

# Ambassador



National Italian American Foundation

Vol . 28, No.3 - Spring 2017 - [www.niaf.org](http://www.niaf.org)

## **NIAF 2017 Region of Honor: Sicily!**

Two Sicilian Villages

World's Tiniest Opera House

New Orleans for St. Joseph's Day

DelGrosso's Wild Ride

The Barbers of Sicily





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# Ambassador

The Publication of the National Italian American Foundation  
Vol . 28, No.3 ■ www.niaf.org

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*On the Cover: Announcing the NIAF 2017 Region of Honor: Sicily! Called "The Cultural Crossroads of the Mediterranean," Regione Sicilia idyllic nature, rugged panoramic coast and charming ancient villages, all overflowing with history, myth and tradition, make this autonomous region of Italy one of today's top destinations for travelers. Look for stories from and about the island of Sicily in this and upcoming issues of Ambassador.*

*Cover photograph: Shutterstock Inc./ Roberto Lo Savio*

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**AMBASSADOR Magazine** is published by the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF)  
1860 19th Street NW  
Washington DC 20009  
POSTMASTER: Send change of address to NIAF, 1860 19th Street NW, Washington DC 20009.

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Single issue price: \$5.00  
ISSN 1000-9999

NIAF  
1860 19th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
Tel. 202-387-0600  
www.niaf.org

Design: Barbieri & Green, Inc.  
Printing: Mosaic



# The Chairman's Notes

No matter what you think about climate change, I'm sure most of us can easily warm up to the idea that spring is here. It's a promising season that encourages and energizes like none other. That's certainly how we're feeling these days at the National Italian American Foundation—encouraged and energized!

A big part of that comes with anticipation of the NIAF New York Gala, which takes place at Cipriani 42nd Street, the Italian Renaissance-inspired landmark in New York City, on March 22. This incredible, always sold-out celebration of our heritage has evolved into an important springtime marker each year for the Foundation—an evening when NIAF leadership, members, and friends break bread with top political and business leaders from the United States and Italy in the Big Apple!

Besides the New York Gala, NIAF recently welcomed new members of the Italian American Congressional Delegation (IACD) on Capitol Hill, held an Italian American Leadership Council Summit in New York, and is preparing for a Frank J. Guarini NIAF Public Policy Forum in April. And, as you'll discover from the magazine's cover and while paging through the fascinating features and columns in this issue of *Ambassador*, we have announced that Sicily is the NIAF 2017 Region of Honor! So we look forward to a promising year of collaborating with and visiting Italy's island region that's sometimes called "The Wonder of the Mediterranean."

On a final note, my tenure as NIAF chairman comes to an end in March. Serving as the Foundation's chairman the past four years has provided me with a remarkable

opportunity to give back to the Italian American community I so dearly love—and for that I will always be profoundly grateful.

During my term, it has been my privilege to steer NIAF in our unprecedented efforts to strengthen our nation's cultural and business ties with Italy, such as our Region of Honor program; to enhance our role in representing Italian American interests in the nation's capital; to provide scholarships and grants to deserving students and scholars; and to establish our nationwide network by which the Italian American community generously assists Italy in times of need, such as the recent destructive earthquakes there.

I am proud of what the Foundation has accomplished on my watch, and I am thankful its leadership will continue in good hands.

On behalf of NIAF, I sincerely thank each and every one of you for your support of the important work NIAF does. And I urge you to continue to embrace NIAF's mission to preserve and protect our invaluable heritage and culture. For the sake of our children and our grandchildren, for each new generation of Italian Americans, your passionate commitment to sustaining our rich legacy means everything.

Joseph V. Del Raso,  
NIAF Chairman

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# Reader Feedback



Phil Ellsworth / ESPN Images

## *Dick Vitale, Baby!*

Thanks for the story on me! Dick Rosano did a really excellent job writing about my life and love of basketball, as well as my passion for pediatric cancer research.

Please let your readers know that The 12th Annual Dick Vitale Gala will be held on May 12, in Sarasota, Fla., at the Ritz Carlton. With this yearly fundraising event, my wife, Lorraine, and I raise money for the V Foundation, in honor of my good friend, the late Jim Valvano. Net proceeds from the Dick Vitale Gala fund pediatric cancer research. More information on the gala and ways to donate can be found at [DickVitaleOnline.com](http://DickVitaleOnline.com).

— Dick Vitale  
Lakewood Ranch, Fla.



Melanie Dunea / CPI Syndication

## *NIAF Scholarship Story*

I am a former NIAF Scholarship grantee who was just recognized on the 2017 Forbes 30 Under 30 list in Healthcare. Today, I am a physician-scientist with joint appointment at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School in the lab of Dr. Rox Anderson, where I lead the invention, development and commercialization of new therapies. I just wanted to thank you all at NIAF for your generosity and support early on in my education! Grazie mille!

— Emilia Javorsky, MD, MPH  
Wellman Center for Photomedicine  
Massachusetts General Hospital  
Boston, Mass.

## *A Sainly Life*

Thank you for your wonderful article on the saintly life of the extraordinary Italian American, Clementina Theresa Sclafani. Her cause for sainthood has a global membership of which I am a part. As a long-time member of NIAF and a proud Italian American, I urge all to read her brilliant and inspirational poetry book, "The Shades of Twilight," which was presented by the Vatican Embassy, as you reported. I am thrilled that Pope Francis has a copy of her poetry!

— Gilda Del Signore  
Executive Committee  
Sodality for the Cause of Sainthood of Clementina Theresa Sclafani  
Washington, D.C.



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## *Barolo Bonanza*

Who knew controversy ferments in the greatest of Italy's wines? Salute to your story and tasting notes telling the difference in old- and new-style Barolo!

— John Rossi  
New York, N.Y.

## **We Want to Know What You're Thinking!**

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## The NIAF-IALC Leadership Forum in New York



Interested in representing your local Italian American community and becoming more involved with NIAF? Become an IALC member and join NIAF's Board of Directors and representatives from Italy for the annual NIAF-IALC Leadership Forum, on Wednesday, March 22, from 2 - 4 p.m., at the New York Times Building in New York City.

The summit provides an opportunity for IALC members to put their leadership commitment into action, discussing important issues pertaining to the Foundation, the Italian American community, and relations between the United States and Italy. To join the IALC and to reserve your place at the upcoming NIAF-IALC Leadership Forum, please contact Alex Benedetto at 202-939-3117 or [abenedetto@niaf.org](mailto:abenedetto@niaf.org).



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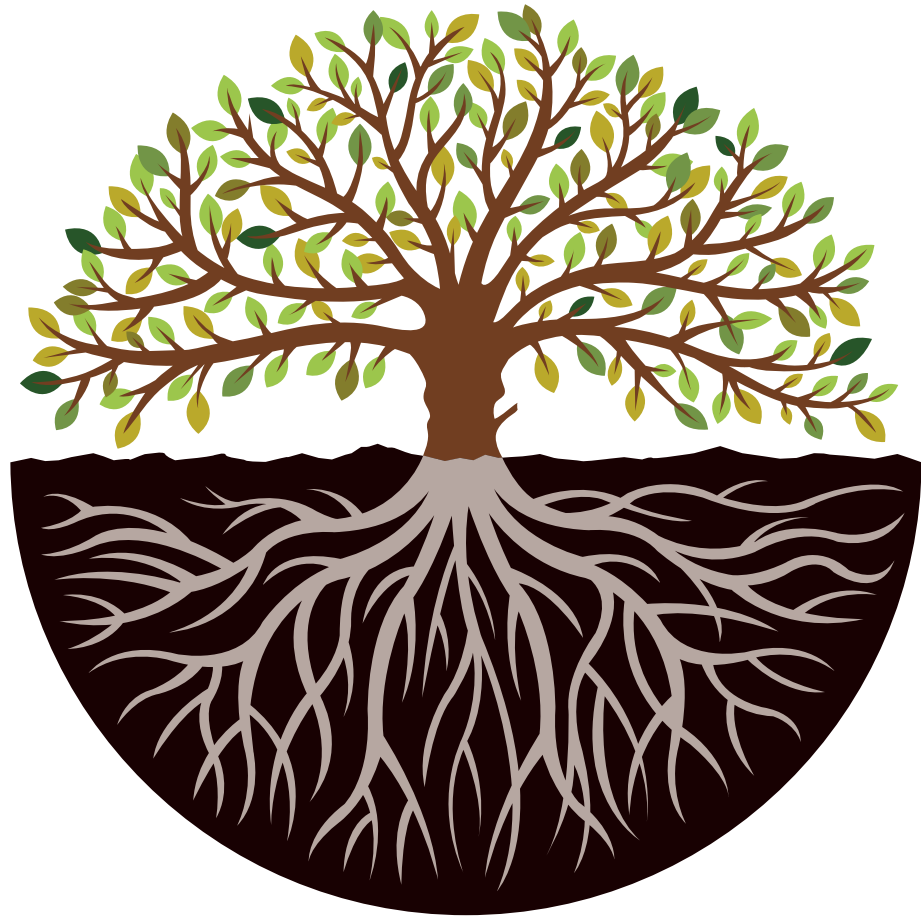
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# Sicily

Cappella Palatina in the Palazzo Reale, in Palermo, Sicily

## Introducing the 2017 NIAF Region of Honor

By John M. Viola, NIAF President

Every year for the past five years, the National Italian American Foundation has recognized a unique region of Italy as the *Regione d'Onore* (Region of Honor) to serve as our partner and inspiration for the myriad of events and programs we host throughout the nation and in Italy.

One of my proudest accomplishments in my time here at the Foundation is that we've been able to build such robust partnerships and shared experiences with some incredible regions in our ancestral homeland. This year, we are recognizing a region that not only provides the Foundation with an incomparable wealth of culture, productivity, and destinations to celebrate, but one that means a great deal to me on a personal level.

The 2017 NIAF Region of Honor, Sicily, is not just one of the most distinctive and captivating parts of Italy, it is also the ancestral region of my maternal grandfather, and a place I have spent a great deal of my life exploring, engaging, and falling ever-more-deeply in love with.

Perched at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, the island of Sicily represents the patrimony of so many world cultures, and a melting pot of mysteries that even the most avid traveler can never fully comprehend. In his masterpiece "The Normans in Sicily," John Julius Norwich describes the island region as "the steppingstone between Europe and Africa, the gateway between the East and the West, the link between the Latin world and the Greek." Two centuries earlier, the German philosopher, writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, writing from Palermo, put it this way: "Italy without Sicily cannot be conceived: here is the key to every-thing."

Today, this land blessed with fertile fields and sun-kissed cities affords the visitor an incomparable opportunity to engage the innumerable cultures, both ancient and modern, that have left their mark on her people, places and charac-



Andreas Zerndl / Shutterstock Inc.

FOUNDATION FOCUS

ter. Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Germans, Spaniards, French—all have lent some part of themselves to Sicily's "kaleidoscopic heritage," which allows even the most infrequent tourist to feel somehow, at-once, a part of this exceptional place.

Over the course of the upcoming year, the National Italian American Foundation will offer incredible travel experiences, including our renowned Ambassador Peter F. Secchia Voyage of Discovery program in *la bella Sicilia*. And for our members and supporters here in the United States, our New York Gala on March 22, and our 42<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary Gala Weekend this November 3-5 in Washington, D.C., will highlight the culture, cuisine, music, wine and spirit of the Sicilian people and their island. If you, or the people you love, trace all or part of your heritage to this island at the crossroads of the Mediterranean world, I hope you will join us for some of these special events. After all, Sicilian Americans make up one of the largest percentages of our 25 million member Italian American community, and I am certain that this year-long celebration will inspire great interest among our NIAF members and supporters around the nation.

From the ancient Arab markets of Palermo to the Greek metropolis of Siracusa, from Messina and Catania, to Ragusa and Agrigento, I have spent a great part of my life seeking the opportunity to experience and understand as much of Sicily as I can. It is only as I have gotten older that I have realized perhaps this unique land can never truly be understood entirely... and that might be what I love most about it in the end.

For me, the opportunity to share my immense passion for this place is an answered prayer. It is my great hope that all of you in the NIAF family will find here in the pages of Ambassador magazine, in our events and celebrations, and in our trips to Sicily throughout the summer, the opportunity to see, as I do, a special island and a special people that have so much to offer the entire world. ▲

Greek Temple in Agrigento, Sicily



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# Finding Italy in St. Louis

Searching for Italy's influences in America? Whether it's the top Italian restaurants, most popular festivals, the best markets or museums, in NIAF on Location, our members provide insider information and lead you to special places that make them feel a little more Italian in their own hometowns. This issue, NIAF member and president of the St. Louis neighborhood organization Hill 2000, Charlie Oldani, finds Italy in St. Louis, Mo.



Roman Korotkov / Shutterstock.com



Charlie Oldani at "The Italian Immigrants" statue in St. Louis' Little Italy neighborhood, The Hill.

## What is the most Italian part of your city?

The Italian section of St. Louis is known as The Hill. It is located at the highest point in the city, hence the name. Great restaurants and markets make it the place to go for anything Italian. St. Ambrose Catholic Church is the cornerstone of the neighborhood and many activities originate from there.

## What are your favorite Italian restaurants in your city?

All of the restaurants on The Hill are great! You cannot stay in business in this neighborhood if you do not serve consistently good food. Brazzie's, Cunetto's, Gian Tony's, Lorenzo's and Guidos are all places to go and not come away disappointed.

## Are there any "back in time," authentic, neighborhood restaurants?

LoRusso's, Bartolino's, Favazza's and Rigazzi's are family owned restaurants that have been in business for many years and they also serve amazing food. The list of good restaurants in the neighborhood is a long one and space does not allow me to list every one. You cannot go wrong by stopping by any of them

## When you need some Italian culture, where do you go?

In October 2015, the Hill Neighborhood Center was opened by the neighborhood organization known as Hill 2000 and the Hill Business association.

It is the "Hill museum" with many old pictures and artifacts. Not only is it a service center for tourists who want to find a specific restaurant, bakery, or import store, it also serves the residents of The Hill. They can come in to view the old pictures, find help with tracing their ancestry, and find out how life was when their parents and grandparents grew up there.

## To cook an authentic Italian meal, where do you go to get those hard to find ingredients?

There are three shops in the neighborhood where you can find anything needed to make a great Italian meal at home—DiGregorio's, Urzi's and Viviano's. They also carry a fine collection of wines and are the markets that are a must for shopping.

## What's the most Italian day of the year in your community?

The first Sunday in May is the annual LaFesta celebration sponsored by St. Ambrose. There you can find music, food, drinks, and games and rides for the kids. The celebration is held in front of the church and in the church parking lot.

Labor Day weekend in St. Louis means bike races, a popular sport in Italy. The Gateway Cup begins the Friday of Labor Day and features four races in four different neighborhoods, including the Giro Della Montagna, the race that originated the Gateway Cup more than

30 years ago, on The Hill that Sunday. Thousands of people line the streets to cheer on riders from across the country. Every year, the bicyclists and fans talk about the neighborhood hospitality. Little did anyone know how this would grow into the weekend event it is today.

The annual Columbus Day celebration is held on the Sunday before Columbus Day. It starts with a parade through the neighborhood and ends at Berra Park, where you'll find local restaurants serving their wonderful food, with Italian music playing and drinks flowing.

## Where's the best morning espresso served?

A lot of neighborhood residents start their morning by stopping on their way to work at Shaw's Coffee on The Hill. Some of the bakeries there also have coffee and you can pick up something sweet.

## Any special monuments, museums, or cultural centers based on Italian or Italian American culture?

In front of St. Ambrose Church is the statue of "The Italian Immigrants." The neighborhood was started by Italians who came to America seeking a better life for their families. The statue is of a man and a woman with one suitcase, probably everything that they owned. Life was difficult at first, but they worked hard and made a living to support their family. It's a lesson we should all follow even to this day. ▲

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# BOTTEGA NIAF

By Gabriella Mileti

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### Scent of Sicily

Inspired by the scents and sights of Sicily, Baronessa Consuelo Cali is the mastermind behind Cali Cosmetics' beauty and health products, made with finest ingredients, including olive oil, blood oranges, coffee and Malvasian grapes. Pictured from left to right: Lipari Candela, \$36; Catania Diffuser, \$42; Siracusa Diffuser, \$42; Palermo Candela, \$42; Stromboli Travel Tin, \$14; Felicudi Hand and Body Moisturizer, \$28; Basiluzzo Hand and Body Wash, \$22; Salina Home and Body Fragrance, \$28; Alicudi Candela di Soia, \$48; Bagheria Candela di Soia, \$48.

### Chill in Style

Dolce & Gabbana has teamed up with Smeg for a special edition of their FAB28 iconic refrigerator. Together, they share backgrounds rooted in family with deep respect for tradition and the Made in Italy label. This year, they are offering only 10 limited-edition refrigerators for the U.S. market (100 worldwide). Each "Refrigerator of Art" features Sicilian decorations and motifs, and has been hand painted by a Sicilian artist. \$34,000. [www.smeg.com/refrigerator-of-art-dolcegabbana-and-smeg/](http://www.smeg.com/refrigerator-of-art-dolcegabbana-and-smeg/)



### Borsa d'Arte

The Sicily Bag is the perfect accessory for your beach days! Handcrafted by skilled artisans in Palermo, Sicily, no two of these straw bags are alike. Inspired by vibrant Sicilian culture, tradition and colors, the Sicily Bag is available in three sizes (piccolo, medio, grande). Free shipping worldwide. Grande (pictured): \$461. [www.SicilyBag.com](http://www.SicilyBag.com)



### Knot Your Typical Bracelet

Gioielli Dop pieces are 100-percent designed and handmade in Italy by passionate Italian craftsmen. Their bracelets, earrings, cufflinks, charms and more feature tasty traditional Italian delights, but also classic symbols of the Italian culture, like the famous Sicilian Trinacria (pictured). Bracelet: \$54. [www.gioiellidop.com](http://www.gioiellidop.com)



### Balancing Act

Sempli is a contemporary design company that combines Italy's style and elegance with Swedish functionality for glassware, lighting and bar accessories. Aerate your favorite Italian wine in this unique decanter, hand-blown from lead-free crystal. Vaso-Vino: \$50. [www.sempli.com](http://www.sempli.com)





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Do you know of a fantastic new product or design made in Italy or of interest to Italian Americans? Contact [bottega@niah.org](mailto:bottega@niah.org).



