooking

As this new cuisine took shape, forming between existing American eating customs and Italian ingredients, it would be pasta – the most Italian of foodstuffs – which propelled Italian cuisine into the homes of every American. One dish in particular, the iconic spaghetti and tomato sauce, would bring Italian food into mainstream American culture. Pasta, or “macaroni” as it was referred to then, had always played a central role in the Italian immigrant’s diet. A food of the wealthy
back in Italy, it became a staple of Italian-American cuisine, consumed on a daily basis. The Italians consumed pasta in great quantities, initially produced in private homes and family-owned tenement sweatshops until large pasta factories began opening up around the turn of the century. The sight of spaghetti drying in shop windows of Little Italies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century soon gave way to large-scale production plants. By 1929, 550 “macaroni” plants were in operation in the United States, and by the 1930s Brooklyn and Queens alone had eight plants. For many Italian-Americans, pasta was the ever-present dish at family meals, and contemporary accounts recall Italian immigrants consuming two or three plates of pasta each night. Public “spaghetti dinners” were popularized in the early decades of the twentieth century in Italian social groups, particularly in women’s church societies. The symbolic importance of these spaghetti dinners is evidenced by one particularly significant dinner on Ellis Island on New Year’s Day 1925. Approved by the Commissioner of Immigration, the event was attended by 120 Italian immigrants, all eating the food symbolic of their new life in this country on the island that symbolized their transition from Italy to America.

Americans soon adopted macaroni as their own as well. Around the turn of the century “spaghetti” was becoming a familiar word to Americans even if not all Americans were ready to start eating it. Spaghetti’s increasing popularity is evidenced by a 1906 article from the “Humor” section of the New York Times entitled “All Eyes on Mulberry Street” which boldly claims: “When Little Italy’s great spaghetti-eating

105 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 55.
106 Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 35.
107 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 56.
108 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 55.
contest is held public interest is bound to be diverted from any other great event that may be scheduled to take place in the world of sport.”  

Pasta’s rise to fame (and that of spaghetti in particular) would receive particular support during World War I, a major turning point for Italian cuisine. As an ally to the United States, Americans found a new appreciation for the Italian people, including their food: “Ravioli, favorite dish of our Italian ally, should be served on every American table,” wrote Good Housekeeping magazine.  

Additionally, the need to conserve meat during the war, as well as scientific advancement in the field of nutrition and the discovery of vitamins at this time, reversed some of the attitudes held by social reformers and nutritionists towards Italian food. Fruits and vegetables, always popular in Italian cuisine, were looked upon favorably, and pasta was hailed as a nutritious and affordable dish.

By the 1920s, spaghetti and tomato sauce was becoming a common meal in American homes. A 1922 advertisement for “Goodman’s Spaghetti” promoted the nutritional value of the food as reported by the government:

According to Government reports, a package of spaghetti supplies the body with 37% more energy, 46% more protein, 17% more phosphorus, 29% more iron than wheat bread or whole milk of equal bulk…it is rich food and it is inexpensive.

The canned food industry capitalized upon pasta and tomato sauce as well, selling both the sauce alone as well as a full canned dinner of cooked spaghetti with sauce

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and cheese. “It’s only a matter of minutes to heat and serve Heinz cooked spaghetti,” boasts one advertisement.\(^ {114}\) And though “tinned spaghetti…the apex of culinary atrocities,” may not have appealed to an Italian traditionalist, to the American it offered a uniquely affordable, likeable, and purportedly nutritious meal option.\(^ {115}\) Later, the Great Depression only furthered the popularity of spaghetti and tomato sauce (particularly canned) as a practical, affordable option in tough times.\(^ {116}\) Of course, the Americanization of this dish was considerable. The spaghetti and pasta sauce Americans prepared would have been a far cry from the recipes used by mothers and grandmothers on Mulberry Street. Not only canned sauce but ketchup was often used in place of homemade tomato sauce, and “dreaded garlic” was rarely included in early American adaptations of the dish.\(^ {117}\) But by 1938 the American cookbook *Thoughts for Food* published a recipe for “Italian Meat Balls and Spaghetti” which resembled more traditional Italian versions of the dish. It was composed of “Italian Sauce” made from canned tomatoes, “Italian Tomato Paste,” olive oil and, yes, garlic, served over spaghetti with “one package grated Parmesan cheese.”\(^ {118}\) By 1948 Angelo Pellegrini mused, “In America, spaghetti is now a well-established, quasi-national dish.”\(^ {119}\) In one of the first instances since the founding of America, an immigrant cuisine was being adopted by American culture. The food of Italy was becoming the food of America. The story of spaghetti and tomato sauce

\(^ {114}\) "Display Ad 100 -- No Title," *New York Times* (1923-Current file) 1929.
\(^ {115}\) Pellegrini, *The Unprejudiced Palate: Classic Thoughts on Food and the Good Life* 164.
\(^ {118}\) *Thoughts for Food: A Menu Aid* (Chicago: The Institute Publishing Co., 1938) 264.
\(^ {119}\) Pellegrini, *The Unprejudiced Palate: Classic Thoughts on Food and the Good Life* 164.
proved how Italian home cooking could appeal to American tastes on a large scale, and in time, help shape them.

