

**Buon
appetito!**
**ITALIAN FOODWAYS
IN
ONTARIO**



The Ontario Historical Society



Buon appetito!

Italian Foodways in Ontario

Jo Marie Powers, Editor

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In Appreciation

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and to this publication**

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Foreword

Since the inception of The Ontario Historical Society in 1888, it has maintained a tradition of fostering a better understanding of the history of all Ontarians. This mandate has been carried out in many different ways through the years. A new initiative began several years ago with a series of workshops, seminars and conferences exploring the history and foodways of the many cultural groups whose traditions contribute to Ontario's cuisine today. Many of you know the publications *Consuming Passions* and *My Cultural Handbook* that resulted from those programmes. The Ontario Historical Society continued that theme when the Society hosted **From Cathay to Canada: Chinese Cuisine in Transition** on April 12, 1997, and brought together those interested in Chinese cuisine and its diffusion in Canada.

On November 6, 1999, this initiative was continued when **Buon appetito! A Symposium on Italian Foodways in Ontario** was presented. The papers from that symposium consider Italian Canadians and their influence on the province's culinary awareness and appreciation.

The symposium was a timely one. The province's population of Italian Canadians has increased enormously since the end of the Second World War. In 1951, in Ontario's total population of about 4.5 million, some two percent (about 88,000 individuals) were of Italian origin. Forty years later (and with some differences in census enumeration) the total provincial population had jumped to almost ten million and Italian Canadians within that number had grown to almost three-quarters of a million (roughly 700,000 of the total according to the 1991 census).

No doubt it is partly because of these significant increases in population that Italian culture in general, and Italian cuisine in particular, have become so much a part of life-styles in Ontario. I paraphrase the recent words of a well-known Ontario newspaper columnist when I ask, "when was the last time that anyone in Ontario (or anywhere else in Canada) thought of pizza or pasta or espresso as being *Italian*?" We will learn that that time has been surprisingly recent even though Italian culture and cuisine has been part of Ontario's history for a very long time indeed. Many of the papers will deal with this subject – that is, the influence of Italian cuisine on Ontario's culinary repertoire. Other papers will introduce us to the diversity that is Italian regional cuisine; the importance their cuisine has had in the social and cultural life of Italians and Italian immigrants in Canada; and, changes brought about in culinary traditions as a consequence of immigration, and continuing efforts of Italians to maintain their traditions in a new land.

In short, these proceedings provide us with a veritable feast of unique, fascinating and informative insights into an extremely important component of Ontario history.

Buon appetito!

Jeanne Hughes
President, The Ontario Historical Society

Buon appetito! A Symposium on Italian Foodways in Ontario

**Saturday, November 6, 1999
John McKenzie House, 34 Parkview Avenue
Willowdale, Ontario**

Programme

Welcoming Remarks

Jeanne Hughes, President, The Ontario Historical Society
Caroline Di Cocco, M.P.P., Sarnia-Lambton

Foodways and Italian-Canadian Identity

Franca Iacovetta, Department of History, University of Toronto

Regional Cuisines in Italy

Gianni Ceschia, Culinary Studio 2000, Toronto

Special Days: Special Dishes

Cristina Perfetto, Toronto, assisted by Barbara Truax, Toronto

Pizza-making Demonstration

Tony Schiassi, Toronto

From Garden to Table

Gabriele Scardellato, Toronto

Food and Religious Identity in an Italian-Canadian Festa

Enrico Carlson Cumbo, Toronto

Italian Foodways as a Model of Cultural Exchange

Angelo Principe, Erindale College and Mimma Corno Piscitelli, Toronto

Grow! Prepare! Preserve!

Luigi Pennacchio, Toronto

Kitchen Utensils from Old World to New

Maria A. Pace, co-author, *The Little Italy Cookbook*, Toronto

A Columbus Menu: Italian Food over Five Centuries

Ivano Zambotti and Rodney Donne, George Brown College, Toronto

Chin! Chin! Salute! Drink Up! Wine Tasting

Introduction

I was introduced to The Ontario Historical Society (OHS) about seven years ago through my good friend Gabriele Scardellato who introduced me in turn to Robert Leverty of the OHS. At that time I was attempting to put together a book on the history of the Italians in my community.¹ I thank Gabriele Scardellato and Robert Leverty for their assistance and encouragement. That project was my way of finding out how I fit into the Sarnia-Lambton region of Ontario as a Canadian born in Italy.