**Swim to Sicily**

Ortigia is not only a small island in the historical center of Siracusa, it's also a small, luxurious soap-and-scent company offering a wide range of products, from creams and candles, to scarves and shampoos. All made in Sicily from the finest natural products, the scents and designs have Sicily in mind. Swim Shorts in Gattopardo Blu: \$85. [www.ortigiasicilia.com](http://www.ortigiasicilia.com)



**Head Turners**

Italy is known for its beautiful ceramics, and the Sicilian town of Caltagirone is the epicenter. Made there are the unusual planters shaped like human heads that you'll see in towns throughout Sicily. The legend behind them goes back to the 10th century, during Sicily's Arab rule, when a beautiful young Sicilian girl in the Kalsa, the Arabic district of Palermo, fell in love with a Moor merchant. When she learned that he had a wife and children in his native land, she snuck into his home while he was sleeping and chopped off his head. She brought his head home as a way for him to stay with her forever, using it as a planter for her basil. When locals noticed her plant flourishing, they commissioned local ceramic artisans to make vases resembling heads. Today, you can find varieties of ceramic head planters, but the traditional pair is pictured. Handmade in Sicily, each planter is available in two sizes: \$237 and \$390. [www.thatsarte.com](http://www.thatsarte.com)



**Public Affection**

Italian American Al Pisano kicked off his graphic-design career in New York creating logos for companies such as Burger King, Paul Masson and Pepperidge Farm. A trip to Italy inspired him to try his hand at sculpting and carving. He eventually started his own company, Piazza Pisano Studio, specializing in home décor and gift items. All products are made at his studio and factory in Miami, Fla. Show your Sicilian pride with the Trinacria plaque: \$79.95. [www.piazzapisano.com](http://www.piazzapisano.com)



**Colorful Creations**

What was created by the iconic Italian cashmere brand Cruciani as a last-ditch effort to save the company from debt ended up taking Italy and the world by storm. Crisis averted. The unisex Cruciani bracelet is made in Italy and comes in fun colors and shapes. Italian Flag Bracelet: \$18; Spicy Bracelet: \$18. [www.crucianic.com](http://www.crucianic.com)

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Carter Harrington

## How Does Your Garden Grow?

Mary Menniti's Italian Garden Project has a threefold mission: to pay tribute to the traditional Italian American garden; to preserve its heritage; and to prove its relevance in today's world.



Carter Harrington

A passionate gardener, Menniti's venture was inspired by her Italian immigrant grandfather, Antonio, who spent hours caring for his garden in the backyard of the house where Menniti grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa. Like many post-World War II immigrants, he embodied a lifestyle of self-sufficiency and connection to food and the earth that has mostly been lost.

"Sustainability is not a new concept for the Italian gardener," Menniti says. "It is a way of life."

As fewer and fewer classic Italian American gardens are being planted, Menniti sees the next five years as crucial. She plans to document 100 gardens across the country and submit 10 for inclusion in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Gardens. To her, it is a way to preserve a know-how that was passed down from one generation to the next and that can teach us to live "more lightly on the earth."

As part of the project's legacy collections, Menniti is busy collecting seeds and fig trees whose origins trace to Italy. The goal is not only to preserve biodiversity, but also the authentic flavors so lovingly cared for by the gardeners.

To contribute to these collections, or if you know of a garden worth documenting, email Menniti at [info@theitaliangardenproject.com](mailto:info@theitaliangardenproject.com).

— *Silvia Donati*



## Work of Art

As the Getty Museum's Senior Curator of Paintings, Davide Gasparotto's job is to care for the museum's outstanding collection, organize exhibitions, and acquire new works of art.

An impressive task, but Gasparotto's credentials are quite impressive themselves: the former director of the Galleria Estense in Modena, the Bassano del Grappa (Veneto) native is a leading figure in the field of Renaissance through 18th-century Italian painting and sculpture. He has curated several major exhibitions, and published extensively on northern Italian art of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. He was also a fellow at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, an experience that, he says, was crucial in cementing his decision to move to Los Angeles to work at the Getty.

"The Getty is not only a major museum, it is a worldwide cultural institution," Gasparotto says.

The most exciting part of his job, he says, relates to acquisitions, which gives him the chance to travel and "see the best that the market can offer."

Gasparotto is currently working on an exhibition project on his favorite Venetian Renaissance painter, Giovanni Bellini, "a small, jewel-like exhibition, with 11 paintings of superb quality coming from the major museums in the world."

As a lover not only of art, but also of wild nature, in his free time he enjoys exploring "the wonders of the Western United States."

— *Silvia Donati*



Jessica Rinaldi / The Boston Globe

Ambassador's Paesani department profiles in short form the lives of Italian Americans, Italians and others doing extraordinary things of interest to Italian Americans. Know someone who should be in Paesani? Send suggestions to [paesani@niaf.org](mailto:paesani@niaf.org).



## The Good Doctor

Dr. Alessandra Biffi wanted to be a lawyer. But as life twists and turns like a DNA double helix, the Milan, Italy, native chose the field of medicine and received her medical degree from the University of Milano in 1998. After 15 years of genetic groundwork in Italy, Biffi is now the director (since 2015) of gene therapy at Dana-Farber/Boston Children’s Cancer and Blood Disorders Center—a leader in pediatric gene-therapy programs in the country.



In Italy, Biffi was at the forefront in gene therapy research and treatment for metachromatic leukodystrophy (MLD), a genetic disorder that harms brain cells and the central nervous system, especially in infant children.

Biffi started clinical trials in April 2010 in Milan. She and her team gave children a fighting chance to live a full life. Through a genetic process in the lab, the child’s defective gene was “corrected” and a duplicated “good” gene was given back to the child, comparable to a bone-marrow transplant.

Biffi believes that “opening a trial is a major accomplishment.” Her work in treating MLD in Italy provided the genesis for a promising new therapy. While not a cure, this therapy can halt damage to the brain if started early.

“Gene therapy has become real medicine,” says Biffi, who is currently investigating gene therapy for other diseases. Visit: [www.danafarberbostonchildrens.org](http://www.danafarberbostonchildrens.org).

— Robert Bartus Jr.

## Who’s On First?

Louis Sciara is sometimes called a loafer at work. But he doesn’t mind. The 51-year-old Fairlawn, N.J., resident, and his partner Gil Palmer, have performed Abbott & Costello’s Union Loafer’s Bakery sketch hundreds of times as part of their comedy act.

“It’s a nice routine,” says Sciara, who is regarded as the foremost Lou Costello impersonist in the country. “But everyone wants to see ‘Who’s on First?’”

At the 2013 Baseball Hall of Fame Induction Ceremonies in Cooperstown, N.Y., the comedy duo reenacted the timeless skit “Who’s on First” to celebrate its 75th anniversary.



A third-generation electrician and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers member, Sciara grew up watching the classic vaudeville and Hollywood comedy team’s movies from the 1940s and early ‘50s every Sunday on WPIX-TV. “I identified with Costello,” says Sciara, whose father’s relatives are from the Italian Province of Salerno. “I rooted for him because he was an underdog.”

Sciara met Palmer at an Abbott & Costello look-alike contest in 1992. The contest’s sponsors then paired them to work at an Abbott & Costello Fan Club Convention.

Twenty-five years later, the pair is still loafing at work. “I love what we do,” says Sciara. “Our shows make people laugh and smile.”

Visit [www.heyabbott.com](http://www.heyabbott.com).

— Douglas J. Gladstone

# Persons of Interest



## Top Shelf Umbria

Bill and Suzy Menard “fell in love with the Italian lifestyle” about 20 years ago while on a study abroad in Florence with Georgetown Law School. Since then, the couple has turned their infatuation with *la bella vita* into Via Umbria, a unique store and restaurant in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. They also run a travel and tour business centered on their spacious farmhouse and numerous food, wine and art connections in the Umbria region of Italy.

Via Umbria is a store like no other. The entrance is an Italophile import heaven: olive oils, truffle products, and



gourmet pastas are stacked on ceiling-high shelves; fine linens hang from the walls; and bright, ceramic dishware creates a colorful backdrop to the deli counters loaded with meats and cheeses. A wine room and café are in the back. “This is basically the equivalent of a little Italian

village all under one roof,” Suzy says.

Upstairs are the gallery and dining spaces. They host events with visiting Italian chefs and artisans here, along with cooking classes, wine and beer tastings, themed dinners, communal brunches, and gallery openings. “We wanted to be more than a retail store,” Bill says. “[Visitors] experience things themselves and then share with each other and create a community.” Visit [viaumbria.com](http://viaumbria.com).

— Lisa Femia



Giovanni Fortunato — Firenze

## Brava! Brava!

Few musicians ever step to the podium, silent themselves, set tempo, create nuance and harmony, and direct musicians in bringing to life a musical score. Debra Cheverino is a conductor.

Growing up in California, she played piano and flute. At 14, she conducted her own composition in a statewide competition. “From that day forward,” she says, “I decided this is something that I must do!”

A 1994 NIAF-Pavarotti Scholarship recipient, Cheverino earned a Bachelor’s degree in music at USC, and a Master’s degree at the University of Hartford. In 2001, she became the first woman to win an international conducting competition in Italy. In 2004, she received a Fulbright scholarship to study with conductor Zubin Mehta in Florence, Italy. She has conducted orchestras worldwide, from the Los Angeles Mozart Orchestra to the Sinfonia di Firenze. Her teachers include Mehli Mehta, John Barnett and Claudio Abbado.

As a girl, she dreamed of studying music in Italy. Her Italian American father and South African mother met in Sorrento; her paternal grandmother was an opera singer; her maternal great-grandfather a pianist, composer and music professor.

“Music is a part of [Italians’] very fabric,” says Cheverino, who lives in Florence, but whose Italian lineage originates in Castellammare del Golfo in Sicily.

Her future? “My dream is to become music director of my own orchestra,” Cheverino says. “Very few of us women conductors have been able to achieve this.”

— Don Oldenburg



Giovanni Fortunato — Firenze

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## ISO Palermo Street Foods

# Going Home to Sicily

Yulia Grigoryeva / Shutterstock.com

BY MARY ANN ESPOSITO

**M**y Alitalia flight from Milan to Palermo, Sicily, was just as I expected. I braced myself for the sight that would unfold before me as we began our approach to Punta Raisi airport, now known as Falcone–Borsellino Airport.

Jagged Mount Pellegrino came into view, seeming to loom out of the sea. I had seen this view many times before, and each time, it was breathtaking. Legend has it that the bones of Saint Rosalia are buried on the mountain. She is a huge star in the litany of saints Sicilians adore, along with Saints Lucy and Joseph.

Whenever I am in Sicily, I tell myself that I have come home, completing the full circle trip that my grandfather, Rosario Saporito, began when he was

25 years old and left Sicily, as many did in the early 1900s, to come to America in search of a better life. He found it in Rochester, N.Y., where he worked for the railroad.

For me, it felt good to be in the culture again, one that is still not understood by many mainlanders who do not consider Sicily a part of Italy. What I noticed on this trip was how much



improved the roads were, and how Sicilian dialect is still so difficult for me to understand.

The traffic into Palermo city is horrendous and it seems that the vespa is still the best way to get around, weaving in and out of traffic at heart-stopping speed. In all this chaos, street vendors sell roasting chestnuts, *lumache*, freshly baked semolina bread piled high in the back of their cars, and prickly pears!

Once I got to the Grand Hotel des Palmes, I immediately put myself into the culture and greeted the reservation host with: “*Sono Marianna Esposito, ho una prenotazione.*” I think my grandfather would have been pleased.

After settling into my spacious room, I grabbed my camera and headed straight for the Vuccuria and Capo outdoor markets in the old quarter of Palermo. I had a mission: to find the best *arancine* (rice balls), one of the signature street foods of Sicily. These are prepared while you wait at the local fry shops along with *panelle* (crunchy chickpea fritters), a food that goes back to the days of Arabic influence.

You just might shy away from other traditional delicacies like *stigghirole*, the fatty intestines of new born lambs that are soaked in wine and vinegar and wrapped in parsley leaves before being fried, a clear Sicilian favorite; or *pani cil'la mezza*, cooked beef spleen served in a roll with a generous amount of fresh ricotta sheep's milk cheese.

But definitely try *iris*, a rounded yeast-dough bun filled with sheep's milk ricotta and bits of chocolate that is fried in oil and coated in cinnamon and sugar.

After searching out these typical street foods, nothing says Sicily like gelato, traditionally served in a brioche bun or cannoli, the queen of all Sicilian desserts—but that's another story for another day.

When I eat them, I am really home again.

Mary Ann Esposito is the host of the PBS's *Ciao Italia*, television's longest-running cooking show. For these recipes, cooking demonstrations, and more, see Mary Ann Esposito's latest cookbook “*Ciao Italia Family Classics*,” and visit her *Ciao Italia* website at [www.ciaoitalia.com](http://www.ciaoitalia.com) and her Facebook page at [maryannesposito.com](http://maryannesposito.com)

## Panelle Chickpea Fritters

Walking through the streets of the kinetic city of Palermo is an experience for all the senses. Your eyes are drawn at once to a melting pot of architectural styles from Byzantine to Baroque. Beautiful ornate fountains are everywhere, and the hordes of people and dizzying traffic make for fever-pitch activity. Your nose tells you that something good is cooking just around the corner—delicious street food like golden brown fried fritters made from ground chickpeas.

Makes about 32

### Ingredients

2½ cups (8 ounces) chickpea flour  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1 teaspoon fine sea salt  
1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper  
3 cups water  
3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh parsley or oregano (optional)  
4 to 6 cups vegetable oil

Street vendor panelle in Sicily



### Directions

- In a heavy-duty, 2 quart saucepan, mix the flour, baking powder, salt and pepper together off the heat. Slowly stir in the water and blend in with a heavy-duty whisk, being careful to avoid lumps from forming. Stir in the parsley or oregano.
- Cook the mixture over medium heat, whisking constantly until it thickens and begins to move away from the sides of the pan. This is similar to making polenta. Remove the pan from the heat.
- Using a rubber spatula, divide and spread the mixture thinly over four 9-inch round plates, making sure to cover the plate completely to the rim.
- Set the plates aside to cool for 2 to 3 minutes.
- Run a butter knife around the outside edge of each plate. Carefully lift the *panelle* away from the dish. Stack the *panelle* on top of each other and cut them in half length-wise, then into quarters. Cut each quarter in half. There should be 32 *panelle*.
- In a deep fryer, heat the vegetable oil to 375°F. Fry the *panelle* until nicely browned. Drain them on brown paper and serve immediately. These are best eaten hot.

## Arancine Siciliane Sicilian Rice Balls

*Arancine* are traditional Sicilian street food that had its beginnings in many foreign cultures—the rice and saffron from the Arabs, the sheep's milk cheese from the Greeks, *ragù* from the French, and tomatoes from the Spanish. No wonder they are so good! Do not attempt to make them with regular rice; *arborio* is a short grain, starchy rice used to make risotto. It has left to stand up to deep frying.

Makes about 12

### Ingredients for Ragù Sauce

3 tablespoons olive oil  
¼ cup minced celery  
¼ cup minced carrot  
¼ cup minced onion  
1 teaspoon dried hot-pepper flakes  
1 pound ground beef or pork  
2 cups crushed plum tomatoes  
¼ cup red wine  
salt to taste  
grinding black pepper  
½ cup fresh or frozen peas

### Ingredients for Aracine

1 cup *arborio* rice  
2½ cups chicken broth  
1 teaspoon saffron threads dissolved in ¼ cup warm water  
½ cup grated Pecorino cheese  
4 large eggs  
Salt to taste  
2 cups fine dry bread crumbs  
4 cups canola or peanut oil for frying

### Directions

- Heat the olive oil in a 2-quart sauce pan and cook the celery, carrot and onion until the mixture softens. Stir in the hot-pepper flakes.
- Add the meat and brown it well.
- Combine the tomatoes with the wine and add to the meat; stir the ingredients well; cook over medium low heat for 45 minutes. The mixture should be thick, not watery.
- Stir in the peas. Add salt and pepper to taste. This step can be done several days ahead.
- Pour the rice into a 2-quart sauce pan and add the chicken broth. Stir well and bring to a boil. ▶

- Lower the heat and allow the rice to cook, covered until all the liquid has evaporated.
- Strain the saffron threads and add the saffron water to the rice. Stir well.
- Off the heat, stir in the cheese and two eggs. Salt to taste. Let cool.

#### To assemble the rice balls.

- Grab about ½ cup of the rice in the palm of your hand; form small orange-size balls, then make an indentation in the center with your finger.
- Fill the indentation with a generous tablespoon of the *ragù*. Close the rice around the filling. Set aside.
- Put the flour in a shallow bowl.
- Beat the remaining two eggs with a fork in another shallow bowl.
- Coat the balls in the flour, then the egg mixture. Coat the balls in bread crumbs to cover completely.
- Refrigerate several hours or overnight uncovered.
- Heat 4 cups of sunflower or canola oil to 375°F in a deep fryer or heavy-duty pot. Fry the *arancine* in the oil until nicely browned.
- Drain them on absorbent paper. Serve hot with or without tomato sauce on the side. ▲

Sicilian rice balls



John Hession

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# NEXTGEN

## ITALIAN CUISINE

BY DANIELLE DESIMONE

*In a culture where history and tradition are valued above all else, two young Italian American women are making a name for themselves from opposite sides of the Atlantic—one from New Jersey, the other from Rome. Both are breaking the mold of the Italian culinary tradition...in the kitchen and online.*

### NONNAS' COOKING LEGACY IN AMERICA

For Rossella Rago, Italian cooking isn't something learned in culinary school. It's learned through the gentle kneading of pasta dough in your nonna's kitchen.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., Rago is a first-generation Italian American who has made a career of her grandmother's recipes. As a young girl, she was surrounded by the tight-knit community of her family's hometown immigrants from Puglia, ▶



John Cristino

Rossella Rago

Deep-fried mozzarella and spicy sausage sandwich, *Nduja in Carrozza*, from Katie Parla's cookbook.  
Photo by Kristina Gill



Rossella Rago's Ricotta Cheesecake



Rossella Rago's Seafood Beatrice



Rossella Rago's new cookbook.

which had a profound effect on her upbringing and love of Italian food. And, of course, there was always her nonna, who lived in her family's basement.

"Cooking has always been a big part of our lives," Rago says. "I was always surrounded by it and, because of that, I never thought that it was anything extraordinary."

Not until Rago went to college did she realize the rest of the world "doesn't cook like this." She experienced an "existential crisis," she says, that led her to recognize her true passion wasn't teaching, as she had originally planned, but rather cooking. All of those years of learning the ways of the Italian kitchen by her grandmother's side inspired Rago to start her own online cooking show. She named it "Cooking with Nonna."