As certain Italian ingredients enjoyed more widespread acceptance among the American population at large, Italian cooking as practiced in America became a distinct cuisine all its own: Italian-American cuisine. The cuisine was new to American palates and still not fully understood or accepted by Americans. But this cuisine was also not fully Italian and certainly not representative of the diet of most immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno*. This new cuisine, based on Italian cookery but practiced with American sensibilities, was quickly assuming its own identity:

The practices of daily life and face-to-face interaction in the immigrant enclave, together with the unprecedented quantity and variety of foods available in the New York market, defined a community food pattern utterly American upon which immigrants built an important part of their new identity as Italians.\(^{120}\)

Both within the Italian community and to the American population at large, the idea of “Italian-American food” was beginning to form. Within the community, this was the result of many Italian immigrants from various regions coming together around food and other shared aspects of Italian culture. An academic work based on the research of Leonard Covello draws the following conclusion:

Immigrants found themselves drawn together…Fiestas grew in their scope. Styles of food began to mingle and their common experiences taught the immigrants to disregard their differences and join together…The Italians became more conscious of themselves as Italians rather than as Calabrians or Neopolitans, but without destroying the sense of loyalty for the old local villages and regions. This better prepared the way for the introduction of the Italian-American into the main stream of American society [*sic*].\(^{121}\)

\(^{120}\) Cinotto, "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York," 511.

America had created a more cohesive, unified identity for Italian immigrants of disparate regions of the Italian peninsula and Sicily. Just as their identity assumed a more collective image, so the food which they cooked and ate in America became more unified as well. The diets of Italians living in Italy had similarities but each region and each town had its own unique dishes. In America, many such unique dishes were still prepared, but all Italian immigrants regardless of origin could come together around common dishes like spaghetti and tomato sauce.

Moreover, for America at large, a notion of Italian-American food was taking form and assuming a more coherent identity as it increasingly appeared on American dinner tables. American women were increasingly open to preparing certain Italian dishes, like easy and nutritious spaghetti and tomato sauce or macaroni and cheese, in their home kitchens.\textsuperscript{122} And the variety of Italian dishes they adopted only expanded over the course of the twentieth century. They were embracing a cuisine of new ingredients that played to existing American eating habits, and Italian food was establishing itself with great success. But as any American can tell you, Italian food’s greatest advancement took place not in the home kitchens of immigrants or Americans. Rather, another factor played a major role in expanding the popularity of Italian food in America, and would be the most important step in the establishment Italian-American cuisine: the Italian-American restaurant industry.

3. The Rise of Italian-American Restaurants in New York City

a. New York Eats Out: Early Italian-American Restaurants

As it was, Italian-American food would achieve its greatest fame not in the apartments of Italian nonnas or in the kitchens of American housewives, but in Italian-American restaurants. With New York City as the epicenter of this burgeoning industry, Italian-American restaurants would in short time become a favorite of American diners. Checkered tablecloths hosting platefuls of spaghetti smothered in meat sauce, eggplant parmesan and hefty bottles of red wine became well-known to American diners from coast to coast. Pizza would become one of the most popular and iconic foods in America. A dish of Italian heritage, it would assume an American identity all its own. Through their restaurants, Italians would help shape the very notions of eating out and restaurant dining now so common to the American diner. But a century and a half ago such experiences were rare for the average American.

The Italian-American restaurant industry was in many ways an extension of Italian-American home cooking trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the same way that Italian home cooking caught on in America, Italian restaurants operated with such success because they tapped into existing American appetites and acceptable eating habits in a way that other cuisines, besides the ever-present Anglo-Saxon cuisine, did not. Over time, as American tastes for Italian food grew, people frequently returned to the familiar and comforting tastes of Italian-American restaurant food. In the beginning, home cooking was always at the heart of the Italian-American restaurant industry. In time, enterprising Italian restaurateurs created a guise of “home cooking” in their restaurants even when home cooking
methods played no role in the preparation of a meal. And while home cooking continued in America, the rise of these restaurants was responsible in part for the decline of home cooking (much as prepared foods likewise played a role in its decline). In all, the association of Italian food with home cooking and family would play an important role for the industry from the beginnings. With that, Italian restaurants defined what it means to eat out in this country, and set the standard for ethnic restaurant dining in the United States.