Although I certainly am not a historian, the project opened up an acute awareness of my heritage and how Italians were a part of the Canadian milieu. The greatest revelation for me was that history was not just about momentous events and grand historical figures, but that it was also about stories of ordinary people and their ways.

During the journey of gathering the data for our work, it soon became apparent that most of the Italians who emigrated to Canada came from humble rural origins. Most of the stories I documented spoke to those rural roots. The hardships they recounted about settling in this new world were not just about hard work, or encountering prejudice, but also of finding the food and the cooking utensils to which they were accustomed.

The resourcefulness and adaptability of people were shown by how they managed to provide for their families. Food played a big part. For example, my parents bought a new house and, typical of most Canadian homes, it had a small back yard with a lawn. The first thing that they did was to turn most of the lawn into a garden. I recall that when my mother worked as a dishwasher at a Greek restaurant, she brought home empty ketchup bottles and we spent many hours in the late summer filling those bottles with tomatoes. One can imagine how painstaking it was to put a tomato into the narrow opening one slice at a time. Another example of their resourcefulness was bread – a big problem. Very few Italians could become accustomed to soft, white Canadian bread. Large 100-pound sacks of flour were bought to make crusty Italian loaves. I think back with astonishment that large cooking-oil cans were cut in half, cleaned and used as loaf pans to bake the bread.

Although I can relate these examples from my own experience, in interviews and discussions with many others, the realities of food preparation for the first Italian immigrants were similar in many aspects.

Due to the fact that most of the Italian immigrants of the postwar era were of humble origin, they brought with them folkways from their rural lifestyle. Nowhere was this more evident than in the culinary and food preparation traditions that were passed down to the second and third generations. Italian foodways in Ontario are both an interesting study of how an original aspect of culture is maintained and a reflection of how culture is modified and changed in different environments and under different circumstances.

Today Italian food and Italian restaurants are common everywhere in Ontario. There has been a shift in that Italian ways and thus Italian foodways are now trendy and the “in” thing.

In my new role as a member of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and as culture critic, I am attempting to put into perspective the role government has in maintaining and nurturing a healthy environment around heritage issues. Heritage has

shaped us and we in turn shape the heritage we pass on. The word “foodways” is a creative way to suggest that all aspects of food portray a way of life, change, adaptation and a retention of culture.

I congratulate The Ontario Historical Society, the organizers of the symposium, *Buon appetito!*, and the authors contributing papers to the proceedings for this unique approach to discussing a “lifeway” of a people in Ontario. I welcome you to the discovery of Italian foodways in Ontario.

Caroline Di Cocco M.P.P.
Sarnia-Lambton

Note

1. Caroline Di Cocco and Sarnia Italo-Canadian Cultural Club, *One by one: history of the Italian community in Sarnia-Lambton – Passo dopo passo: storia della comunità italiana di Sarnia-Lambton 1870-1990* (Sarnia: Sarnia Italo-Canadian Cultural Club, 1991), English with parallel Italian translation.
-

Caroline Di Cocco is currently the Liberal Member of the Provincial Parliament for the riding of Sarnia-Lambton. Prior to her election in 1999 she was actively involved in the community for 20 years and she was completing a degree in anthropology. Until 1998 she taught piano and music theory.

From Jellied Salads to Melon and Prosciutto, and Polenta Italian Foodways and “Cosmopolitan” Eating

Franca Iacovetta

In participating in the opening plenary of *Buon appetito! A Symposium on Italian Foodways in Ontario*, I combined personal anecdotes, historical research and reflections on the contemporary culinary scene which, in my case, means Toronto and an extended network of family and friends who enjoy a wide range of so-called “ethnic,” including Italian, foods. I will even admit to feelings of sweet revenge as I embark on a paper that takes us from Jello to tiramisu, from “Kleenex” bread to focaccia and panini, from iceberg lettuce to rapini!

As the daughter of post-Second World War Italian working-class immigrants, I, like many other children, know first hand how food and food customs can act as powerful signifiers of “difference.” As a public-school girl in the 1960s, I hid or threw away the pungent sandwiches made by my mother, a laundry worker, who arose at 5 a.m. each weekday to make school lunches before taking the long bus and subway-ride to the factory. She always insisted on using thick, crusty breads and spiced “smelly” meats. I coveted the tidy peanut-butter-and-jam-on-white-bread sandwiches of my “Canadian” classmates, the crusts cut off and looking so thin and neat.