The cooking show began as a family affair. Rago's father not only built her a website (cookingwithnonna.com), but also a professional, roll-away, stovetop island for filming. Rago's grandmother was one of the first guests on her show.

That was 2008, when the idea of YouTube stars was still a novelty, and Rago didn't really know what she was doing, she admits. But nearly 10 years later, she's getting the hang of it. "Cooking with Nonna" grew quickly and organically from an Italian American community desperate to reconnect with its heritage.

"This is the last generation of the nonna," Rago explains. "That whole generation of grandmothers who emigrated from Italy is sadly getting older, and you lose so much between the generations."

This is why Rago believes "Cooking with Nonna" is so successful. Later generations of Italian Americans, and even Italophiles, are craving having a nonna in their lives, she says, someone to rekindle those childhood memories of a grandmother bustling around a warm kitchen, making dinner from a recipe only she knows.

Rago brings that feeling back to life with her webisodes, in which she invites various nonnas to appear on her show and guide the viewers,

step-by-step, through the process of cooking one of their signature recipes.

Her favorite dish to make? "Eggplant parmigiana," Rossella says confidently. "But don't ask me if it's sauce or if it's gravy—I won't pick a side!"

This personal look into a nonna's kitchen has resonated with hundreds of thousands of people who now actively follow Rago across her social media platforms, many of them reaching out personally to ask Rago to "play detective" and find recipes their own grandmothers once made.

"Cooking with Nonna" has grown to include hundreds of recipes shared on Rago's website, as well as in her new cookbook (scheduled for publication on March 15) as a sort of catalog of long-lost traditions. "If we don't document certain recipes, and if we don't learn things from our nonnas while they are still here, we will lose all of those traditions that make Italian culture so unique," Rago says.

"Cooking with Nonna" has taken Rago from starring on (and winning) the Food Network's "24 Hour Restaurant Battle," to the shores of her family's hometown in Puglia where she leads guided culinary tours, to NIAF's 2017 New York Spring Gala where she will be honored this March for her contributions to the Italian American community.

Most importantly, it has introduced her to a cast of incredible women who inspired her to create her own "Cooking with Nonna" cookbook, which includes more than 100 recipes from 25 nonnas, reflecting the individual cooking styles of the women who provided the recipes, as well as their life stories.

"The nonna is the unsung hero of the Italian family," says Rago. "She is the cornerstone of the famiglia, and so it was nice to finally pay homage to these ladies through my book."

Our nonnas are, after all, far more than just the stereotypic elderly woman in the corner of the kitchen. They are defined, Rago says, "by the way that they love, and how they show that through cooking."

## WHEN IN ROME

Katie Parla's love for Italy has been a lifelong affair. Although she credits her family's cooking for her passion for Italian food, she says her Latin and Roman civilization classes in high school are what made her realize, at age 16, that, "Someday, I was going to live there."

Today, Parla lives her ex-pat lifestyle full-tilt as a full-time resident of *la città eterna*, Rome, where she writes about Italian cuisine, travel and culture, and is taking the food-blogging scene by storm.

A native of New Jersey, Parla grew up in her father's restaurant where she developed a passion not just for Italian food, but the entire process of eating a meal. "For me, it's not just about producing a meal. I like the whole experience that goes into hospitality," Parla says.

Yale University art history degree in hand, Parla promptly moved to Rome to become an English teacher. Why Rome? "It was instantaneous," Parla says without hesitation. "From a very young age, I just always felt this urgency to spend the rest of my life there."

Parla soon realized that teaching was not her strong suit. Instead, she began writing guidebooks and travel articles for publications such as *The New York Times*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *National Geographic*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, and others, before earning a degree in Italian Gastronomic Culture from the University of Rome.

Through this degree and her own personal research, Parla has entrenched herself in the local Roman food and beverage scene. Not only was she exploring the century-old *pasticceria* making traditional pastries, she was also delving into the new restaurants making a riff on old-school *amatriciana* recipes.

She began writing on her personal blog ([katieparla.com/blog](http://katieparla.com/blog)) about Roman cuisine, and things took off in 2008. Soon, Parla was leading her own food and history tours around the city (with an archeological speleology certification from the city of Rome) and was increasingly sought

after to collaborate on much larger projects.

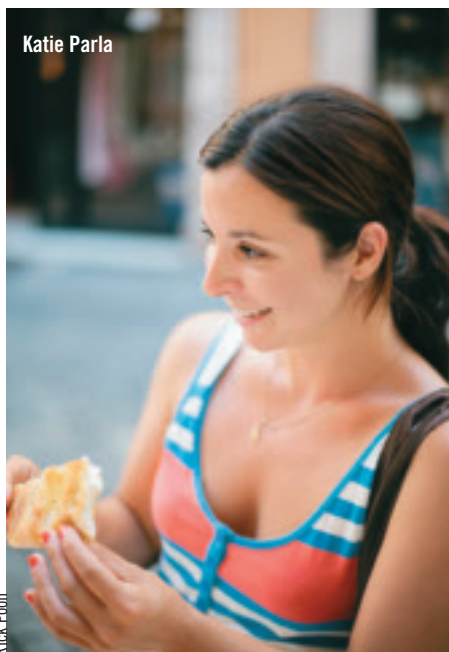
Last year, Parla published her first cookbook, "Tasting Rome: Fresh Flavors and Forgotten Recipes from an Ancient City." It is as much a history book as it is a kitchen guide, as Parla takes you through the streets of Rome that she knows so well, introducing the recipes



Kristina Gill



Katie Parla's 2016 Cookbook.  
Katie Parla (above right) making *Cacio e Pepe*



Katie Parla

Rick Poon



Pizza Romana from Katie Parla's  
"Tasting Rome" cookbook

Kristina Gill

of some of the city's most esteemed restaurants.

For Parla, writing the book was a way to connect Rome to the larger culinary world. "My favorite part of writing this book was being able to give a voice to the chefs, bakers and mixologists of Rome who aren't really able to communicate directly with the diners because of a language barrier," Parla says. "It takes time to build trust between the people making the food and the people eating it, so bridging that gap, and creating a main line into Rome's food culture, is the most rewarding part of publishing this book."

After a whirlwind book tour throughout the United States in 2016, Parla is back in Rome, researching and writing her second book on Italian southern cuisine.

Living in Italy for so long has given Parla the time, expertise and language skills to track down her family in Basilicata, as well as learn to define that difficult line between Italian and Italian American. She continues to tirelessly campaign for *pasta alla gricia*—carbonara's close cousin that calls for *guanciale* or *pancetta*, and pecorino romano, but no egg—to become a household name.

While the internet is oversaturated with food blogs of every size and shape, Parla's work stands out by spreading the gospel of authentic Roman cuisine and the culture that surrounds it. ▲

Danielle DeSimone is NIAF's Social Media Manager and Assistant Editor.



## Celebrating St. Joseph's Day in New Orleans

By John M. Viola  
NIAF President

# AN ALTARING



Top: St. Joseph's Day  
Parade float. Above:  
Along the parade route  
Photos by Italian American  
Marching Club

When my parents decided we would leave our Italian American enclave in Brooklyn and relocate to the New Jersey suburbs, I think they did so without a functioning “ethnic compass.” Somehow, my large Italian American family ended up in the only Garden State town with no Italian Americans, a little Irish American enclave.

So, for this Italian American kid, no day felt more alien than St. Patrick's Day, when my freckled, fair-skinned classmates dressed in kelly green and proudly presented lumpy soda breads their mothers made. I survived that only because two days later I would have a celebration of my own.

St. Joseph's Day means a great deal to Southern Italians, and particularly to those from Sicily, where St. Joseph has been a patron for centuries. It's said that in medieval times the humble carpenter answered the prayers of the Sicilian people and brought rains to end a drought that had devastated the island's food supplies. Giving thanks, Sicilians began celebrating St. Joseph's feast day by breaking with Lenten austerity and building gigantic altars weighed down with a rare abundance of sweets, breads, special foods and symbolic fixings like lemons and fava beans—which served as the center of celebratory visits

with family and friends.

These traditions made their way to our shores with millions of Southern Italian immigrants. My family, in our Irish American exile, relished the opportunity to dress in red and celebrate with a family dinner, savoring the once-a-year delight of indulging in the famous St. Joseph's *zeppole*.

These days, it seems like many of my great Italian American adventures begin with a phone call from my friend David Greco, the famed Arthur Avenue chef and food historian. My relationship with the Sicilian American community in New Orleans, sharing its incredible celebration of St. Joseph's Day, is no different. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, David had been approached by his friend, Emmy award-winning actor and proud Sicilian American Michael Badalucco, who was looking to help the devastated city of New Orleans rebuild one of its most important traditions—the St. Joseph's Parade.

New Orleans is a special city, and even more so to the Italian American community as the destination of some of the earliest immigration of Italians to the United States. Over the past century, the town has become increasingly and proudly Sicilian.

For the past 46 years, the Italian American Marching Club, one of the largest ethnic



# EXPERIENCE

organizations in the southeastern United States, has grown its St. Joseph’s Day celebration into one of the signature events in the Crescent City. But the aftermath of Katrina jeopardized the three days of festivities. To make sure this tradition wasn’t lost, Michael and David began working with the Sicilian Americans of New Orleans. When David learned the festival kick-off lunch would be serving 2,500 Sicilian American guests spaghetti and the world’s largest (in his opinion, driest) meatball, he saw a problem he could solve. To David, the novelty-sized *polpetta* ran counter to the traditional Southern Italian Lenten abstinences from meat, as well as the wealth of the Sicilian culinary traditions. So, at his personal expense, David drove from the Bronx New Orleans and, instead of the spaghetti and meatball, cooked 500 pounds of pasta con le sarde, a traditional Sicilian St. Joseph’s dish.

While I had helped David with personal donations toward this feast, each year he begged me to come along on this once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Two years into my time at NIAF, I found the opportunity to join him.

A little before 5 a.m., the morning before St. Joseph’s Day, I stumbled bleary-eyed into the cavernous catering kitchens of the Hilton New Orleans Riverside to assist as David’s sous chef

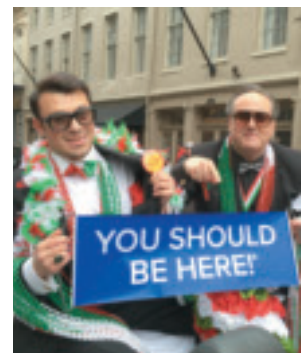
in what would end up being one of the most impressive and enjoyable culinary experiences of my life.

I’ve always known David to be a man of boundless energy, but nothing proved that more than finding him lining up ingredients and singing orders to the kitchen staff as he began making, from scratch, with a lot of love, 500 pounds of *pasta con le sarde*. To make that much food, no pots or pans suffice. The gigantic machine for cooking the sauce looked more like an industrial trough.

In short order, the kitchen was swimming with intoxicating aromas of wild fennel greens, onions, salted sardines, raisins, *pignoli* nuts, and countless spices—delicately blending the scents and flavors of the many cultures that, over centuries, have left their mark on the Sicilian palate.

As the sauce cooked, David worked with the team to parboil 500 pounds of fresh spaghetti he donated from Arthur Avenue. Like a military commander in his precision, when one of the kitchen staff left his post and the pasta is supposed to be blanched, David flies into a tornado of activity to do it himself. Only someone who reveres our culture would worry about making sure 500 pounds of pasta is cooked perfectly al dente!

We worked all morning. At noon, we ➤



**Clockwise from top left:** John M. Viola and David Greco toss beads; Queen of the Feast Day; Italian American Marching Club

Photos by Italian American Marching Club

**Above:** John M. Viola and David Greco in their parade convertible



Top: NIAF President John M. Viola and David Greco preparing the *pasta con le sarde*  
 Right: David Greco and actor-singer James Darren put final touches on the *pasta con le sarde*  
 Photo by John M. Viola

hoisted to our shoulders dozens of trays of pasta to serve the waiting masses. All are beautifully sauced and hand-charred by David. He has a theory about how the special Sicilian breadcrumb mixture, *mudiga*, needs to be toasted to bring out the flavors. The extra care is warranted: The 50 giant Ziploc bags of *mudiga* David is using come from one of the Sicilian *nonne* of the Marching Club, who makes the mixture from a secret family recipe for this moment every year to ensure the dish's authenticity.

As we entered the ballroom, the sea of red shirts and jackets, tricolored beads and trimmings, transports me back to how small I used to feel when my family and I were the only people proudly celebrating St. Joseph's Day. Here, it feels like all of New Orleans is anxiously awaiting the main course. I'm regaled by the jazzy notes of my favorite numbers by Louis Prima, a proud son of New Orleans whose songs and passion are kept alive by his daughter, Lena Prima. A talented musician and passionate member of the Big Easy's Sicilian community, Lena and her band are playing "C'è la luna" as we plate the delicacy.

With the line of eager Italian Americans wrapping around the room, we hand out heaping portions of pasta and plastic cups of red wine. Celebrating its patron saint, the entire community is together, eating and drinking, singing and dancing. After I join Lena onstage for an impromptu "That Old Black Magic," I'm completely welcomed into the Sicilian community of New Orleans as one of its own. By the time my head hits the pillow that night, I could only imagine what lay ahead on St. Joseph's Day itself.

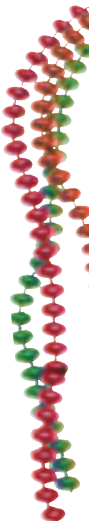
Many Italian American families and predominantly Italian American churches

still put together St. Joseph's altar tables, welcoming visitors from all over New Orleans and surrounding towns. So, on St. Joseph's Day, David, Michael, my new Marching Club friends and I went to St. Joseph Parish in Metairie, a New Orleans suburb with the area's largest Sicilian American church. For days before the *festa*, families prepare their foods, plus baked traditional Sicilian *cucidati* fig cookies, to decorate the city's largest altar.

That morning, thousands of guests line up around the block of the church to share a lunch of traditional Sicilian delicacies, many topped with *mudiga*, representing sawdust from St. Joseph's carpentry. The table seems as if it were a football field long, every square inch covered with treats sold to raise money for the church. Lunch is a multicourse affair of antipasti, pastas, fishes and sweets. By the end, I can't imagine going further without a nap, but we're carted back to the hotel to change for the main event.

The St. Joseph's Day Parade is the heart of the celebrations. Members of the Marching Club, their families, celebrity Grand Marshalls and honored guests make their way, on foot or in floats, through the French Quarter in a multi-hour carnival of Italian American joy. Long-tenured club members have personalized chariots; and men are not allowed in the parade without a black tuxedo!

As I straighten out my red-white-and-green bowtie and exit the hotel, I'm astounded by what seems to be an entire city bedecked in red, white and green. There are thousands of marchers, everyone in their tux, crisp and perfectly pressed, weighed down by the tricolor beads, buttons, flowers and hats, that scream Italian pride. The





young girls of the community, all dressed in beautiful white gowns and dainty gloves like it's their first Holy Communion, are arranged in a hierarchy of Queens and Maidens for the Court of the Feast Day. They are one of the central attractions; everyone I meet shares a story about the honor of having a daughter or granddaughter serve as a Queen of the feast.

David and I take a seat in the back of an open convertible, our parade car. True to his nature, David takes out a bottle of wine and a plate of antipasto he vacuum sealed just for the day. "Why should we be hungry," he asks, "just because we're in a parade?"

Our trip through the Quarter is a red-white-and-green blur of Italian music, and people dancing in the street. Hundreds of thousands of spectators line the route, hands outstretched for the strings of the tricolor beads we toss from the car. Every few feet, we stop as someone runs into the street to hug a friend or plant a kiss on a family member marching to keep their traditions alive.

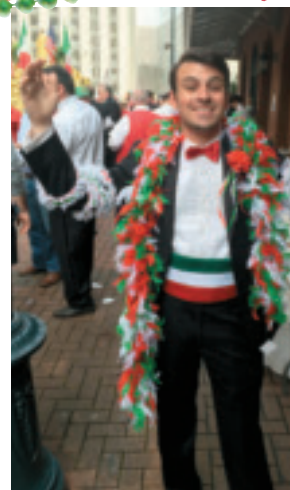
When the pandemonium of the parade fades, we return to the hotel for the Gala Dinner. It feels like thousands of tables surround the dance floor where Marching Club members and

honored guests are introduced, before the little girls, beaming with pride, are invited to the dance floor to dance with their fathers and grandfathers. When the ceremonies are finished, tarantellas breakout and, like one big family, people begin table hopping to share food each has brought.

For me, the night ends in Chianti-induced haze of song and dance, twirling the red-white-and-green feathered boa a fellow marcher tied around my neck earlier.

As I look back on that first trip, I'm energized by how good I feel about New Orleans' Sicilian American community and its unparalleled tradition. I go back every year now, bringing friends and family to share what I think might be the most special weekend of the Italian American calendar (with all respect to our NIAF Gala).

I tell anyone who cares about his or her heritage to visit New Orleans on March 19. If you're Sicilian, Italian, or just a lover of good people and their proud culture, it's an event you shouldn't miss. And, if you make it to the Feast, look for David and me in the back of our convertible, and maybe join us for some antipasto and wine. ▲



**Top: The gigantic St. Joseph's Day altar table in Metairie**

Photo by John M. Viola

**Above: NIAF President John M. Viola at the parade**

Photo courtesy of David Greco



# THE BARBERS OF SICILY

WHEN A **TRIM AND SHAVE**  
MIRRORED SOCIETY

*Story and Photography by Armando Rotoletti*

In spring 1991, I was in Sicily working on a cover story for a Roman magazine when I came across a barber shop in a square in Corleone. I went in to ask for some information for the story. I can't remember if I ever got it, but I recall being struck by a revelation. Before my eyes was the most authentic setting of Sicilian sociability, where any ripple affecting village life would be carefully combed with sly nonchalance, seen without looking, told without speaking.





From this unexpected experience, I had the idea of fixing time on film, catching that intangible trace of traditional Sicilian essence which I knew very well, being Sicilian myself, and longed to record before it was too late. The photo shoots took place over a few weeks, between 1992 and 1993, and followed an itinerary driven by instinct and chance, stopping by barber shops in towns and villages, starting inland and going towards the coast, all across Sicily. They brought me close to realities that reflect customs and chronicle a highly sociable world that symbolises the hub of all the communities, even more than the church, or the main street.

Despite the uniqueness of each barber shop, given its age, the owner, and the people who went there, I noticed how they all had characteristics in common. The interiors were austere, with minimalistic furniture and little eye to aesthetics; the materials, equipment and furniture were often second hand or passed on from one

generation to the next until they were completely worn out.