When Italians arrived in America, there was not much of a restaurant scene to speak of. Even in New York City, where today restaurants line every block of every neighborhood, eating out was not common around the turn of the century and restaurants were few and far between. The restaurants that did exist were for the most part accessible only to those who could afford their high prices. The most famous of those early establishments, opened in 1827, was Delmonico’s. While the restaurant bore the name of an Italian family, the Delmonico family was in fact Swiss and prepared exclusively French haute cuisine, served in a markedly French style. Many of the other early restaurants were housed in hotels, which commonly dictated their style and pricing. They also served primarily French food. By 1900, “Spaghetti Italienne” (note the French spelling of the dish) had made its way onto the menus of these restaurants, but that was the only dish from France’s inferior cousin to the south. Throughout the nineteenth century the restaurant industry in New York City

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123 The restaurant originally opened as a café and pastry shop before becoming a full French restaurant. Throughout the following decades the restaurant would change location and be overtaken by new management a number of times, but always remained a cornerstone of fine French dining in New York City. See Grimes, Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York Chapter 4.
slowly expanded and more options became available for those unable to afford the prices of the high-end establishments. But these establishments – primarily lunchrooms, oyster saloons, chophouses and “eating houses” (large food halls designed for high capacity) – prepared Anglo-Saxon cuisine. One Italian restaurant did operate at this time in the city, Café Moretti, but its clientele consisted mostly of visiting Italian opera singers and musicians. Overwhelmingly, French and Anglo-Saxon cuisine maintained their stronghold on the restaurant industry throughout the nineteenth century. No one could have predicted the success Italian-American restaurants would have in the century to come.

The first Italian eating establishments on American shores, discussed in the first chapter, were proto-restaurants set up to meet the needs of single, working men. Many of these establishments, located on the ground floor of boarding houses where the men lived, would later develop into some of the first Italian restaurants in the country. They were very much the product of home cooking – serving unadorned food to men who longed for a taste of home. As wives and children migrated to the United States, whole families would occasionally dine out at the boarding houses, with non-Italians sometimes finding their way in as well. But such instances were rare. For the most part during the initial waves of Italian immigration during the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the general American population was unwilling to make Italian food part of their diets. For many Americans, eating out was uncommon, and eating Italian food was virtually unheard of.

128 Diner, Hungering for America : Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration 75.
Around the turn of the century, Italians began opening restaurants in Manhattan’s Little Italy and the adjacent Greenwich Village, some of them extensions of the eateries established in boarding houses. Convincing Italians to try a meal at their restaurants may have been easy enough for the Italian proprietors, but finding an American clientele was more of a challenge. But one group of Americans – Bohemian artists, writers and musicians – found these Italian restaurants quite attractive. During the nineteenth century New York City became the unquestionable cultural capital of America, and it attracted a large community of Bohemians, poor but hungry for a taste of Europe. As early as the 1880s, Bohemians flocked to these new Italian restaurants which served cheap, filling food in a family atmosphere. Many of the restaurants were located on the bottom floors of boarding houses or in private homes, and the owners’ wives did the cooking. The food itself was simple and unadorned.\textsuperscript{129} New York Times food critic and restaurant historian William Grimes describes the meal at one such restaurant, the popular Maria del Prato’s: “Sixty cents bought a cut-rate feast of soup, spaghetti, and chicken, with zabaglione for dessert.”\textsuperscript{130} Wine too, often Chianti, was served along with the meal. Notably, the food itself was not the only draw for the Bohemians. Cheap prices and filling, homemade food made Italian restaurants an appealing and practical choice. But it was the idea of eating as a European, the romantic notion of dining as a poor Bohemian while drinking bottles of Italian wine and chatting with the owner, which kept the Bohemians coming back. The Bohemians’ appreciation for Italian-American food and culture was a pivotal moment in Italian-American restaurant culture:

\textsuperscript{129} Grimes, \textit{Appetite City : A Culinary History of New York} 126.
\textsuperscript{130} Grimes, \textit{Appetite City : A Culinary History of New York} 126.
The fifty-cent (or even thirty-five-cent) table d’hôte—a stomach-filling multicourse meal with red wine—lived long in the memories of every young man who arrived in New York, pen or brush in hand, and walked the streets in search of a cheap meal and a dash of romance.\footnote{Grimes, Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York 125.}

Indeed, the clientele could not help but feel part of the family, and the Italians welcomed the new stream of steady business with open arms.