Historically, “ethnic” foods have often been relegated to the margins of receiving societies, either dismissed as unhealthy, offensive or, alternatively, pilloried by food experts on the lookout for novel ideas for entertaining bored eaters and/or economic meals for budget-conscious cooks. Still, as *Buon appetito!* suggests, immigrants have in significant respects transformed, albeit unevenly, the culinary landscape of their adopted society even while their own food tastes and customs have been modified. To me, as an Italian Canadian, one of the great ironies of today’s “cosmopolitan eating” among middle-class Torontonians is what some have called the “yuppification” of familiar Italian foods – including the staples of Southern Italian peasant households that, as in the case of polenta, helped people through lean months when there was little meat or fresh vegetables.

My paper fits into a larger book project exploring the ways in which Cold War politics and a familialist ideology (in turn, reflecting idealized notions of the bourgeois nuclear family) shaped immigrant and refugee reception work in Canada during the early post-Second World War period. In tackling this topic, my project considers a wide range of players and activities. The players include, on the one hand, a variety of gatekeepers, from front-line settlement house workers, citizenship activists, adult literacy workers and women’s organizations to professional social workers, psychologists and government bureaucrats; and, on the other, the more than two million women, men and child immigrants and refugees, especially but not exclusively, from Europe. Taken together, the activities under scrutiny were many and varied: from the more explicitly ideological work of the Citizenship Branch and the RCMP, both of whom engaged in the political surveillance of the left and right ethnic press and organizations, to the numerous English classes, social agency services and neighbourhood “projects for newcomers.” Here, I explore briefly the main contours shaping relations between Canadian health and welfare

experts and the postwar immigrant and refugee women, focusing in particular on examples involving Italian women, families and foodways.

As the Second World War came to an end, Canadians were made acutely aware of the widespread hunger, starvation and health disasters affecting people from around the world. The Canadian media contained graphic and heartbreaking images and tales of emaciated Holocaust survivors, flood and disaster victims in Europe and beyond, and malnourished mothers and children from towns ravaged by war. Indeed, a central theme emerging in these early years stressed the great gap between Canada as a land of modest affluence and a devastated Europe.

With the coming of the Cold War, this theme also served ideological ends. This was evidenced, for instance, by U.S. and Canadian propaganda material contrasting the good fortunes of mothers in North America, where liberal capitalism permitted them to raise and nurture well-fed and moral children, with those mothers struggling under the exploitation and scarcity prevailing in “Iron Curtain” countries. From stoves to one-stop grocery stores, boosters sang the praises of Canadian modernity. In the Displaced Persons camps, on ships sailing overseas and in locales across Canada, women newcomers confronted these messages of modest affluence and modernity everywhere: in films, pamphlets and newspapers, in English and citizenship classes, settlement-house mothers’ clubs and YWCA meetings. They were subjected again and again to lessons, sermons and health campaigns intended to reform both Canadian and New Canadian women’s cooking regimes and food customs, household management and child welfare. In short, health and welfare experts offered their version of the postwar homemaker ideal, with their middle class and sexist denunciations of married women and wives who worked for pay – among them huge numbers of refugee and immigrant women. Canadians were encouraged to embrace the newcomers but also teach them the superior values of democracy, “freedom,” and, not least of all, the well-balanced Canadian meal.

Food and health campaigns aimed at immigrant women and their families were varied and numerous; they were part of larger campaigns intended to “improve” the homemaking skills of all women. When, for example, British war brides were offered health lectures and cooking classes, both in England and Canada, they were not only taught to measure ingredients the Canadian way (i.e., the British measured liquids by weight, North Americans by volume) but were deliberately being “trained” for their new role as wives and mothers of Canadian husbands and children. Media coverage of the war brides’ resettlement to Canada, a major government undertaking that garnered enormous public attention, was everywhere punctuated by the ubiquitous image of the fresh faces of young, white British women and their ruby-cheeked children. By contrast, the non-British war brides (including Italians), and their children, never attracted the same sort of attention. Another contrast was provided by the women, especially East European “DPs” (displaced persons) and later, Caribbean women who came as domestic workers. Both groups of women were encouraged to cook “Canadian style” but the former were welcomed more than the latter to eventually marry, form families and stay in Canada. Without question, Canadian nutritionists and food writers, like other “experts,” focused much of their attention on the hundreds of thousands of Europeans who figured prominently among the more than 2.5 million newcomers who had arrived in Canada by 1965.