This sparseness was justified by the economic environment of the small towns, where most of the people were devoted to farming, crafts or shepherding; but, most of all, by the fact that the most gratifying experience at the barber's was the human contact and social interaction. Those similar interiors were often draped with erotic pictures. They were a symbol marking the men's-only territory, drawing a perimeter from which women were left out by ancient customs. The photos on the walls could, at times, be so explicit as to leave nothing to the imagination. They served an almost liberating function by being fetishes on which to project one's urges and emotional tension. The most marked effect of this visual hyper stimulation would be leaving behind the social conventions of the strictly layered agrarian society and entering a sort of "decompression bubble" where any topic of conversation would be allowed, even the most obscene. ➤





Not only were barber shops the epicentre of popular culture, playing a pivotal role in oral tradition and visual communication, but they were also exhibition centres for a varied iconography of contemporary heroes and idols, a melting pot of highbrow and lowbrow, of sacred and profane.

Show biz stars, models, famous footballers, politicians of more or less dubious fame, but also people of great moral and spiritual influence, such as the “Good Pope” (John XXIII) would inspire conversations. Getting in touch with such celebrities, if only visually, allowed people to be wrapped in their beauty or their spiritual energy for a few minutes, and become part of such an idealized world, detached from the mundane, that a barber shop’s psychological benefits were unquestionable.

In an agrarian society with traces of matriarchy, the barber shop represented some sort of neutral haven where men could take refuge. The absence of women and the entertaining display of varied humanity expressing itself so theatrically turned the salon in the most *spacchioso* (attractive) place in town, consolidating male bonding.

The smell of cologne spreading through the shop and the soft and sensual touch of the barber—source of implicit and involuntary erotic pleasure—created a relaxed atmosphere that fostered friendship and intimacy with the host. The barber took on several roles that ranged from master of ceremonies to confessor and therapist, directing ersatz psychoanalytical sessions in which all sorts of existential diagnoses were made on marriage, health, business and politics.

The great wall mirror aided this voyage to self-discovery, a magic object through which each customer could look at himself in an unusually objective way, motivated to search within his deepest thoughts, to get rid of his suffering and negativity. Stopping by the barber’s would thus become to some a rare chance to discover themselves rather than just being a weekly aesthetic ritual.

Many things have changed in barber shops in 25 years, some for the better, like the fall of one of the tradition’s last taboos that prevented women from an exclusively men’s world.



Not to mention, there have been great improvements in sanitation, satisfying a demand for a more reliable and specialized professionalism.

What has disappeared? The dusky atmospheres; the dim lighting and the chiaroscuro that made the barber's a dreamlike place. Instead, we have rooms swathed in a warm and enveloping light, fostering well-being and relaxation. The spotlight is now centred on image, in all its aspects, ranging from marketing strategies planned to the minutest detail, to the interior's colour schemes and the ubiquitous TV screens permanently showing music videos.

The show of human variety is thus replaced by another type of show. But, despite the clear-cut contrast with the past, the sense of community hasn't vanished but rather has taken on new guises, more elusive, less set. The fervent sociability of the barber shops and their social networks are now displayed in real life through weekend drinks with the customers and friendly chats.

This series of photos, shot more than 20 years ago, became my book

"Barbers of Sicily," a blend of photo-journalism and anthropological research that unearthed the last barber shops then still unaffected by the modernization altering the island. I wanted the camera not to surrender to nostalgia for old customs, but rather document customs before they regenerated into new forms and new behaviors, and stimulate conversation about barber shops—and society—then, now and in the future. ▲

*Born in Messina, Sicily, Armando Rotoletti is a photographer and writer whose work has appeared in such prominent publications as Corriere della Sera, Vanity Fair and The Sunday Times. His interest in cultural and social environments of micro communities has led to many photo collections and exhibitions, and seven books. Their topics range from small Sicilian villages (in books "Barbers of Sicily," "Conversations in Biancavilla" and "Etna's Wine and People," among others) to Italy's wine-producing Langhe area ("Barbaresco People").*  
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# TALE OF TWO SICILIAN TOWNS

A Wayward Reporter Explores  
the Beauty of Sicily

By Theresa M. Maggio

Mistretta photos by Riccardo Zingone

Linosa photos by Theresa Maggio

I collect small Sicilian towns. It is my joy to choose the town with the tiniest dot on a map and go there. They are all founded by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans or Arabs and set like gems in the country or sea around them. Some were once kingdoms of their own. I go to watch people's lives in these unsung places, and to enjoy their hidden beauties whether roughshod or refined. Here's a peek at two of them during one Sicilian spring.

## Mistretta

I woke at dawn in Mistretta, a medieval town of 5,000 people living 3,120 feet up in the Nebrodi Mountains, 56 miles east of Palermo. The birds chirped, the sun beamed as I walked out in the crisp April air to explore its historic center.

Past the bank, bar and museum, I got sucked into an alley and followed it uphill into an abandoned stone village where the houses and the paving stones were cut from the same rock, the golden sandstone *pietra dorata di Mistretta*. Wandering, I found pockets of life—a pot of red begonias, a woman pinning laundry to a line, a teenage boy running downhill beating on doors, yelling, “Pane!” He told me he delivered bread to the old ones who never left.

In Via Solitario, I met a solitary old man and asked him how the road got its name. “That's just the name they gave it,” he said, disconsolate.



“There used to be a family of five or six in every house on this street.”

In 1921, nearly 15,000 people lived in Mistretta but life changed when farming died. Now moss grew on the empty houses and grass between the pavers. At a belvedere on cliff-side Via Rupe Saracena, I looked out over the red tile rooftops across the valley into the mountains of the regional Parco dei Nebrodi, the greatest expanse of protected land in Sicily.

I walked downhill back to town and into the *pro loco* office, open by then, to see what more I could learn about Mistretta. Its vice president, Gaetano Russo, a stone cutter and sculptor, gave me a tour of this city of decorative stone. He said a Danish builder was buying up the abandoned houses to turn them into vacation homes for fellow Danes.

Mistretta has Roman roots but flourished in the 1500s when farmers raised 30,000 head of sheep,

and herds of cattle and swine, and manufactured woolen and leather goods. A moneyed middle class arose with a taste for art to embellish their new palazzi and churches, so artists flocked to Mistretta. Their exuberant burst of creativity turned the town into an outdoor gallery of 500-year-old decorative stone. I know of no other town like it. My guide showed me the carved sandstone coats of arms. The naked men and women burning in bas-relief flames on the facade of the Church of the Souls in Purgatory. Balcony corbels in the shapes of monsters to scare off evil spirits.

“People are still asking me to make these,” Russo said.

Flanking the double doors to the Palazzo Scaduto’s Gran Bar stand the life-sized torsos of a man and a woman, shocking caryatids in the buff. I saw a wine glass, emblem of the tavern-keeper’s guild, carved over the door to a medieval bistro,

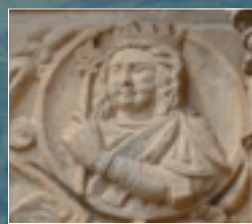
now overgrown with vines. I saw the insignia of a cobbler carved in a wall behind the mother church but the building was abandoned. My favorite sculpture was the dandy jutting from a wall to uphold the balcony above the barbershop, bare-chested, bodacious, arms folded coolly behind his head, with his handlebar mustache and petit goatee.

I met the barber, Nicolo Rossini, who was cutting a client’s hair in his one-chair salon. He said that when he bought the place he was thrilled to discover something even better to him than the dapper man. He pointed up. On either side of the sculpture were the bas relief symbols of the barbers’ guild—scissor and comb on one side, straight blade and strop on the other.

“This has been a barbershop for 500 years!” he said, as he lifted the smock from his customer’s shoulders and brushed him off. ➤



In Mistretta: Barber Nicolo Rossini, and sculptures seen on buildings in the town.



## Linosa

One midnight in May under a full moon, I boarded the ferry at Empedocle for Linosa, a Pelagic island 100 miles south of Sicily. Four-hundred-thirty people live on its two square miles, a jagged black isle in a turquoise sea poised on the tip of a volcano.

Most islanders live in its colored-cube village with the sea at one end of the street and the volcano at the other. It lies at the southernmost point of the European land mass while Lampedusa, its white limestone sister island, lies 26 miles southwest on the African plate, 80 miles from Tunisia. Lampedusa and Linosa is one town on two continents.



Approaching Linosa by sea

At six the next morning, a crewman threw the mooring rope to a man on the dock who owned the cottage I had arranged to rent. Paolo Tuccio is also the town butcher, but the shop was in his wife's name because in Sicily, where jobs are scarce, it is illegal to work two.

His son Salvo collected me, and as we drove away he pointed out the brown beach called Cala Pozzolana, the only sand on the island, where tourists swim and sea turtles lay eggs. The rest of the coast is rock, all black and burnt amber.

In my blue-hued country cottage, I unpacked and stared at the kitchen wall puzzled by the polished hardwood forms hung there like abstract art. I shivered to learn the curvy objects were fragments of an African refugee boat that had cracked up on Linosa's jagged coast.

The people had likely drowned. "They were probably headed to Lampedusa and got lost," my



Pasquale Bonadonna at 89

landlord said, and showed me the peg coat rack he'd made from more shipwreck. He said the Italian Director Emanuele Crialesi was on Linosa filming "Terraferma," his movie about desperate African refugees' first impact with European culture.

I walked down Via Re Umberto past houses pink, periwinkle and orange with thick contrasting color borders framing windows and doors. I was drawn to the ruffled sea sparkling like diamonds at the end of the street. There I met Vincenzo, a young fisherman tending a boat on the slanted cement slip.

Linosa is a seamount so its waters are deep and dangerous, he said; few islanders became fishermen. Most are the children of farmers, a trade now nearly extinct on this island famed for drought. "It hasn't rained since last



The lentil cloud

October," six months without a drop, said Vincenzo.

My landlord hand-watered his zucchini and also hand-pollinated them because Linosa has no bees. He grew up barefoot, tending his father's cattle when Linosa's beef was prized because "the beef was pure," he said. Its cattle grazed the wild Mediterranean scrub, scented with rosemary. In drought, he'd feed them the straw from his mattress and cut the paddles of prickly pears for fodder. Now there is not a single cow on the island.

Linosa is famed for lentils, which survive in near desert conditions. Tuccio gave me the name of a man



Smiling under a load of lentils

who grew them and would soon be harvesting and threshing by hand. While I sat at the village four corners hoping to meet him, I met instead Pasquale Bonadonna on his 89th birthday, the island's oldest man. He lamented the lack of a soccer field, cinema, newsstand, gas station and high school, but most of all he wished for an island doctor. He knew a man who had died of a heart attack waiting six hours for the rescue helicopter.

Once self-sufficient, the island now depended on the ferry and calm weather for health care, groceries, beef, fresh water and fuel. When the sea is rough, the ferry cannot dock

and Linosa is cut off from the world.

Finally, I met Mazarino, who got his nickname from the ferry he was born on, the Mazara del Vallo, while his mother was headed to the hospital. His lentils were ripe, but harvest was delayed until the wind blew just hard enough to blow away the chaff but not the beans.

On my fifth and last day on Linosa, conditions were right. I walked up to a field of dry brown stalks which four men collected in armloads, bundled into tarps and carried in 40-kilo parcels on their backs to waiting trucks. At the threshing ground, instead of driving a donkey over the pile of twigs to loosen the beans, Mazzarino pushed a rototiller. Then the men took turns tossing the harvest to the sky with pitchforks. The wind took the brown chaff and the salmon-pink lentils rained down.

To celebrate my final night, I ate at Anna's, the only restaurant, with the sirocco harvest wind now rattling its windows. I ordered the lentil soup. When Anna's father brought it to me, I said, "This is my last night on Linosa."



In the lentil harvest fields

He leaned in with a wicked grin. "You're not going anywhere in the morning," he said. The ferry was stuck at Empedocle.

And I bit down on a lava stone in my soup. ▲

*Theresa Maggio, granddaughter of Sicilian immigrants, is the author of "Mattanza and The Stone Boudoir: Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily." Her new book, "Heart of Palermo," awaits representation. Find her at [www.theresamaggio.com](http://www.theresamaggio.com).*



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# notes from nonie

By Rachel Bicha

a handwritten history from my grandmother



Rachel Bicha

Aurora holds open her personal prayer book, which she has owned since 1957.

*The grapes are getting ripe and the crushing will soon begin... the warm weather is very important for ripening the grapes—they will need to have a certain percentage of sugar content before wineries can accept the grapes for crushing.*



Rachel Bicha

Aurora looks over a set of pages in her scrapbook.

The familiar shaky penmanship on the back of the postcard pulls me out of the searing October Los Angeles heat where I stand by my mailbox and back to the fall days of the Depression. Although the blacktop is starting to burn through my flip-flops and an ice cream truck is chiming a block over, my grandmother's words remind me that the beginning of fall—and grape harvesting season—are right around the corner.

Childhood autumns with Nonie have left me crisp memories—apple picking in the Pippin orchards an hour from our house; reading books with green tea by the fireplace; and making *biscotti*, *torte* and meatballs as the afternoon slipped into evening. In college, I realized how much I missed those afternoons with Nonie, her kitchen filled with the warmth of frittata in the oven. I didn't expect that she'd begin sending me letters, once or twice a week, filled with stories of her childhood, family history and meditations on daily life.

My Italian grandmother, Aurora, known affectionately as Nonie to all us grandkids, continues reminiscing about the start of harvest season:

*It was not easy working out in the hot sun, especially with the bees. Once even a snake was resting under a grape vine, and it was easy to let your grape knife slip and slice a finger. Well, it really wasn't too bad (and we were young). Also, my mother would always call out around noon and say, 'Rest now, come and eat!' Well, she was a No. 1 chef, and so it was always a great feast.*

I have never seen the grapevine terraces or the ranks of fig trees. I've never spent the afternoon shaking fruit off the branches and hefting the heavy baskets to the end of the row. Nonie's letters pluck me from my text-messaging, over-crowded, car-clogged metropolis and set me down in the slower-paced farm she grew up on—a world of butter churns and bread boxes, train schedules and telegrams.

The mention of her mother's kitchen reminds me of my own childhood afternoons in Nonie's apartment—a stovetop cluttered with pots and pans, a scattering of whisks

and measuring spoons and emptied egg shells, an oval of flour dust on the wooden pastry board.

"Did I do it right, Nonie?" I pipe up, hands sticky with cookie dough. I'm barely tall enough to see above the countertop, where I've plopped misshapen lumps of dough haphazardly on the greased cookie sheet.

Nonie's kind glance checks my work. "Those will do just fine," she tells me. "Make sure you leave room for them to spread."

Three rounds of Go Fish later, the lumps of dough were soft, gooey cookies.

While I was growing up, Nonie rarely talked about herself or our family history. Maybe I was too young to have the ears to listen. Once the letters started coming, however, I realized how little I knew of my family's history. I read them keenly as they poured in over the weeks and months. They soon became more than just letters to keep in touch. They were a journal of sorts, a chronicle of a life viewed forwards and backwards. I began to look on them as ephemera in a time capsule, one Nonie was building and I was safekeeping.

Some letters detail Nonie's daily life and reflections now, chronicling the past few years in a series of snapshots. She wrote as she developed macular degeneration—and recovered from it (*I thank God for my medical success. Now I will send up prayers for my memory—which seems to be in peril*), moved to a new apartment (*Five more days to go before the move—this will be a short letter, because I have moving brain cramp. I'm tripping over boxes and only eating salami – no, just kidding – but I don't even have a bottle of wine*), got a cane (*I sort of zig-zag when I walk—looks like I drank too much vino!*), celebrated birthdays, mourned loses, painted, baked, colored and read.

There was no distinction between the significant and the mundane, no transition from the "important" family history to the everyday details of her life. It was always all blended together—just like when you live it.

Other letters look back, to Nonie's childhood and our family history. Nonie was born the youngest of ➤



Nonie's first communion, age 8, circa 1935.



Aurora and her two sisters working in the family vineyards in Northern California, in 1946.



Nonie's high school graduation picture (circa 1945)

four kids just before the Great Depression. In one notable letter, Nonie details the story of her parents' arrival from Italy.

*Dear Rachel,*

*On the glowing reports from his cousin in California, your great grandfather, age 30, gathered together enough money to buy his passage to the land of milk and honey in America. Once he had arrived in America, he took a train to San Francisco, sailed across the Golden Gate Bay and finally arrived in Windsor County, in Sonoma. He was employed as a farmhand. In Italy, he had been employed as a blacksmith, so he was able to repair wagons, equipment, horseshoes, etc.*

*After two years he had finally saved enough money to send for his sweetheart, your great grandmother. He met his bride fresh off her cross-country train trip, whisked her off to the Catholic church, and married her the same day. They had a one-night honeymoon, and then they would be off to Windsor to begin their married life.*

*The morning after their honeymoon, they stopped for breakfast before leaving to head north to Windsor. His English was still not very advanced. When the waiter came to take their order, he ordered two eggs for himself, and two eggs "for this lady here"—he didn't know how to say "wife" or "sweetheart" or anything like that. My mom loved to tell this story.*

*Poor mama. Her first home here was a farm cabin (usually a home for males). The first winter they discovered wind blowing through all the cracks and crevices in the walls, making it impossible to keep the place warm. They ended up having to fill in all the cracks and holes with newspapers. It actually kept the place quite warm, and kept them from freezing that first winter.*

*These two ancestors were hard-working and God-fearing people. Their door was always open to friend and stranger alike and I was fortunate to have been their daughter.*

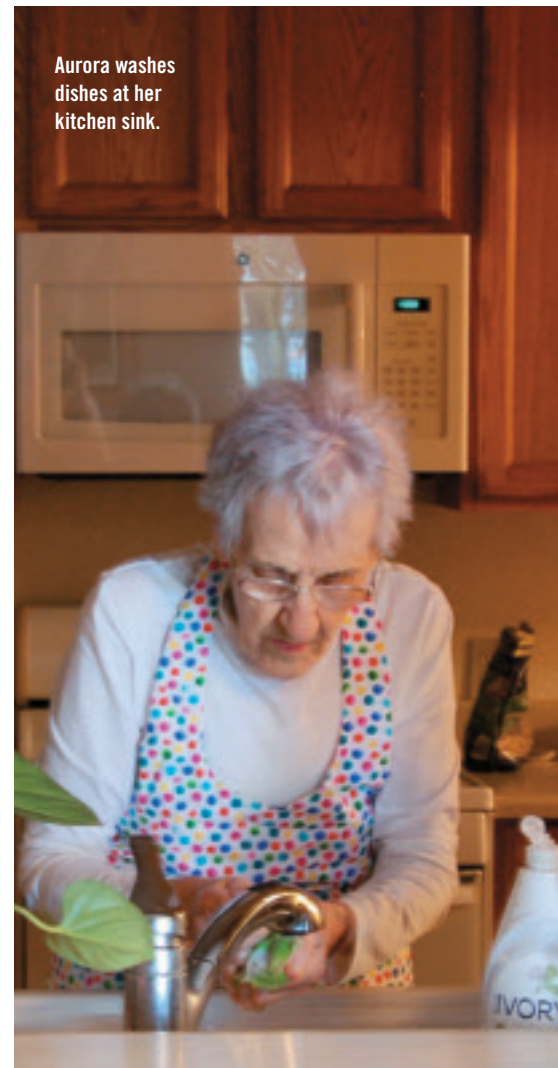
*Love ya,  
Nonie*

Although most of her letters do not contain such detailed stories, they are filled with bits and pieces of family history. She and her two sisters spent their afternoons picking grapes, figs and other fruits in the orchards, playing made-up games, and reading books from the school library:

*Just so you know, we didn't always have chores to do after school, but pretty much, yes... it wasn't too hard. We would yak and sing. Well, I guess that was mostly me. [My sister] couldn't carry a tune. So, what else was there to do? We had no radio until I was 15, and I was even older before I can remember having a phone. Oh, the happy days not connected to the outside world!!*

Earlier years are not forgotten either.