For this first generation of Italian restaurants in America, the food was very much a product of home cooking. While the Italian restaurant industry would eventually commercialize the idea of home-style cooking and family-run restaurants, these restaurants indeed practiced home cooking much as it was actually prepared in the homes of immigrants, and they were generally family run. Early Italian restaurateurs cooked food based on family recipes. Whereas French restaurateurs in New York may have sought to recreate the food of upscale Parisian restaurants, the immigrants from the Mezzogiorno would have had no concept of an Italian restaurant in Italy.\footnote{Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 51.} Additionally, like the home cooking of Italian immigrants in America, the food at Italian restaurants in New York City was abundant, even excessive, and featured large portions of meat, pasta and sweets. And unlike the French restaurants of this period which sold themselves on status and exclusivity, or on the contrary eating halls and lunch counters which sold themselves on convenience, the Italian restaurants sold themselves on \textit{home cooked} food and a friendly atmosphere. Whereas French restaurants served the food of the French elite, Italian restaurants served the food of the Italian everyman (or at least the Italian everyman living in America).

While lunch halls were designed to feed people by the thousands and lacked character, Italian restaurants were at first small, intimate places full of charm.
Consistent with Italian-American home cooking, the actual dishes served in these restaurants were an American interpretation of Italian cuisine, combining the traditional dishes of many regions of southern Italy with what was available in American markets. And while it appealed to existing American eating habits, the Italian-American restaurant industry was in part responsible for forming new eating habits among Americans. The establishment of the Italian restaurant in New York City marked the beginning of a whole new genre of dining experience for Americans. No longer was eating a multi-course dinner at a European establishment reserved only for the wealthiest American citizens. No longer were Americans completely unwilling to sample food outside of the Anglo-Saxon cannon of dishes. The extensive array of ethnic restaurants which exist today in America owe their beginnings to Italian-Americans, mostly in New York City, who pioneered this entirely new dining concept.

As the Bohemians popularized Italian-American restaurants, a wider clientele of non-Italians soon caught on, including a wealthier up-town contingent eager to try the food of Italy. Restaurants expanded and became popular dining destinations in New York City. No longer was Delmonico’s the only popular spot to have a dinner, and no longer was the city’s elite the only clientele. Take, for example, Gonfarone’s, an Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village which opened around the turn of the century. The restaurant began as a small basement eatery with only a handful of tables serving Italian food mostly to Italians. Under the direction of its famous manager Anacleto Sermolino, the restaurant’s fifty-cent (sixty-cent on weekends\textsuperscript{133}) table d’hôte offered a seven-course menu featuring antipasti, soup, spaghetti with

\textsuperscript{133} The price increase accounted for the half-boiled lobster with mayonnaise served on the weekends.
meat sauce, salmon, sweetbreads, chicken or roast prime rib, side dishes and wine.\footnote{Grimes, \textit{Appetite City : A Culinary History of New York} 128.}

It quickly became a hit among Americans – particularly with the Bohemian crowd – and soon expanded its operation to neighboring houses on McDougal Street.\footnote{Gerald W. McFarland, \textit{Inside Greenwich Village : A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) 175.} In time, it served an average of five hundred people a night, and double that on the weekends.\footnote{Grimes, \textit{Appetite City : A Culinary History of New York} 128-29.} An American appetite for Italian-American food was growing steadily. Maria Sermolino, Anacleto’s daughter, attributed Gonfarone’s success to the “simple, Latin variety of hedonism” it offered American diners.\footnote{Attributed to Maria Sermolino, quoted in Grimes, \textit{Appetite City : A Culinary History of New York} 129.} But of course, this variety of hedonism was an expression of luxury not enjoyed by the vast majority of Italians living on the Latin shores of Italy. Rather, this culinary overindulgence was a distinctly American form of consumption. Only in America at this time could a meal of such excess be had for fifty cents.

A more upscale clientele soon caught on too, like those who frequented Mamma Leone’s. The small restaurant started above a wine cellar behind the Metropolitan Opera in 1906 before moving to larger space on West 48\textsuperscript{th} Street in 1914, decorated in elaborate “Italian” style. In time it became a favorite of New York socialites, with Mamma Leone herself ever-present to supervise her Italian dream world – complete with nude statues of Venus, the goddess of love. Like Gonfarone’s it served huge meals of Italian-American classics, enjoyed family-style with wine. It offered, like many other Italian-American restaurants in New York City at the time, a grandiose style of dining uniquely American in scale and imagination:
Its theme was that of an Italian-American fantasy that had absolutely no basis in reality back in the Old Country, where the majority of Italians were still economically deprived of the pleasure of going out to dinner.\textsuperscript{138}

Italians had found a niche in the American food market, appealing to an American appetite by creating a whole new style of dining out. They sold their restaurants on Italian charm and on home cooked food, of which neither necessarily had a basis in authentic Italian culture. The average American had never before dined out in such a way, much less experienced ethnic food (as Italian food was very much considered then). Italian-Americans were shaping an entirely new industry with their early restaurants. Their newfound popularity paved the way for the restaurant industry in America up to the present day. Indeed this novel style of dining – at affordable, comfortable, ethnic restaurants – came to define the American experience of eating out.

\textit{b. Booze, Crime and Pizza: Italian Food Becomes an American Classic}

As the popularity of Italian restaurants grew throughout the first half of the twentieth century, so, too, did their importance to New York cultural life. Prohibition in the United States created a peculiar and ultimately beneficial role for the burgeoning Italian-American restaurant industry. The industry had found some support among non-Italians in the first decades of the century, but with the onset of Prohibition laws in 1919, the industry found yet another and even more widespread source of patronage. This new patronage provides yet another example of the Italian-

\textsuperscript{138} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 55-56.
American ability to tap into American demand.\textsuperscript{139} Italian boarding house owners had long produced their own alcohol – wine, beer and grappa – to serve to residents and friends. When the “Dry Decade” hit between 1919 and 1933, non-Italians flocked to Little Italy seeking alcohol, which was readily available at Italian establishments during Prohibition.\textsuperscript{140} The Palm Restaurant, today a chain of famous steak houses, began in New York City as an Italian speakeasy, serving alcohol in a dark room with sawdust-covered floors on Second Avenue. Besides the contraband liquor, basic Italian dishes were served, which American patrons would order along with their drink (in the early days steak was available only upon request). With Prohibition, Italian restaurants were becoming the restaurants of choice for many New Yorkers. Indeed, New Yorkers would rather be afforded the opportunity to drink at an Italian speakeasy – and perhaps even sample some of its food – than suffer through a meal at one of the “fine dining rooms” with no drink in hand.\textsuperscript{141}

The continued success of Italian restaurants during the 1930s and 1940s was in great part the product of a clientele base formed during the dry years.\textsuperscript{142} And by the 1930s, dining out at high-end French restaurants was no longer favored among the well off.\textsuperscript{143} Affordable Italian restaurants became a practical and popular choice for Americans from all social strata who wished to eat out. And the Great Depression only served to reinforce this attitude.\textsuperscript{144} Many of the Italian restaurants frequented

\textsuperscript{139} And the timing of Prohibition was quite lucky for Italian-Americans. During the 1920s, the negative economic effects of new immigration restrictions barring most new immigrants from Europe were offset by an increased demand for alcohol.
\textsuperscript{140} Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930," 18.
\textsuperscript{141} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 54.
\textsuperscript{142} Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930," 18.
\textsuperscript{143} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America} 28.
\textsuperscript{144} The rise in popularity of Italian restaurants during the Depression coincided with the rise in popularity of serving spaghetti and tomato sauce in American homes.
during Prohibition expanded in the years following its repeal, increasing the size of their restaurants and lengthening their menus to fill the new demand. “Spaghetti houses,” for example – originally cheap, lunch counter-like restaurants serving only spaghetti popularized in the business districts of large cities in the 1920s – expanded to full restaurant operations.\textsuperscript{145} By 1930, there were 409 Italian restaurants in Manhattan, and 204 in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{146} It was also during this time that many of the standbys of classic Italian-American restaurants came into being. Photos of famous customers began lining the walls, Italian decorative pieces and sculptures became typical décor, and casual music was commonly introduced as a form of entertainment for diners.\textsuperscript{147} Checkered tablecloths and candles stuck in wine bottles, now something of a cliché for Italian-American restaurants, also became common around this time.\textsuperscript{148}

Something else, too, became associated with Italian-American restaurants in the minds of Americans: crime and the mafia. A quick survey of \textit{New York Times} articles from 1900-1930 features a large number of articles describing crime scenes at Italian restaurants. Article titles like “Italian ‘Bad Man’ Strangely Slain: Genario Gallucci Found Shot in His Brother’s Restaurant in Harlem”\textsuperscript{149} from 1909 provide evidence that even early Italian restaurants carried connotations of crime and “the mob.” Another \textit{New York Times} article from the same year, a fictional mystery tale published in the newspaper, highlights the associations of crime and Italian restaurants as well:

\textsuperscript{145} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America} 51.
\textsuperscript{146} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America} 51.
\textsuperscript{147} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 55.
\textsuperscript{148} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America}.
The restaurant has a history. Not so many years ago it was necessary to make various sundry signs in order to gain admission. Within a certain sense of danger to life and limb added zest to the steady and continuous flow of pink ink. Conversations were carried on in whispers. Those unfriendly to whatever cause it was were forcibly ejected. Those who remained were subjected to surveillance in the strictest. An interesting place to spend the evening it was some years ago from all accounts of those who survived.\textsuperscript{150}

By 1926, articles like “Bronx Restaurant Held Up,” which describes a scenario in which “Four robbers, three armed, entered the Modern Italian Restaurant…last night, and lined Ginnaro Colicci, the proprietor, and four male patrons against the wall,” were not uncommon.\textsuperscript{151}

Clearly, New Yorkers were fascinated by the idea of Italian crime and “the mob.” Real-life examples like Al Capone, the infamous Italian mob leader during Prohibition, were partially responsible for associations of Italian-Americans and crime. And indeed, a certain level of crime existed in the Little Italies of America, particularly during the illegal operations carried out during Prohibition. But in great part, these associations were formed and perpetuated by Hollywood. Images of ominous Italian-American men consuming excessive amounts of food and wine in the dark corners of Italian restaurants are more the result of popular culture and film than they are of reality. As early as 1906 Hollywood was producing Italian-American crime dramas, and big hits like \textit{Little Caesar} in 1931 only furthered American’s obsession with Italian mobsters and Italian restaurants as the center of their insidious activities.\textsuperscript{152} Such an obsession only highlighted the prominent place of Italian-American restaurants in American culture. Throughout the twentieth century, instead

\textsuperscript{152} Mariani, \textit{How Italian Food Conquered the World} 90.
of denying such associations, Italian restaurant owners would use these associations in advertising, claiming their establishment was “connected.” In the end, while some Italian restaurants surely served as the meeting places for mobsters, their connection with organized crime only further established them as America’s favorite restaurants – crime-ridden or not.

Whether it was mobsters or native New Yorkers sitting at the tables of Italian restaurants in New York, certain dishes soon became iconic of the increasingly established industry. Of course, the ever-present spaghetti with tomato sauce or meatballs graced the menus of all Italian restaurants. But other dishes too gained fame, most of them featuring meat and dairy products so loved in America. Take, for example, lasagna, which featured pasta, cheese, sauce and meat. Such a dish would have been a rare indulgence to poor contadini in Italy, eaten, if at all, on feast days. But in America lasagna became a standby of Italian-American restaurant menus. Other Americanized dishes like chicken or eggplant parmesan, shrimp scampi, “turkey alla Tetrazzini,” made with spaghetti and turkey, and “spaghetti alla Caruso,” made with chicken livers and tomato, became commonplace as well (the later two dishes were both named after Italian opera singers). And for dessert, cheesecake prepared with ricotta, virtually unheard of in Italy, was a favorite of American diners. As Italian-American restaurants defined a new style of eating out, popular Americanized adaptations of Italian dishes were created to satisfy American expectations.154

153 Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 94-95.
154 Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 51.
Many dishes served an important role in popularizing Italian food among Americans, but none was as important as the one thing – the one dish – that immortalized Italian food in the American imagination. It became so important here in the United States, particularly in New York City, that it is in many ways an American food first and foremost. Pizza – that most accessible and affordable American meal, appropriate for lunch, dinner, or even breakfast, available in fine restaurants, college dining halls, convenience stores, highway pit stops and airport terminals – is without a doubt the Italian food which overtook America.

Pizza did originate in Italy, but not as we know it today. It was a foodstuff of the very poor in the Italian south, eaten by residents in the slums around Naples. Originally a combination of baked dough and tomato sauce, legend has it that it gained the additions of mozzarella and seasonings in 1889 by a Neapolitan pizza maker who prepared one of his pies for Queen Margherita.\(^\text{155}\) In America, it was poor immigrants who brought pizza to America and continued to prepare it as a cheap foodstuff. Originally, Italian laborers might pick up a piece of *pizze cavere* (“hot cakes” in Neapolitan dialect) in New York’s Little Italies, but Americans had no knowledge of the product.\(^\text{156}\) Hardly considered a dish representative of Italian culture, pizza was first introduced to the American public in 1905 when Italian immigrant Gennaro Lombardi started selling pizza at his grocery store on Spring Street in Manhattan’s Little Italy.\(^\text{157}\) Throughout the first half of the twentieth century,