*No books or crayons or even pencils in our pre-school years. We weren't exposed to English at all. My older sister had to repeat first grade so she could learn enough English to be promoted. She was our introduction to English and [my other sister] and I were soon speaking enough English to blend in. When I discovered the library at school I was hooked. I believe I was the only one in the family who read books. And now...well, I'm still reading.*



Aurora washes dishes at her kitchen sink.

Karina Bicha



Aurora kneads bread dough at the kitchen table.

Rachel Bicha



Rachel and Nonie at Aurora's 75th birthday party, 2002.

Nonie was the only reader in her family, but sure wasn't the only reader in ours. My childhood was filled with evenings (and mornings and afternoons) sitting with Nonie as she read me stories, and as I got older, reading stories to her as well. Many of my earliest memories, even aside from reading and baking, are moments shared with Nonie. Hunting for pebbles in the backyard in exchange for pennies, so they wouldn't catch in the lawnmower. Setting up the rickety card table in her cramped living

room to assemble Thomas Kinkadee jigsaws. Eating exactly one maraschino cherry from the little jar in her refrigerator. Watching "Jeopardy!" and yelling out wrong answers.

It's easy to underestimate the value of our own stories. After all, we lived them. They seem commonplace, but what is mundane to us may someday be an important piece of someone else's backstory. Our lives intertwine and overlap.

Without my grandmother's letters, I might never have been transported to the villages of Nonie's Italy. I wouldn't have heard of a few young children struggling to learn English as they attended *scuola di prima* in the United States. Because of her letters, I have a better sense of where I come from, who I am, and where I'm headed. ▲

*Rachel Bicha is a writer and a student in Los Angeles, Calif. If she's not running between classes, studying in the library, or biking to her favorite coffee shop, she's probably planning her next adventure. Follow her on Instagram @rachel\_beak.*



Rachel Bicha with her grandmother, Aurora, in 2016 in Rachel's childhood backyard

Karina Bicha

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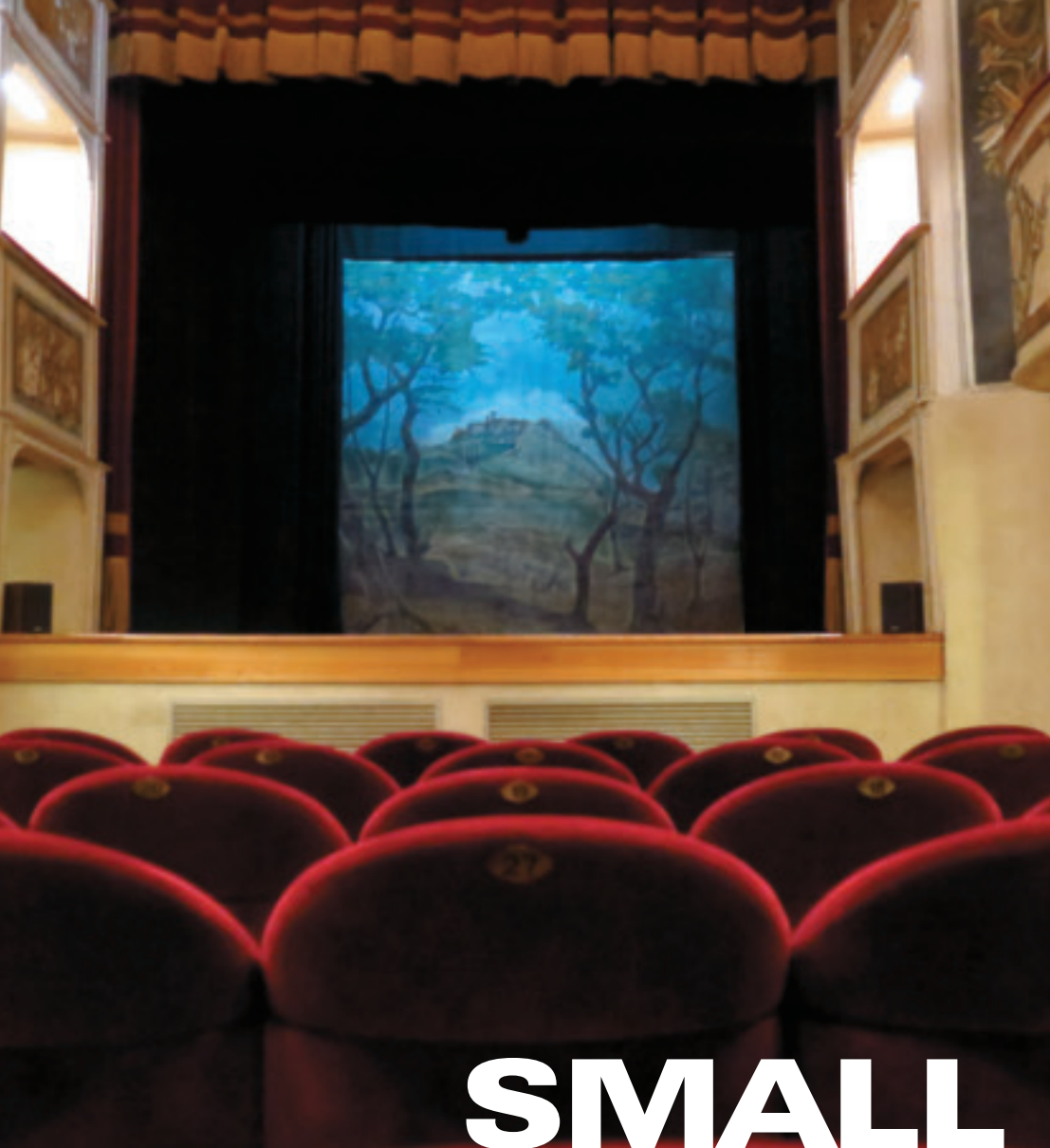
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Inside the Teatro della Concordia

The theater's restored ceiling

Ancient arch in Monte Castello di Vibio



As a boy, I remember listening to opera, broadcast live on the radio from the Met in New York City every Saturday, as my mother, the former Carmella Casullo, vacuumed our walk-up apartment in the Bronx. The soaring voices and dramatic music easily overpowered the Electrolux as slowly, inexorably, I formed a lasting bond with this touchstone of Italian culture.

Decades later, as I stood for the first time in the elegant confines of the Teatro della Concordia, those feelings surfaced again as recorded arias played while my wife, Judy, and I walked through what seemed like a miniature world of gilt, trompe l'oeil and red velvet.

The theater was built at the beginning of the 19th century and opened in 1808, during the Napoleonic wars. Nine wealthy Umbrian families financed the theater to reflect and support the cultural ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood (hence “Concordia”) that went beyond the goals of the French revolution. Immediately, the theater was a point of pride in the small hill town, though it took decades for its tiny interior to be decorated with trompe l'oeil paintings, first by artist Cesare Agretti, and later by his son Luigi, who, amazingly, began working on the theater when he was only 14. The father-and-son effort, completed in 1892, combines decorative work

on the theater's bell-shaped ceiling (cherubs, nymphs, birds, flowers), heraldic shields on the stalls (touting Italian greats like Dante and Goldoni), a painted backdrop depicting the town of Monte Castello di Vibio, and a captivating and whimsical treatment of the walls of the upper-floor lobby making the room look as if it were hung with tent-like tapestry—complete with a pussycat peering in over the folds.

Claiming the mantle of smallest opera house, or smallest theater, in the world was not without controversy. There are far smaller performance spaces all over, and not just in Europe. However, only Teatro della Concordia is a faithful reproduction, but on a much smaller scale, of much grander European and Italian theaters. It has a classic bell-shaped floor plan, proscenium stage, dressing rooms, and ticket booth—even a grand staircase entrance at the front of its building. In short, Teatro della Concordia arguably is everything that La Scala is in Milan, or La Fenice in Venice, but in miniature.

My parents were far from rich (it was a Bronx walk-up, remember), but mom made sure to set aside money every year for her nosebleed tickets to the Metropolitan Opera, especially after it moved to its luxurious new home at Lincoln Center in 1966. On the rare times I accompanied my ➤



Above:  
Box seating at  
the Teatro d  
ella Concordia



Right:  
Theater's  
19-century  
trompe l'oeil  
paintings



From inside one of the  
theater's 18 boxes,  
a warning sign—the  
Italian *sporgersi* means  
"to lean."

parents, I was in good company: some 3,800 opera lovers filled the huge Lincoln Center opera house.

It was a similarly overwhelming feeling decades later when Judy and I enjoyed a sold out performance of "Cosi Fan Tutti" at the Kennedy Center opera house in Washington—along with nearly 2,400 other opera lovers.

How different it is in Monte Castello di Vibio. The whole town has only slightly more than 1,600 souls, meaning that the entire population of Monte Castello di Vibio could fill the Metropolitan Opera House—twice—with 600 seats to spare. Even La Fenice in Venice, a restored space I adore for its intimacy, not to mention its over-the-top opulence, can hold a thousand people.

Every January, we bring our Venice-in-Winter photo workshop groups to Teatro La Fenice to photograph from Napoleon's box. And every year our students are overwhelmed by what they see. This rare combination of intimacy and grandeur makes it feel as if you could wear the opera house around your shoulders—like an elegant scarf or stylish yet comfortable coat. The feeling is hard to imagine if you have not been there.

Of the Teatro della Concordia's 99 seats, 37 red-velvet theater seats are on the ground floor facing the stage, and the remaining 62 high-backed chairs are scattered among 18 intimate boxes that ring the theater on two upper floors.

A wonderful photo from 1929 shows just how popular the little theater was. The grainy image shows a lot more than 99 folks crowded onto the main floor and into the stalls for who knows what kind of performance back then. You cannot look at this photo without flashing back to the wonderful crowd scenes in the 1988 film "Cinema Paradiso."

All manner of entertainments have taken place in the Teatro. In 1945, an 18-year-old unknown named Gina Lollobrigida played in the Eduardo Scarpetta comedy "Santarella." It was one of the first public appearances in a career that would see Lollobrigida become an international film star, a respected photojournalist, philanthropist—and 2008 Lifetime Achievement awardee from the National Italian American Foundation.

Though it survived the World War II years intact, the theater closed in 1951 and fell into neglect. In the 1960s, the stalls collapsed and it appeared that Teatro della Concordia would go the way of the fictional "Cinema Paradiso." In fact, there was a plan to raze the building and create an open town square in its location. Happily that scheme foundered after townspeople agreed to pay extra taxes to help begin needed restoration of the historic building.

In 1981, the town formally purchased the theater and restored it under the direction of architects Paolo Leonelli and Mario Struzzi. When construction was begun, they discovered that the theater's existing wooden pillars were strong enough for the interior to be restored in its original form.

Today, the theater enjoys popularity in proportion to its tiny size. It regularly features concerts, recitals and plays (and also can be rented for civil weddings.) In fact, the theater, not to mention the town, could hardly accommodate much more attention beyond a tour bus or two—and even that would be a stretch.

While the best way to get to see the Teatro della Concordia is by car, Monte Castello di Vibio does not even have in-town parking. You park at the base of the town and start walking. Since it is such a small place, the walk is not onerous. The well-kept stone houses and buildings are gorgeous, and the view from the top is splendid. Still, a horde of tourists wielding selfie-sticks is perhaps the last thing Monte Castello di Vibio needs.

A 19<sup>th</sup> century document describing the Teatro's opening noted that its creators "made it little so it would be proportionate with their town." With remarkable prescience, the document added that "civilization is not measured in volume or square footage." Or, for that matter, in foot traffic. ▲

*Frank Van Riper is a Washington, D.C.-based photographer, journalist and author who works in collaboration with his wife and professional partner Judith Goodman. For information on their book, "Serenissima: Venice in Winter," and on their photography workshops in Venice and Umbria, go to [www.veniceinwinter.com](http://www.veniceinwinter.com) and [www.GVRphoto.com](http://www.GVRphoto.com). You can read Frank's online photography column at [www.TalkingPhotography.com](http://www.TalkingPhotography.com).*



Street scene in Monte Castello di Vibio



1929 photo of the Teatro della Concordia

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Beechum County Courthouse  
in Monticello, Ga., site of the  
film's courtroom scenes



Photo by Chris Ceredonio

The film won its star an American Comedy Award for Funniest Actor in a Motion Picture, and it launched the film career of a then largely unknown performer who would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role. In 2015, the Writer's Guild of America ranked it no. 83 on its all-time list of funniest movies. And the American Bar Association Journal rated the film no. 3 on its list of the 25 Greatest Legal Movies.

# STILL FUNNY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of

**MY COUSIN VINNY**

By Douglas J. Gladstone

As fans celebrate the 25th anniversary this month of the release of "My Cousin Vinny," it is ironic that its screenwriter and producer, Dale Launer, didn't initially have high hopes for the film, and at one point thought it was "un-releasable."

Launer put great effort into researching the script for this celebrated courtroom comedy in which a brash, untried New York attorney, Vincent Gambini, and his sassy, class, Brooklyn girlfriend, Mona Lisa Vito, travel to a small town in rural Alabama to defend his innocent cousin facing murder charges. Renting a car in New Orleans, Launer drove through Mississippi and Alabama, and then down the Gulf Coast. The road trip provided inspiration for scenes that ultimately

found their way into the film: Launer's car got stuck in the mud; all of the restaurants where he ate had grits on the menu; and he actually experienced a screech owl's "unearthly call."

"It wasn't that I didn't think I had written and produced something that was good," Launer says. "It's just that I'd get the dailies on videotape and I was disappointed. The film didn't play out the way it had played out in my head."

"I mean, I'm happy it's well reviewed and well received by so many people," he explains. "But it was only until I watched it with some friends of mine that I was able to get a sense of how funny it was and saw what worked."

Others knew sooner. "First and foremost, it's just so very, very funny," says actor Ralph Macchio who played

William Gambini, Vinny's young cousin and one of the defendants. He attributes at least part of the film's success to "the fact that it's an iconic American comedy which grew more popular on cable television."

"It pays off every time because it gets more clever and smarter on each viewing," Macchio says, adding that the film "resonates in a weird way to people, which helps explain its staying power. Whether it's two kids who are in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the scene where Vinny is awoken at night by the train coming through the town, we've all been there."

Macchio calls it "a beautifully crafted fish-out-of-water comedy that has withstood the test of time. And that's a credit to Dale's script."

The actual Sac-O-Suds convenience store in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in “My Cousin Vinny” was set.

Photo by Chris Ceredentino



Jonathan Lynn directing Ralph Macchio



“My Cousin Vinny” director Jonathan Lynn with Joe Pesci and Marisa Tomei on the set

Mitchell Whitfield, who played William Gambini’s co-defendant, Stanley Rothenstein, agrees that the fish-out-of-water theme was central to the film’s appeal. “I am from Brooklyn, and when I moved out to Los Angeles, I experienced my own share of growing pains,” Whitfield says. “The thing that stands out is... Vinny was worlds away from what he was used to.”

Whitfield also attributes the film’s success to the “fantastic” performances of Joe Pesci (Vinny) and Oscar winner Marisa Tomei (Mona Lisa)—neither of whom were available to be interviewed for this article.

Critics agreed their award-winning performances were hilarious. In his Baltimore Sun review, Stephen Hunter wrote that the film “allows

Pesci enough room to let his considerable comic talents explode.” As for Tomei, Carrie Rickey, formerly the film critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, praises Mona Lisa for not just her comic edge but for “having the spunk and native intelligence of Italian American girls, so often undervalued and thought to be airheads when they are anything but.”

Launer says the duo’s relationship was one of “friendly, playful one-upmanship,” and their deft comic interplay was fueled by their great relationship when the cameras weren’t rolling. In an interview for the Bravo series, “Watch What Happens Live,” Tomei noted that Pesci “actually has a real beautiful voice” and “one of the things that we did a lot is that he

would play the guitar and we would sing standards on the set.”

The film also earned accolades in the legal world. While critics have pointed out that defense lawyer Vinny’s visit to the defendants’ prison cell would not occur in real life, the film is nevertheless praised by lawyers for its authenticity.

“Lawyers love it,” says Launer, proud of its ABA Journal ranking. “It has played in law schools all around the country because it addresses court procedures.”

Paul Fishman, the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey, reportedly referenced one of the film’s scenes at the annual Brendan Byrne Lecture he gave at Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2016. In it, Vinny ➤

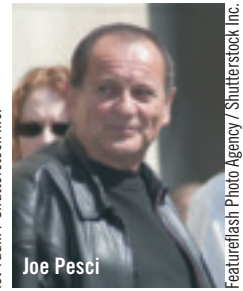
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Ralph Macchio



Marisa Tomei



Joe Pesci

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Director Jonathan Lynn with actor Fred Gwynne as the judge

Jonathan Lynn on set with Austin Pendleton, who plays the public defender.



Courtesy of Jonathan Lynn

questions a prosecution witness who says he saw the murder occur and he was certain of the time the clerk was killed—because he had just started cooking grits.

In his cross examination, Vinny says the timeline doesn't match up, since the witness claimed he cooked his grits in five minutes and, as Vinny points out, "it takes the entire grit-eating world 20 minutes.... Are we to believe that boiling water soaks into a grit faster in your kitchen than anywhere else on the face of the Earth? Were these magic grits?"

Fishman reportedly told his audience: "I have taught trial techniques for 15 years using that because his cross examination is terrific."

While lawyers embrace the movie, some Italian American groups have reasonable doubt. Dr. Manny Alfano, president and founder of the anti-bias organization Italian American One Voice Coalition, says "the movie may be funny, [but] it reinforces the old negative stereotype that Italian American men are not very bright.

"From the time Hollywood was established, Italians and Italian Americans have been portrayed as mobsters,

bums, bigots, buffoons and bimbos," he says in an email. "What troubles us is that there are very few positive roles. We are not asking for candy-coated portrayals, only reasonable depictions that show us for who we really are."

The film's director Jonathan Lynn disagrees: "Nonsense. Vinny and Lisa are heroes. They may be blue collar but they are intelligent, persistent and they do the right thing."

Ralph Macchio defends the film as well: "...I don't believe anything we did or said was derogatory to Italian Americans." He adds that the only negative reaction to the film he remembers came from the National Stuttering Association: "I was blind copied on a letter objecting to the way Austin Pendleton portrayed ... the public defender who stuttered. And Austin was upset when he found out, because he really was a stutterer."

Louis Gallo, vice president of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America's National Commission on Social Justice, understands how Alfano could think the movie is disparaging. "It's a fine line," he says. "The saving grace is, in the end, the movie shows how brilliant an attorney Vinny is

and how knowledgeable Mona Lisa is about auto mechanics. If both leads played their roles straight, the humor would have definitely been lost. The portrayal of the stereotypes is what gives the movie such endless appeal."

Georgia businessman Chris Credendino has visited the Sac-O-Suds convenience store, in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in "My Cousin Vinny" was shot. He has visited several "Vinny" film locations for his blog. A transplanted New Yorker, he says he understands the film's fish-out-of-water premise firsthand. He doesn't think the film sends the wrong message about Italian Americans at all.

"Please, I have a vowel at the end of my name. Neither I nor any of my friends are offended by the movie," says Credendino. "That's all it is, a movie. A very funny movie." ▲

*The author of "Carving a Niche for Himself: The Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco and Mount Rushmore," Douglas J. Gladstone is a frequent contributor to these pages. His cover story on Associate Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of Ambassador Magazine.*

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The Yo-Yo ride is aptly named



Danielle DeSimone

# Beyond the Sauce

The DelGrosso Family's Wild Ride

By Danielle DeSimone

**M**ost people know the name DelGrosso as synonymous with fine Italian pasta sauce. But, unless you're from central Pennsylvania, you may not know the same DelGrosso family has owned and operated its own amusement park since 1946.

ing the values, traditions and dedication to family handed down from past generations and passing it along to the next. In fact, today, the business is run by four generations of the family who still work hard to assure success—but manage to have fun doing it!

The oldest, major family-owned manufacturer of pasta sauce in the United States, DelGrosso has built a business empire by embrac-

The DelGrosso legacy is a long one, dating back to the early 1900's, when a large influx of Italian immigrants arrived on America's shores. Like most Italian



Enter DelGrosso's new Laguna Splash Water Park here!

Danielle DeSimone

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stories, this one begins with love: a young woman named Mafalda (affectionately called “Murph”) married a man named Ferdinand (“Fred”) DelGrosso in the small, rural, Pennsylvania town of Altoona, and the rest is pasta-lovers’ history.

In 1943, Fred and Murph opened DelGrosso Café in downtown Altoona, serving what soon became known as “the best spaghetti in town,” largely due to the passed-down tomato sauce recipe from Murph’s mother, Marianna. The sauce was so popular that customers brought home extra jars after dining at the restaurant.

Three years later, the DelGrosso couple sold their café and purchased an amusement park just down the road, where they continued to serve their popular Italian dishes to

even then, had a habit of helping those in need, at one point more than 11 people squeezed into the tiny house, taking in orphans and priests from the local parish.

“My grandparents really didn’t have much,” Carl DelGrosso, president of the DelGrosso Amusement Park, said recently at the park. “But they always found room to give.”

The DelGrosso children spent their childhoods running wild through the amusement park—their own, rollercoaster-filled backyard. When they weren’t playing, they were working, assisting their parents in running the park’s rides and concession stands.

From the cramped park kitchen, the DelGrossos began making and canning their own tomato sauce commercially, with the children pitching in, typically working 10-hour days. In the 1950s, the family expanded its factory, and the team effort paid off. “DelGrosso” quickly became a household name in central Pennsylvania. Today,

its classic DelGrosso labels are recognized nationwide.

Nowadays, the amusement park and sauce factory would be unrecognizable to Murph and Fred. Once booming with turn-of-the-century railroad business, these rolling Rust Belt hills have since quieted—except for the burst of life along that stretch of land just outside of Tipton, Pa., where delighted squeals of children and the whirling music from the roller coasters can be heard before you even see it.

And, what was once just a small, humble family amusement park in the 1940’s has expanded to include the DelGrosso Amusement Park, the Italian-themed Laguna Water Park, and the DelGrosso Sauce Factory. Although the park is much larger than it once was, the small

**Above: The Lazy River at Laguna Splash Water Park.**  
**Below Left: Murph’s Kitchen**  
**Below: Vintage 1970s DelGrosso family photo**



Danielle DeSimone

park patrons.

It wasn’t easy. Fred and Murph had seven children—many of whom still work in the family business. The family of nine lived near the back of the amusement park property in a red-brick cabin so small that their kitchen was in a different building. And, since the DelGrossos,



Courtesy of the DelGrosso family

town carnival feel is still everywhere. From families with small children riding an antique carousel, to the park employees greeting guests by their first names, you can’t help but immediately feel comfortable at the tree-lined park.

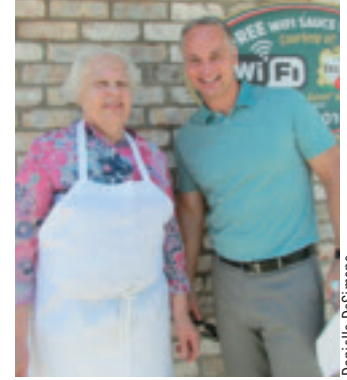
And of course, there’s the food. True to ▶



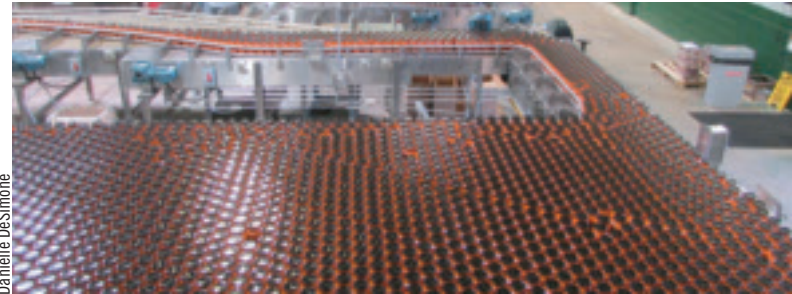
Left: An early photo of Fred and Murph at their sauce factory.

Right: Aunt Mary Ann Crider and Michael DelGrosso, vice president of Global Sales & Marketing at DelGrosso Foods.

Below: The DelGrosso Sauce Factory today



Danielle DeSimone



Danielle DeSimone

tradition, the DelGrossos have incorporated their family sauce and recipes into all of the food menus here. Amusement parks are not normally remembered for their stellar food, but DelGrosso's is. Park guests enjoy everything from homemade meatballs smothered in the DelGrosso signature Aunt Mary Ann's Sunday Marinara sauce to fusilli twirled in Uncle Joe's Vodka Celebration sauce.

Behind the kiosk windows of Murph's Kitchen, one of the park's 14 eateries and snack bars, located near the Kiddie Carousel, the Gift Shop, and the Rock Star and Paratrooper rides, is a bustling kitchen where a crew chops vegetables, stirs bubbling sauces, and builds stacked sandwiches like an assembly line. Even the potato salad here is special, made with Murph's secret recipe, and eaten with a cult-like reverence.

Obviously, Murph's Kitchen is named after the DelGrosso matriarch, Murph, so it seems appropriate that everything cooking there now falls under the watchful eye of Aunt Mary Ann herself, a self-proclaimed "retired working woman" and Murph's daughter. She exudes a certain Old World charm as she fusses around the kitchen, inspecting the Bolognese sauce, offering constructive

criticism here and there with her personal adage, "If it's the truth, you can say it!"

Aunt Mary Ann has her quieter moments as well, such as when she hands half of her uneaten sandwich to a park guest she doesn't know saying, "Here, I'm not going to finish this, do you want it?" Or when she quietly approaches park guests who look like they might "need a little extra help" and offers free strips of tickets to rides, just as her father famously did before her.

Italian American traditions live and breathe here—not just in the food passed down and shared with others, but in the generosity and sense of community.

Across East Pleasant Valley Boulevard is the DelGrossos' newest attraction: the expanded and renovated Laguna Splash Water Park where you can slip down a Venetian gondola slide, run under a 25-foot-tall leaning Tower of Pisa fountain, or cruise along the River Lazio. It's America's only Italian-themed water park!

Here, too, is all of DelGrosso's delicious Italian American food, with regional influences evident in the hoagies, and sausage and peppers. And, next door, the sauce factory continues to churn out the old family recipes into, on average, 240,000-270,000 polished jars daily, even meatballs, all

made with fresh ingredients and with an emphasis on quality and flavor.

Meanwhile, the DelGrossos remain close-knit. Most of the family members work, or have worked, in the park or the factory at some point during their lives. It's almost a rite of passage for teenage DelGrossos to work concession stands or ride-ticket counters. They all still come together on Sundays for a family meal, and the Feast of the Seven Fishes continues to be a crowd favorite.

When asked whether younger generations of the DelGrosso family will carry on the traditions of the park, Carl DelGrosso smiled. "When you grow up from the ground level and you see the amount of work that is put into building a place like this by your grandparents, and then your parents, and you've seen their vision and the risks that they took to build it," he said, "You're far more invested in making sure the place survives because you don't want all of their hard work to fail."

The DelGrosso Amusement Park is more than just a collection of roller coast-

ers and carnival rides, and food stands with incredible meatballs and Italian sandwiches. It is a family place that has contributed to a tight-knit community here.

There is no better evidence of this than the park's Spaghetti Wednesdays, the weekly, moderately priced, pasta specials the DelGrossos serve from mid-June to mid-August, which attract hundreds of locals.

The line can sometimes be hours-long, but the wait is worth it. Not only do guests get to dig into a dish of DelGrosso's homemade recipes with their signature sauces, they come together, sitting on long, extended benches, pausing in their busy lives to dine across the table from family, friends, neighbors or strangers, sharing a meal filled with raucous, joyful conversation. It's Italian American culture at its best. It's a legacy the La Famiglia DelGrosso's Italian ancestors would have been proud of. ▲

*Danielle DeSimone is NIAF's Social Media Manager and Assistant Editor.*

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# Aglianico

THEN & NOW Tasting the Wine of Ancient Roman Legionnaires

By Dick Rosano

Terredora Di Paolo  
vineyard in Montefalcione  
in Campania

The scene would be appropriate for the cinematic genius of Francis Ford Coppola. A Roman commander stands on a slight rise at the edge of a field. He stares off toward the sun that has touched the horizon, lighting the sky and pastures in the distance in an orange blaze. He turns slowly on his heel to face his legions of war-weary troops encamped on the outskirts of the Imperial City.

All are tired from the march, but all are invigorated by the prospect of marching into Rome the next morning bearing the captured combat flags of a conquered enemy. Rome will reward them; Caesar will be pleased.

The commander casts a satisfied glance at the soldiers drifting between lighted campfires. He tells the lieutenant who approaches him to serve the men some wine to go with

boar that he smells roasting over the fire pits.

“Ellenico,” the commander says, identifying a wine that was introduced to southern Italy by the Greeks centuries before. “The best should be served to these brave legions.”

Ellenico was well known in ancient Rome. It was considered one of the best wines of the Empire, and it traveled with the Roman armies



The Acerenza Cathedral in Basilicata about 55 miles southeast from Vigneti del Vulture



The cellars at in Basilicata

Farnese Vini



Wine cellar key at Vigneti del Vulture in Basilicata

Farnese Vini

on the march. The name tags it to its history, connecting to the Hellenic culture that accompanied those invaders more than 500 years earlier with the vine.

Today, ancient Rome’s vinous treasure is called Aglianico, the name of the grape and the wine that is made from it. And while only lightly marketed in the United States, this elixir still deserves the accolades that the ancient legionnaires bestowed on it.

Aglianico grapes are grown throughout central and southern Italy, principally Campania and Basilicata, although some small vineyards of this varietal can be found Puglia, Molise and Lazio. It hits the market under a variety of names, from the simple moniker Aglianico to Aglianico del Vulture, depending on the locality of the grapevines and the labyrinth of Italian regulations.

The Italian wine laws, called *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*, or DOC, recognize Aglianico as a superior wine, according to the strict rules set by the Italian government. In past decades, achieving DOC status was a mark of distinction and, while such an award still merits honor, most of the production of Italian wines has progressed to the point that nearly any wine—other than country plonk—deserves the merit. In the case of this grape, DOC recognition is awarded to Aglianico del

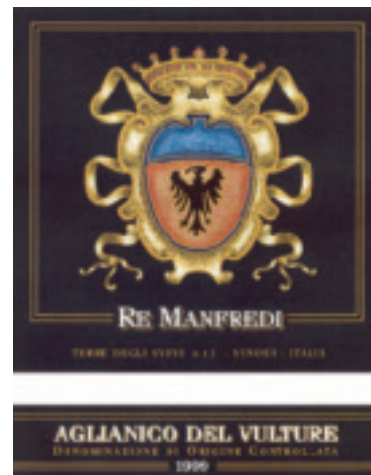
Vulture (from Potenza) and Aglianico del Taburno (from Benevento).

*Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*, or DOCG, which is DOC adding the word “guaranteed,” recognizes additional Aglianico-based wines. The two mentioned above—Aglianico del Vulture Superiore and Aglianico del Taburno—can also be awarded DOCG, based on a vintage-specific quality that raises these bottles above the standard DOC level, including fruit selection, vineyard practices, vintage conditions, and aging.

The most talked-about version of the wine is bottled as Taurasi, a DOCG blend of grapes which emphasizes a high percentage of Aglianico. With intense ripeness and bold flavors, Taurasi is made both for the cellar and for tonight’s dinner table. Higher prices also attend this wine, but the reward more than outweighs the cost.

Aglianico has been marketed in the United States for about 40 years, and while it remains slightly hidden from common stores, it is eagerly sought by the wine cognoscenti. And, as its reputation for quality continues to grow, some producers are affixing proprietary names to the finished product, as can be seen in the section on tasting notes below. By adding these proprietary names—names that indicate the winemaker’s creative motivation, not just the varietal in ➤

Label of an exceptional Aglianico wine—the 1999 Terre Degli Svevi Aglianico del Vulture Re Manfredi.



Frederick Wildman and Sons, Ltd.



Courtesy of Terredora

Daniela Mastroberardino from Mastroberardino winery and co-founder of Terredora di Paolo winery in Campania

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the bottle—they are following the wisdom of the wine world: The more specific the region and name, the more individualistic the wine is expected to be. Higher prices follow the same formula.

You may find a rosé wine called Aglianico del Taburno. It should not be confused with the DOCG red noted above, but it might prove an interesting discovery. If you stumble across a bottle, try it! ▲

*Dick Rosano is a wine, food and travel writer whose columns have appeared here in Ambassador magazine, as well as The Washington Post, Wine Enthusiast, and other national magazines. He is the author of the three mysteries set in Italy: "The Secret of Altamura: Nazi Crimes, Italian Treasures," "Tuscan Blood" and "Hunting Truffles," as well as a history book "Wine Heritage" on the influence of Italian-Americans on wine.*



Aglianico grape vines at Vigneti del Vulture in Basilicata

Famense Vini

## Tasting Notes

### Vigneti del Vulture 2014 Pipoli Aglianico del Vulture (\$17)

Elegant approach, fine yet evident tannins, soft mouthfeel, focus on blackberry and mocha flavors. *Score: 91 (Empson)*

### Donato d'Angelo 2012 Calice Aglianico del Vulture (\$23)

It comes across as closed at first, but the aromas open slowly with floral highlights; mouthfeel is lightly tannic, with concentrated fruit, and chewy mouthfeel. *Score: 90 (Vias)*

### Nativ 2013 Aglianico (\$23)

This is a hearty wine from start to finish. The scent of black fruit and coffee open quickly, followed by flavors of blackcurrants and blackberries, held aloft by hints of brown spice and smoke. *Score: 90 (Montcalm)*

### Re Manfredi 2012 Aglianico del Vulture (\$35)

Aromas and flavors of blackberry, raspberry, anise, and tobacco smoke; a finish that is beautifully finessed. *Score: 92 (Wildman)*

### Terredora di Paolo 2014 Aglianico (\$18)

This wine is fragrant and forward, with intense flavors of raspberry and cherry, with supple tannins and a velvety smooth finish. *Score: 89 (Vias)*

### Terredora di Paolo 2009 Pago del Fusi Aglianico (\$56)

With medium ruby red color and a light approach on the palate, this wine features soft fruit flavors of cherry and blueberry, with cinnamon accents on an elegant frame. *Score: 92*



### Terredora di Paolo 2010 Taurasi Fatica Cantadina (\$36)

Tangy and fruity, this wine is a nice combination of raspberry, cherry and allspice. *Score: 90*

*Despite its relative obscurity on the American market, there are many Aglianico wines to choose from in our stores. In addition to the wines reviewed above, others to look for include Macarico, Bisceglia, San Martino, Tormaresca, Feudo di San Gregorio, and Paternoster, to name just a few.*

You may encounter a grape called Aglianicone, which appears not to be directly related to Aglianico and has been scientifically proven to not be a clonal variation of Aglianico. It is assumed by some ampelographers (botanists who specialize in identification of grapevines) that the two grapes might be related by parentage—which may explain why it is occasionally referred to as Aglianico Bastardo. Both grapes are grown in Campania, but Aglianicone produces fruit inferior in character and flavor profile to Aglianico. Don't worry about getting them mixed up though, at least not in the States. Aglianicone's poor reputation means that little or none of it leaves Italy.



Aglianico grapes

Famense Vini

Aglianico has many names. Ellenico is the popularly considered original name dating to ancient times. Some theories say the name comes from Apulianicum, the Roman name for all of southern Italy; or from Falernium, which the Romans attached to the wine once they abandoned the Greek moniker. Today, there are white wines called Falerno, produced from a grape called Falanghina, not the red grape that the Romans were referring to. Yeah, unraveling the evolution of names requires an advanced degree in linguistics.