\(^{155}\) John F. Mariani, “Everybody Likes Italian Food,” *American Heritage Magazine* December 1989. Hence the modern day American usage of the term “Pizza Margherita,” which denotes pizza made with tomato sauce and fresh (Italian-style) mozzarella cheese, as opposed to the processed mozzarella commonly used in American pizzas.


pizzerias continued to open in the United States, particularly in New York and the surrounding areas. During the 1920s it became a popular item at Italian street feste in New York City.158 Pizza was becoming more popular in the United States than in southern Italy. Frank Pepe’s pizzeria in New Haven, one of the earliest successful pizzerias in the country, was founded in 1925. Like other American pizza establishments, Pepe’s popularized pies which went beyond the classic tomato sauce and mozzarella toppings, selling such regionally inspired variations as the “white clam pizza.”159 But at this time, spaghetti – also a starch-based dish topped with tomato sauce and cheese – still reigned supreme in the minds of Americans. “Pizza at this point was very much an ethnic, poor person’s food eaten by Italians in the urban enclaves in which they had settled,” notes pizza historian Ed Levine.160

It was not until after World War II that pizza became popularized on a large scale in American culture. Deep dish pizza, originally created by Chicago’s Pizzeria Uno in 1943, symbolized the Italian-American ability to make Italian dishes uniquely American, and in so doing to find a large following among American eaters:

[Pizzeria Uno] negotiated authenticity by recruiting the major distinctive feature of American cooking: ‘impressive quantities’ of ingredients baked in an iron pan (designated pie) gave a personal touch to the ethnic food and assigned it back to the ethnic as if it were their own [sic].161

Deep dish or not, by the 1950s pizza quickly rose in status to become one of America’s most beloved, and most frequently consumed, dishes. “Pizza parlors”

158 Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America 230.
159 Mariani, How Italian Food Conquered the World 44.
160 Levine, Pizza: A Slice of Heaven 52.
began serving large, affordable pies, perfect for a group to enjoy at the parlor or just as easy to carry home for a television dinner. By 1956, pizza surpassed hot dogs as the most popular item at drive-ins and take-home establishments.\footnote{Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty : A Social History of Eating in Modern America} 230.} Without doubt, pizza was now a food of America – born in Italy, raised to fame in America.

For the Italian-American restaurants which found some success in the first decades of the twentieth century, pizza would ensure Italian-American food’s continued popularity long into the future. Identity as an Italian-American was now inextricably tied to pride in Italian food. The Italians’ ability to establish their cuisine on American shores “would in turn reinforce their own tendency to use food as a distinctive source of ethnic pride.”\footnote{Levenstein, “The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930,” 19.} Throughout the rest of the century, Italian food would only to continue to rise to prominence.

The association of Italian restaurant food with “home cooking” would remain strong as well, even as increasingly Italian-American restaurant kitchens hired non-Italians to prepare their food, and the preparation was far from “home cooking.” At the same time, Americans were increasingly turning away from their own kitchens and eating out. Of course many Americans, of Italian heritage or not, continued to cook at home. But for some, having dinner at an Italian restaurant or ordering a take-out pizza was easier than laboring over the stove. Indeed, pizza would become a staple of fast-food culture in America, beginning with the opening of Pizza Hut in Wichita, Kansas in 1958. The restaurant industry expanded in other ways too, including the addition of northern Italian restaurants, which appealed to a more discerning clientele, later in the century. And by 1974, the \textit{New York Times} wrote its
first four-star review of an Italian restaurant, Parioli Romanissimo: “Excellent in the first place…The place has style without ostentation…and considering what you get for your money, the price is reasonable.” Italian food, well established among fast food chains and mid-range family restaurants by this time, was now a viable cuisine for high-end dining as well. No other cuisine in America has realized such success so broadly.

The story of Italian-American restaurants is a unique one in this country, for no other immigrant group would see their cuisine rise to such popularity as the Italians did in America. And those other ethnic groups that have subsequently established a popular restaurant following should give credit to Italian-Americans for paving the way. In fact, Italian food became so popular in America that many non-Italian immigrants began opening up Italian restaurants during the twentieth century. The popularity of Italian food among American diners was widely understood and appreciated. As noted above, the home cooking of southern Italian immigrants in New York developed a unique appeal for American palates – and now, Italian restaurants proved to have appeal for Americans excited and delighted by the new experience of eating out that they offered. Italian-Americans set the standard for ethnic restaurants in America. Their legacy continues today, and eating a plateful of spaghetti and meatballs is still the uniquely American pleasure it became over a century ago.