# ITALO CESCO

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1957



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You will search it out with great  
effort and find it only with love.”*

*Italo Cescon*



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# The Spring Italian American Reader

With winter in the rearview mirror, and the budding arrival of springtime trumpeting a new lease of life, it seems counterintuitive to suggest that spring is a good time to settle down with a good book when suddenly there are so many other things to do. But, science tells us that spring's positive effects on our minds suggest otherwise:

For instance, research has found that most people feel an increase in liveliness, energy, optimism, excitement, alertness—the “spring in your step” also known as “spring fever.” Not bad for turning pages. Some people also experience restlessness and sleeplessness in spring, so ditto if you need to reach for a book and reading light....

Purely logistical, spring brings longer days. The first day of spring, also known as the vernal equinox, achieves perfect balance of 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of darkness. Plus, studies show that seeing longer days of sunshine after months of wintry, gloomy captivity uplifts mood and makes us mentally sharper.

Finally, one study determined that spending longer hours outdoors on clear, warm, sunny days measurably improves memory and expands “cognitive style,” as in feeling smarter and more creative and mentally receptive.

Seasonal take away: Bring a book outside, sit in the sun, and seed your literary garden.

*Benvenuti primavera! And buona lettura!*

Santo, Donatella and Gianni Versace;  
photographed at Villa Fontanelle,  
Moltrasio, Lake Como, 1987

© Archivio Alfa Castaldi



© VERSACE by Donatella Versace with Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi; Rizzoli New York, 2016.



## Versace

Written by Donatella Versace,  
Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi  
Contribution by Tim Blanks and  
Ingrid Sischy  
Rizzoli; 288 pages; \$95 hardcover

*Versace, a name so powerful and illustrious that it became synonymous with a way of being. Its symbols, the Medusa and the Greek key, appropriated almost unconsciously from familiar, dignified antiquity, were transformed into icons, driving the beat in the global, cutting-edge rhythm of fashion.*

You need not be a fashionista to appreciate this coffee-table-book's history of the globally renowned, legendary, Italian fashion brand Versace, and that's because this is that much of a visual feast. As you might expect.

Of course, if you're no stranger to the world of haute couture, you'll be all the more spellbound by its 288 glossy pages filled with fascinating, first-class photography cherry-picked from the Versace archives—photos of the Versace family; of beautiful, sulky skinny models on runways and backstage; Versacepal celebrities and Versace-clothed rock stars; past Versace advertising-campaigns, stunning, sensual and bizarre; and high-effect, high-concept fashion montages that make your eyes creep closer to the page. Add to that the fact that many of these photos were shot by some of the top photographers

of our times, from Richard Avedon and Steven Meisel to Irving Penn and Bruce Weber, and you can understand why the optics here are so captivating.

Scattered into this monographic vision are 20 or so pages of text, not counting captions. Most of that focuses on the story of the Versace empire, specifically the post-Gianni Versace years, and Donatella Versace's emergence and impact on the fashion house following her brother's death in 1997. (Full disclosure: in the past, NIAF has honored Versace designer and founder Gianni Versace, and his and Donatella's brother, the company's president, Santo Versace.)

In fact, this is truly Donatella Versace's book. It has only her image and her name with the title "Versace" on the cover. While she wrote it in collaboration with W magazine Editor-

evolution of the Versace fashion house under Donatella's reign, some of these paragraphs ring of the pretentiousness you'd expect from this industry. The introduction, for instance, refers to the book as "the archetypal journey of a trailblazing brand that came to define and identify objects and people." True, but ....

Back to the remarkable photos—some 250, both color and black and white, with Donatella in about a third of them, including the first photo inside of her naked, except for a ring and a cigarette. Other identifiable faces besides Donatella's include the stunning supermodels Donatella loved to use in ad campaigns, including Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell, Gisele Bündchen, Linda Evangelista and Kate Moss. And there are the stars who've worn Versace beautifully



Donatella Versace backstage with models for the Atelier Versace Fall/Winter 2012-2013 Collection show at the Hotel Ritz, in Paris.

© Stefano Guindani/SGP

in-Chief Stefano Tonchi and IUAV University of Venice professor Maria Luisa Frisa, among other friends, her byline adorns only one of its "articles," the opening dedication to her close friend and rock legend Prince, who died last April.

But given that it chronicles the Donatella years and her creative perspective at Versace, it makes sense that others wrote the rest—though don't expect objectivity. Indeed, while the narrative proves well-written, informative and insightful into the

and illustrate, page after page, these innovative and glamorous designs—including Charlize Theron, Beyoncé, Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie, Jessica Chastain, Halle Berry, Selena Gomez, Kendall Jenner and Demi Moore.

As Donatella writes in her dedication: "Fashion is part of pop culture. It speaks the language of rock, and connects with art and technology. It is with clothing that our icons create their own unforgettable image."

—Don Oldenburg ➤



**The Girl from Venice**  
By Martin Cruz Smith  
Simon & Schuster  
305 pages; \$27 hardcover

*Cenzo slipped his hand around her waist and kissed her. He expected her to push him away, but he held the kiss like a long drink of water. He felt the heat of her face, the press of her body, and the way her leg overlapped and coiled on his. Then he heard the rhythmic thud of the German gunboat as it approached, and he moved quickly to steer the Fatima out of the searchlight's range.*

In Martin Cruz Smith's most recent novel, the author makes a departure from his usual mystery writing and delves into the world of historic fiction, set against the backdrop of occupied Venice in World War II. In "The Girl from Venice," the war is ending, but Venice remains under German control, making life difficult and dangerous for its inhabitants. Cruz Smith's story follows the life of a Venetian fisherman, Cenzo, who finds the body of a young Jewish girl named Giulia floating in Venice's lagoon, and rescues her. Cenzo's decision to hide Giulia from the Nazis rather than turn her in suddenly entangles him in political games between Germans, Fascists, and the Italian resistance movement.

Cruz Smith takes the reader from the muddy shores of Venice to the palaces of Salò with captivating storytelling, but the novel's strength comes from its excellent balance of war and character development. As Cenzo and Giulia's relationship grows from one of happenstance to love, the stakes of their actions and of the war itself become much higher. There have been many novels set in Italy during World War II, but this one offers a refreshing read for those interested in World War II fiction that explores the effects of war on ordinary people, rather than the movements of nations.

—Danielle DeSimone

**Spaceman: An Astronaut's Unlikely Journey to Unlock the Secrets of the Universe**

By Mike Massimino  
Crown Archetype; 336 pages; \$28 hardcover

*I wasn't interested in the fantasy of space travel. I was interested in the reality of space travel. I was interested in how people got to space here and now, and at that point the only way to get to space was to join NASA...*

In his memoir "Spaceman: An Astronaut's Unlikely Journey to Unlock the Secrets of the Universe," Mike Massimino recounts his NASA astronaut career from 1996-2104. Why "unlikely" in the title? Massimino admits in his book that "part of the reason I idolized astronauts was because they were everything I wasn't. They were fearless adventurers, and I was an awkward kid."

On his fourth attempt in 1996, he joined the NASA team and the journey begins. Massimino narrates his inspiring voyage with a down-to-earth style that's easy with tech-speak yet still revealing. From his college days at Columbia University and MIT to his camaraderie with his NASA "family," he tells all. Training, spacewalking and traveling at 17, 500 miles per hour—he gives the reader a sense of being there.

Massimino's gifted storytelling describing his shuttle flights and spacewalking (total of four) in 2002 and 2009 to service the Hubble Space Telescope are vivid with doses of humility. Orbiting 350 miles above the Earth during the '09 mission, he was the first person to tweet from space and the last human to work inside Hubble. On the '09 flight, trying to repair Hubble, he describes intense repairs with gripping writing.

Most people will never journey to space, but here's a literary ride to the cosmos thanks to an American "Spaceman" from Long Island, N.Y. A wonderful, insightful and empowering book.

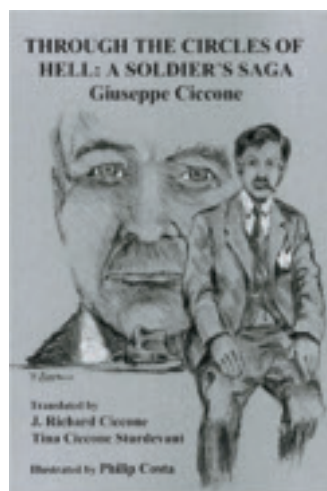
—Robert Bartus Jr.

**Great Italian American Food in New England: History, Traditions & Memories**

By John F. Carafoli  
Globe Pequot Press; 232 pages; \$22.95 paperback

*Community is what this book is about.*

Imagine a six-state, five-spread, often four-generation-inspired Italian American culinary New England road trip. Start with a secret lunganega sausage antipasto recipe in Vermont. Continue to Massachusetts to sample fresh tomato-garlic-and-basil sauce made by the mayor, or "the godmother of Gloucester." Pick up pasta made on 60-year-old vintage machines in Connecticut. Add secondi from the place that brought the first pizza to southern New Hampshire. Choose handmade southern Italian cheeses from a Massachusetts-based Molisano. End with dolci in Maine, with gelati that mix Maine blueberries, Sicilian



routine circumvention that gave license to search homes and seize property; to the restrictions that were imposed on fishermen residing along the West Coast; to the forced evacuations and internments of families, “Branded” is a meticulously researched, scholarly book.

However, it is DiStasi's heart-wrenching interviews with second- and third-generation family members that makes this such a powerful work. These narratives are often first-hand testimonies to government overzealousness. As one eyewitness recalls, “the image of my Papa and my Mamma wailing is etched deeply in my memory. And they were such good and proud American citizens. *Che vergogna!* (What shame!).”

— Douglas Gladstone

pistachios, and Ghirardelli chocolate with milk and cream from local dairy farms.

Part culinary ethnography, part oral histories, part farm-to-table testament to Italian American traditions, “Great Italian American Food in New England” explores everything historical, linguistic and surprising about the region’s food, spanning stories from first-generation immigrants to their great-grandchildren.

John Carafoli’s oeuvre reflects his personal resilience. When he was young, a fire ravaged his family’s home. Only a younger brother and father survived. Carafoli found his “solace and foundation” in memories and experiences of food. A love note to his Cape Cod village of Sagamore, the book is also a lifeline to Italian Americans curious about their roots.

— Kristen Keppel

### Branded; How Italian Immigrants Became 'Enemies' During World War II

By Lawrence DiStasi

Sanniti Publications; 312 pages; \$22.95 paperback

*In the days and months to come, more than one million permanent resident aliens in the United States would learn the same lesson: with war, their rights as Americans had vanished, had in fact been reversed.*

No chapter in our country's history is perhaps more troubling than the way 694,000 Italian immigrants were forced to register as aliens of enemy nationalities during the period before and during World War II. In “Branded,” DiStasi not only chronicles the antecedents of anti-Italian sentiment in America, he examines the disturbing way the Federal government mistreated its un-naturalized immigrants.

From the pink identification cards that had to be displayed upon request; to the travel prohibitions that prevented parents from visiting military installations, where their sons were defending the freedoms that they themselves were stripped of; to the Fourth Amendment’s

### Through the Circles of Hell: A Soldier's Saga

By Giuseppe Ciccone

*We had all arrived at our homeland,  
To our beloved Italy.  
It is true; we were all going to war.  
We were going to help our motherland.*

An Italian soldier using poetry to express his emotional anguish at the Italian Front during WWI is the basis for the book “Through the Circles of Hell: A Soldier’s Saga,” by Giuseppe Ciccone. With references to the Bible, Dante’s “Divine Comedy,” mythology and history, the pages of this book bring to life Ciccone’s traumatic experience during WWI and his possible suffering from “shell shock,” known today as PTSD.

Ciccone gave his manuscript to his daughter, Tina Ciccone Sturdevant, in the early 1970s when she traveled from the United States to Italy to visit him. The original poem was written in Italian; starting in 2012, J. Richard Ciccone, MD, (Giuseppe’s grandson and a professor of psychiatry) and Sturdevant translated it into English.

Born in the Calabria region in 1887, Ciccone immigrated to America in 1901, but felt a calling to fight for his native country and returned to Italy in 1916. His poetic lines, from 1916-1917, document his inner struggles with trench warfare in the Italian army with straightforward yet powerful words:

It was like the depths of hell  
Where Pluto stokes the fires.

There was no shelter from death.  
The fighting was everywhere.

With photographs of the original poem on one page and the English translation on the opposite page, with footnotes, there’s plenty of thought-provoking imagery drawn from the words. A fascinating poem about one man’s confrontation with war.

— Robert Bartus Jr. ▲

Director Dino Risi's

# Neorealist Time Capsules

By Maria Garcia

A Film Retrospective at New York's  
Museum of Modern Art



Catherine Spaak and Vittorio Gassman in a scene from "Il Sorpasso"

**In the summer of 1943,** THE CONTROVERSIAL ALLIED BOMBING RAIDS ON ROME LED TO THE SHUTTERING OF CINECITTÀ'S STUDIOS, THE CENTER OF ITALY'S FILMMAKING INDUSTRY. AFTERWARD, THE DAMAGED LOTS BECAME THE BACKDROP FOR A REFUGEE CAMP, HOUSING THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DISPLACED BY THE WAR. THAT IS WHEN ITALY'S FILMMAKERS TOOK TO THE STREETS. THEIR FLIGHT, EMBARKED UPON WITH A SHORTAGE OF EQUIPMENT, FILMSTOCK AND EXPERIENCED CAST AND CREW MEMBERS, MANY HAVING FLED FASCIST ITALY, LED TO ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PERIODS IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE CINEMA. ITALIAN NEOREALISM, WHICH LASTED LITTLE MORE THAN A DECADE, TRANSFORMED ITALY'S NARRATIVES.

Movie-makers began to chronicle the lives of orphaned children and working-class Italians, many homeless and impoverished by war. The feature films they produced, often based on real events, were usually accomplished with non-professional actors. Ironically, these revolutionary movies, including Rossellini's "Rome, Open City" (1945) and Vittorio de Sica's "The Bicycle Thief" (1948), were box office flops. De Sica's film took eighth place in Italy at the time of its release, bested by American comedies, and movies starring Totò, the "prince of laughter."

By the early 1950s, Italy's state-funded film industry began releasing comedies and dramas with a veneer of Neorealism's social and political critique, but with well-known or up-and-coming actors, such as Vittorio Gassman, Silvana Mangano and Stefania Sandrelli. A brief transitional period that some critics snidely referred to as "*neorealismo rosa*" or rose-colored Neorealism, gave way to the era now dubbed "*commedia all'Italiana*." The latter began with such films as Mario Monicello's "Big Deal on Madonna Street" (1958) and Pietro Germi's "Divorce Italian Style" (1961).

In 2015, the Museum of Modern Art and Luce Cinecittà, a state-owned agency of Italy's Ministry of Culture that promotes Italian film, organized an excellent retrospective of the work of *commedia all'Italiana* writer-director Antonio Pietrangeli (1919-1968). In December 2016, the same partnership curated a less impressive festival of the

films of Dino Risi (1917-2008), one of the most successful writer-directors of the *neorealismo rosa* and *commedia all'Italiana* eras. Luce Cinecittà also partnered with the Film Society of Lincoln Center in the Spring of 2016 to screen the films of Anna Magnani that spanned these eras, and that included newly restored prints of the iconic actress's great performances. (All three events were covered by Ambassador.)

These retrospectives are the result of a 2012 initiative by Luce Cinecittà to digitize its archives, which contain over 100,000 movies and photos dating back to 1927. Because the technology that aids in film restoration, preservation and storage changes rapidly, given the choice of what to preserve, most curators tend not to discriminate too closely. The result is movies that are historical artifacts. Dino Risi's work is a case in point. Unlike Pietrangeli, whose films hold up to modern scrutiny, Risi's are mostly time capsules. One outstanding exception is "il Sorpasso" (1962). Risi's masterpiece was restored with the very latest 4K technology, which allows for custom repairs to image and sound.

Among the other 16 features screened at MoMA were the director's breakout film "The Sign of Venus" (1955), a drama co-starring a very young and slender Sophia Loren and the wonderful Franca Valeria; "A Difficult Life" (1958), about the quest of a former partisan for meaningful work and to rekindle a wartime romance; and "il Gaucho" (1965), which pokes

good-natured fun at the film industry. In addition, Risi's newly discovered documentary shorts, many filmed just weeks after the end of World War II, were screened in their original 16mm and 35mm formats.

The Milano-born Risi was a psychiatrist before becoming a full-time filmmaker. It is undoubtedly his original profession, chosen to please his mother, that gave him a gift for characterization. That talent lends unusual depth to Italian movie stereotypes. In "The Sign of Venus," for example, a post-war capitalist, played by Alberto Sordi, is a *mammone*, or mama's boy, who compensates for his inability to have a relationship with a woman through his work as a black marketeer.

Risi's screenplays, on the other hand, are less effective, often comprised of longueurs and narrative tangents that weaken the film's structure. In the *commedia all'Italiana* tradition, his comedies are tinged with sadness or tragedy, but because they primarily reflect Italian life at the time they were made, even those of the 1970s are marked by race, class and gender biases that, in America, would have garnered some criticism. In Risi's "Scent of a Woman" (1974), for instance, a blind army officer "smells" women and stalks them. (It inspired Martin Brest's 1992 remake, noteworthy only for Al Pacino's Oscar-winning performance.) Risi's recurring depictions of men broken by war, such as Sordi's character in "A Difficult Life," intended as a social critique, are difficult for modern audiences to appreciate, couched as they are in a *neorealismo rosa* story.

This is not the case in "il Sorpasso," a classic male-quest story and road movie. The film was released here as "The Easy Life," but its literal translation, "The Overtaking," more accurately describes the plot. "Il Sorpasso" stars Vittorio Gassman as Bruno, the recurring male character in so many Italian films—narcissistic and irresponsible, yet the epitome of male bravado. Risi explores the attraction of such characters, revealing the dark underside of the Italian psyche. A middle-aged guy who insinuates himself into the life of a shy student (Jean-Louis Trintignant), ➤



"I mostri". 1963. Italy. Directed by Dino Risi

Bruno also “overtakes” Roberto, leading him into risky physical behavior and psychological peril. With his clinical eye, Risi illustrates the deleterious effect of Bruno’s self-centeredness at the same time that the audience may be reveling in the character’s irreverence and sardonic humor.