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165 For example, the many Greek-Americans who went into the pizza business. Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America.
Conclusion

The tradition and legacy of cooking created by early Italian-Americans can readily be experienced in modern day New York City. Take, for example, the city’s new and overwhelmingly popular eating establishment: Eataly. It’s a multi-level, warehouse-sized Italian food emporium located in the Flatiron District, complete with twelve separate dining options, a full Italian grocery store, a cookbook store, and a cooking class center. It is a dramatic testament to the American love of Italian food. On any given night, countless hundreds of New Yorkers and tourists crowd its luminous halls eager to try the wood-fired pizzas and large bowls of handmade pastas. Some work their way through towering cones of gelato while others sip little cups of Italian espresso. They’re all vying for a taste of “authentic” Italy. What they don’t know is that Eataly – though a concept which originated in Turin, Italy – is as much a product of Italian-American food culture as it is of any tradition of cooking formed in Italy. The vast array of trans-Italian dishes which appear on the menus of Eataly’s many restaurants is only possible as a result of a collective Italian culinary identity formed, in great part, within New York City. And the very notion of “eating out” was in great part formed by the restaurants opened by Italian-Americans.

But Eataly pays homage not only to Italian restaurants but to Italian home cooking as well. Its shelves are lined with fresh produce, imported cured meats and cheese, Italian olive oil and freshly made pasta. Since Americans first starting cooking spaghetti and tomato sauce in their homes in the early part of the twentieth century, they have only increased their preparation of Italian foods within the home. Lasagna, risotto, chicken cacciatore, minestrone, tiramisu, just to name a few, all
came to be commonly prepared in the homes of Americans over the last century. At
the time when Julia Child caused a sensation by convincing dedicated American
cooks that they could create the wonders of classic French cuisine in their own
kitchens, Italian food was already a loved and accepted mainstay of the American
diet. Today, it seems more popular than ever. America’s steady love of Italian food,
in recent years fueled by a host of cookbooks and television shows on Italian home
cooking, has thrust Italian home cooking once again into the spotlight. Attracted to
“authentic” Italian food’s simplicity and affordability, Americans have again taken up
the cause of Italian home cooking. Some may write off the renewed interest in Italian
home cooking in this country as a mere popular fad, others as the pastime of a
wealthy elite. But Italian-American home cooking, as it is being reshaped today,
offers the modern American home cook simple and affordable ways to cook at home
and connect with the food they eat. Indeed, Italian food will continue to influence the
way Americans consume food in their home for generations to come.

Since its beginnings, the rise of Italian-American cuisine has always been
centered on a strong connection with the food itself and with the experience of
consuming that food. When Italians first began immigrating to the United States, they
immediately sought to source the familiar flavors of southern Italy on these new
shores. A strong culture of home cooking – la cucina casalinga – formed in New
York City’s Little Italies, one which, though always unique in its Italian identity,
quickly assumed many of the characteristics of American food preparation and
consumption. Then, as Americans modified their cooking habits during the early
twentieth century, particularly with the rise of the prepared foods industry, Italian
home cooking became widely popularized within the homes of Americans. Spaghetti and tomato sauce became a staple of the American diet. Italian food had established itself as the first ethnic food to be widely adopted by American home cooks.

It was the Italian-American restaurant industry, though, which had the strongest and most lasting influence on the way Americans eat. While Italian home cooking became so popular because it appealed to existing American culinary habits, the Italian-American restaurant industry was so successful because it created an entirely new style of dining based on affordable, welcoming restaurants serving home style food. While lasagna, chicken parmesan and shrimp scampi became popular menu items at Italian-American restaurants, it was pizza which made Italian food America’s first and favorite ethnic cuisine. Throughout the rest of the century, Italian food continued to influence the way Americans eat. And Italian-American cuisine simultaneously became a standby of the ever-expanding fast food industry while steadily making inroads on the fine dining establishments of major cities as well. In time, Italian food as formed in America would become popular all over the world.

Back in New York City, I am finishing my conversation with Carmelina Pica at Enoteca Maria. She has designed the dinner menu for that night, and though Enoteca Maria is a casual restaurant, it offers such traditional dishes as braised veal tail and whole Mediterranean sea bass, in addition to pizza, pasta and ricotta cheesecake. We discuss the role of Italian-American food in her family, why food is so entwined with Italian-American identity, why it is so popular among Americans, and the significance of the Italian-American restaurant industry. She thoughtfully
responds to each of my questions, but often sums up her answer with a simple: “The Italian food is the best food.”\textsuperscript{166} Perhaps, that is all the explanation one needs.

\textsuperscript{166}Pica, Personal interview.
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