Risi worked with nearly all of *commedia all’Italiana*’s best actors, including Vittorio Gassman, Nino Manfredi, Alberto Sordi, Catherine Spaak, Ugo Tognazzi and Franca Valeri, so his *oeuvre* represents an opportunity to appreciate Italy’s largely uncelebrated contribution to screen acting. Historians of any stripe can mine Risi’s films for their snapshots of Italian life; in this sense the influence of Neorealism on his work is apparent.

In a 1979 interview, Risi said of Italian filmmakers: “We all drank of the neorealist milk.” That *latte* was largely born of Socialism, and the Italian people’s enduring humanity. This view is most obviously articulated in “A Difficult Life,” in the dignity conferred on Sordi’s character, despite his many imperfections.

In that same 1979 interview, Risi named “*il Sorpasso*” as the film “that resembles me the most,” and “*The Difficult Life*” as “close to my heart.” These two films also represent his best work. Risi’s success, and his rise in Italy’s postwar era, in *neorealismo rosa* and *commedia all’Italiana*, may be explained by the fact that Italians, burdened by the memory of war, wanted to laugh. Yet, it may also lie in the fact that his protagonists, mostly men whose lives were interrupted by war or bad luck or poverty, do not always triumph in the end, though they do not lead what Henry David Thoreau described as “lives of quiet desperation.” In the Italian sensibility, what deserves celebration is simply *la vita*, life lived in the moment. Adjectives to describe it are absurd, backward glances.

Risi’s early appeal lay in characters drawn from real life—women pregnant from wartime romances, or raising their child alone because their lovers abandoned them, and men who in mid-life regretted that abandonment. Instead of the imperfect visages and regional accents of Neo-



“*La fabbrica del Duomo*”. 1949. Italy. Directed by Dino Risi

realist “actors,” audiences saw themselves represented by Sophia Loren or Alberto Sordi or Vittorio Gassman.

“*Il Sorpasso*” is the departure. It is about what happens when people invite chaos into their lives—and forget that *la vita* is everything. Like all great movies, “*il Sorpasso*” defies the categorization of scholars and film promoters, and belongs to no era. ▲

*Maria Garcia is a New York City-based author, writer and frequent contributor to Ambassador magazine. Her reviews and feature articles also appear regularly in Film Journal International and Cineaste. Her book, “Cinematic Quests for Identity: The Hero’s Encounter with the Beast,” was published this Spring. Visit her website at mariagarciawrites.com.*

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Captain Artemio Battaglia, a young World War II pilot, who when repulsed by the brutality of Mussolini’s fascist state, joins a partisan band to fight the Nazi death squads that were terrorizing Italian citizens.

Nicholas Gage, author of bestselling *Eleni* praised *Heaven Cries* for reminding “us of the true spring waters of freedom: hope, kindness, courage, and love. In the dark light of recent events, this history is particularly relevant.”

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# going home

## the Della Robbia exhibition

This incredible, two-ton, “Resurrection of Christ” arch sat in relative obscurity at The Brooklyn Museum since the early 1900s. How’d it get there? Luca della Robbia’s exquisite terracotta works, and his sculptures in bronze and marble, were widely collected in the late-19th and early-20th centuries by Americans traveling to Italy who wanted to bring home a piece of the Renaissance. A piece, indeed.

See, Luca Della Robbia was a 15<sup>th</sup>-century master sculptor who invented a miraculous terracotta glazing technique that retained true colors over centuries. The technique made him one of the most innovative artists of the 15th century—not bad company since it included the creative likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli. Luca shared the secret technique with his nephew, artist Andrea della Robbia, who passed it on to his own artistic sons. The Della Robbia family workshop in Florence prospered for generations over a century before its secrets were lost forever.

As the story goes, Niccolò and Alessandro Antinori, of the famous winemaking Antinori family, which dates back before 14<sup>th</sup> century in Florence, commissioned Luca Della Robbia in the early 16th century to create a magnificent arch known as the “Resur-



Left: Alessia Antinori at the “Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence” exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston in August

Right: “Prudence”; ca. 1475; Glazed terracotta; Andrea della Robbia; Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art



“Resurrection of Christ” (before conservation); ca 1520-1524; Giovanni della Robbia (Italian, Florentine, 1469-1529/30); Italian Renaissance; glazed terracotta. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

rection of Christ.” One of the Antinoris is depicted in the artwork, and Della Robbia sculpted the Antinori family crest into both corners.

Fast forward to August 2016, when the Museum of Fine Arts Boston unveiled a wonderful show of glazed terracotta sculptures created by several generations of the Della Robbia family, borrowed from American collections, alongside choice loans from Italy. That launched the first U.S. exhibit ever of Della Robbia.

Fast forward again to February 5, when the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., opened the magnificent exhibition “Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence,” sponsored in part by Marchese Antinori and on exhibit through June 4. The largest work in the exhibition is an architectural arch from the Antinori estate.

“The Della Robbia exhibition is steeped in history. It transports us back to the Renaissance period in

Florence. The colors are as vivid today as they were almost 500 years ago,” says Alessia Antinori, the 26<sup>th</sup> generation of the Antinori family that today still ranks among the world’s elite winemakers.

“My family has a personal connection to one of the masterpieces.... It’s an amazing piece! My family supported the year-long conservation of this piece to restore it to its original splendor. We are so pleased that it is now on display at the National Gallery of Art.”

Italy’s Antinori family is especially pleased that the Brooklyn Museum, in late 2017 or early 2018, will lend the Antinori Della Robbia arch to the Bargello Museum in Florence.

In other words, in the moment, the Antinori Della Robbia arch will be going home.

— Don Oldenburg

Top Right: Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; \*Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1921

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# Like Father, Like Son

## *Richard Pitino Creating His Own Shot*

By Wayne Randazzo

**F**or University of Minnesota men's basketball head coach Richard Pitino, it would be easy to just rely on his name. Richard is the son of basketball royalty after all. Rick Pitino, Richard's father, is still an active head coach at the University of Louisville, but his place in basketball history has already been cemented with induction into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2013.

Between the collegiate level and the National Basketball Association (NBA), the elder Pitino has amassed nearly 1,000 wins as a head coach. He has been to the Final Four seven times, he has won two national championships, and he has guided two of the NBA's most storied franchises, the New York Knicks and Boston Celtics.

Despite all of that, Richard Pitino uses up little of his day thinking about how he's going to size up with his famous father.

"I don't wake up in the morning and think about how I'm going to try to live up to my father's name," he says. "I'm usually thinking about where I might have to bring my kids or something about the next game."

Pitino's a lot like his father in many ways. He works just as hard. He believes in his team just as much, and he doesn't take anything for granted.

Now in his third season in Dinkytown, Pitino, at age 34, still holds the distinction of being the youngest head men's basketball coach of any Power Five conference team—the NCAA's top conferences—in the country.

As the Gophers trudge through the Big Ten schedule, it's easy to overlook the progress that the team has made. Last year, Minnesota managed just two wins against conference foes. This year, they split their first 12 games, including a pair of hard-fought overtime wins. The presence of freshman Amir Coffey has helped get the Gophers off the ground.

"Amir could have gone to a higher profile school, but he wanted to stay right here in Minnesota and build a winner," Pitino says. "Those are the kinds of kids we need to make this thing successful."

Pitino knows what a winner looks like. He spent five years as an assistant at top programs, including three on



Richard Pitino, head coach of Men's Basketball at the University of Minnesota, at Williams Arena

the bench at Louisville alongside his father. He also had two seasons away from dad, at the University of Florida, assisting Billy Donovan (currently head coach for the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder).

It was those experiences that helped fast track him to the title of head coach. After a one-year stop as head coach at Florida International University to get his feet wet (he led FIU to its first winning record in 13 years), the University of Minnesota came calling to hire Pitino to replace longtime NCAA basketball coach Tubby Smith.

Year one at Minnesota was no problem. Pitino's squad won 25 games and the 2014 National Invitation Tournament (NIT), beating Larry Brown's Mustangs of Southern Methodist University. The 25 wins were a school record for Minnesota, but the team didn't have a chance to rebuild. That's something it's doing now as Pitino can finally put his stamp on the future of the program—and the future of the family name. ▲

*Wayne Randazzo is the New York Mets pregame and postgame show host and fill-in play-by-play announcer on WOR-AM. He's also a freelance television play-by-play announcer for ESPN and Big Ten Network. Read his first-person column, "A Day in My Life," about being radio broadcaster for the New York Mets, in the Fall 2016 issue of Ambassador.*

# CELEBRATING OUR HERITAGE

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# NIAF Museum Exhibiting Italian American History

By John M. Viola, NIAF President



Don Oldenburg

Most people who've visited my home, or set foot in my cluttered office, would probably diagnose me as a hoarder. What they've failed to realize is that I am the son, grandson, and great-grandson of antique dealers, and I have spent the majority of my life traveling around the country and Italy putting together a fantastic collection. You see, my hoard is actually a carefully curated collection of over 2,000 artifacts that tell the story of the Italian and Italian American experience. In recent months, this trove of objects has formed the core of the new NIAF Museum and Victoria J. Mastrobuono Learning Center we are building at the NIAF Headquarters.

The Ambassador Peter F. Secchia Building, which NIAF has called home since 1994, sits just off of Dupont Circle in the heart of Washington, D.C. Although it has served these past 20-some years as a proud and welcoming home for our Foundation, many at NIAF have felt that we could do more with such a special place. So, in 2010, when our Foundation received a bequest from the estate of Victoria J. Mastrobuono (the largest gift in NIAF's history), we made a concerted investment in transforming our headquarters to even better serve the Italian American community. In truth, I can't count the number of times I've been asked by a member of our community, "What can be done to create a truly significant Italian American Museum here in the nation's capital?"

Recognizing this glaring absence, and aware of our role as the Italian

American voice in Washington, in 2014, our Board of Directors voted to establish the NIAF Museum here at headquarters. The idea was simple: use our building as a central repository, collecting the memorabilia, personal stories, and oral histories of our people to tell the complete Italian American story, and to create a centralized resource for all Italian Americans to contribute to the national discourse on who we are and what our experience has been.

Last year, we launched the NIAF Italian American Museum Fellowship to find young student-scholars to curate the items we have acquired and design the Museum's exhibits. As we set out to find an ideal curator for this new venture, we realized that, instead of hiring one person, we could create an opportunity for young people in our community to join NIAF and share their take on our community's history with the thousands of members and guests who visit us each year.

Under the tutelage of a volunteer professional curator, these young people are not only learning Italian American history and gaining invaluable work experience, they are telling the Italian American experience from the perspective of a new generation!

A 2014 interior remodeling of the Secchia Building created two interactive exhibit spaces to house artifacts of the Italian American story from 1860 to today. A special interactive space in our foyer tells the story of the National Italian American Foundation from its founding in 1975.

In the years to come, we plan for a significant expansion of our small museum with an area already designated for the NIAF Italian American Memory Center—an electronic database for Italian American oral history—along with an onsite memory booth for Italian Americans to record their own stories which can be added to our repository.

The Victoria J. Mastrobuono Learning Center will assemble and make available thousands of hours of audio-visual resources and catalogue miles of books and extensive digital archives that NIAF has acquired over the past 42 years.

So far, the Museum's early stages have been an unprecedented hit with visitors at headquarters. Our Museum Fellows gave hundreds of enthusiastic visitors a first glimpse of what we have planned at a mobile exhibit at Expo Italiana during our 41st Anniversary Gala Weekend. Famous names from Italian American community, such as Lena Prima and Franco Harris, have already contributed personal artifacts, and countless guests, following their visits, have sent us personal heirlooms that tell their family stories—and will now help to tell the story of us all.

If you're in Washington, be sure to come visit us. The collection you'll see represents a tiny sampling of the pieces we maintain at headquarters. It's our hope that you will enjoy them and appreciate their place in our history, and ultimately join us on this exciting journey to preserve, promote and protect the heritage of 25 million Americans of Italian descent. ▲

## The 2017 NIAF Leadership Retreat

Photos by Don Oldenburg

Washington, D.C. – At the fourth-annual NIAF Leadership Retreat, members of the NIAF Board of Directors, the Italian American Leadership Council (IALC), and NIAF staff converged on the Nation’s Capital, at NIAF Headquarters at the Ambassador Peter F. Secchia Building, January 12-13, for two days of meeting, workshops, socializing and fine dining, to plan the Foundation’s upcoming year.

Discussions and decision-making kicked off on early that Thursday morning for Board members and Executive Officers with a working breakfast that lead into an Organizational Update session and an Executive Committee meeting. Following lunch, Board and IALC members joined staffers in working sessions that discussed major 2017 NIAF events and initiatives, from the New York Spring Gala (March 22) and the Anniversary Gala (November 3-4) to new programs for young professional NIAF

members and continued development of the NIAF Italian American Museum.

Thursday evening, after a full day of work, Retreat participants enjoyed a casual and delectable dinner at award-winning chef and restaurateur Luigi Diotaiuti’s new and acclaimed contemporary Italian restaurant Aperto, in downtown Washington. A longtime friend and supporter of NIAF, Chef Luigi and his staff served house-cured duck-breast prosciutto and artisan cheeses, tagliata (Tuscan-style ribeye) and house-cured Lamb Chops Scottadito, among other exceptional dishes and Italian wines.

After two productive days, the Retreat sessions adjourned in early-afternoon on Friday to allow participants to escape the city for the airport and train station ahead of the usual Friday rush—and before the early arrivals for the following week’s Presidential Inauguration.



Arriving at NIAF Headquarters for the Retreat: (top) IALC member Giulio Gianturco with NIAF Director of Programs Gabriella Mileti and NIAF Chief Financial Officer John P. Della Fave; and (above) NIAF Vice Chairs Gabriel A. Battista and IALC member Anthony DiSandro.



Dinner at Aperto: (above) NIAF Regional Event Planner Andrea Bartlett, IALC member Tom Gentile, IALC member Giulio Gianturco and NIAF Public Policy Manager Lisa Femia; (top left) NIAF Vice Chair Patricia de Stacy Harrison and NIAF Board Member Mike Zarelli; (left) Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society Treasurer Peter Bell and Mary Ellen Cosentino with IALC members Joe Cosentino and

Sam Vitale; and (bottom) IALC member and Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society President Maria D’Andrea-Yothers and IALC member Anthony DiSandro.



Chef Luigi Diotaiuti welcomes NIAF Board member Basil Russo and wife Patricia Russo (far left) and NIAF President John M. Viola (left) to his new D.C. restaurant Aperto.



During the Retreat planning sessions: (right) IALC members Lawrence Purpuro and Joe Cosentino with NIAF Board member Basil Russo; and (below) NIAF Webmaster and Network Services Administrator Chris Korin (on right) and NIAF Finance Manager Xavier Atizol



## Feast of the Seven Fishes Reception on Capitol Hill

On December 12, NIAF hosted a Christmas reception on Capitol Hill celebrating the Italian American Christmas Eve tradition of the “Feast of the Seven Fishes.” Held in conjunction with the Italian American Congressional Staff Association, the reception welcomed young professionals working on and off Capitol Hill, and members of the NIAF community. Italian wines accompanied seven different seafood finger foods, and guests left with bags of pasta as a Christmas gift from the Foundation.

— Lisa Femia



NIAF Congressional Fellows Amanda Coker, Sarah Meo and Adrianna Tomasello with NIAF Public Policy Manager Lisa Femia (in front)



(Right) NIAF Public Policy Manager Lisa Femia welcomes guests to NIAF’s Christmas reception on Capitol Hill; (left) The buffet included seafood and fish pasta dishes, eggrolls and other finger foods.



## White Truffle Auction in Philadelphia

On November 13, Enoteca Regionale Piemontese Cavour and Regione Piemonte hosted the World Alba White Truffle Auction that took place simultaneously at the Union League in Philadelphia and at the Grinzane Cavour Castle in Piemonte, Italy.

As guests here savored a gourmet luncheon at the Union League, the largest event in the world dedicated to the prized Alba White Truffle took place in a unique international competition among cuisine experts, renown chefs, entrepreneurs and philanthropists, bidding to win extraordinary auction lots of truffles and wines from Barolo and Barbaresco, with a portion of the \$60,000 raised in the United States donated to NIAF. The prize item that had bids flying worldwide via live satellite was a 1,170 gram (more than 2.5 pounds) Alba White truffle won with a bid of \$105,000 Euros by Beijing chef and restaurateur Dong Zhenxiang.

“We are overwhelmed by the tremendous response to the auction...,” said NIAF Chairman Joseph V. Del Raso, who attended the auction luncheon. “We are happy that we were able to raise money through luncheon tickets and the auction to support the wonderful work of NIAF.”

Also attending was Italy’s Ambassador to the United States Armando Varricchio, and NIAF Board member Frank Giordano, who the next week attended a dinner with Del Raso and their wives at the Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C., where the chef used truffles from the auction.



NIAF Chairman Joseph V. Del Raso and wife Dolores Del Raso, Ambassador Armando Varricchio and wife Micaela Barbagallo, singer Deana Martin, and NIAF Board member Frank Giordano and wife Dottie Giordano at the truffle luncheon and auction.

Photos by Bachtrach Photography



The Union League in Philadelphia



Executive Sous Chef Denny Santiago presents one of the prized truffles up for auction to Dolores Del Raso.



Some of the white truffle and wine lots on display for auction (top); while potential bidders took a closer look (middle); and guests dined on pasta with shaved Alba white truffles.

On December 14, NIAF's annual Christmas Open House once again combined the spirit of the season with the tradition and taste of Italy as more than 300 invited guests celebrated an evening of music, food, open bar, Christmas décor and rousing karaoke. Besides NIAF officers and Board members, many foundation members and friends, as well as Italy's Ambassador to the United States Armando Varricchio, were on hand. And, once again, Warrior Catering provided a bounty of Italian appetizers and dishes!



Photos by Don Oldenburg

# Christmas Open House at



**NIAF Public Policy Manager Lisa Femia welcomes arriving guests.**



**NIAF President John M. Viola and Italy's Ambassador to the United States Armando Varricchio**



**Robert Donofrio and Katie Valianti-Collins with Samantha and David Chandler**



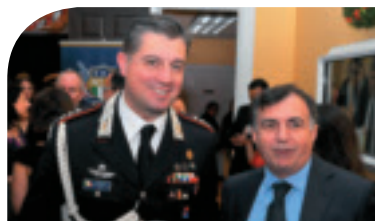
**Elena Valeriote and David Mazaheri**



**James Henderson and Lisa Comento**



**NIAF Congressional Fellows Sarah Meo, Adrianna Tomasello and Amanda Coker with NIAF Board member Anita Bevacqua McBride, co-chair of the Foundation's Education and Grants Committee**



**Carabiniere Bramati Luigi with Enzo Bruni**



**Radio Kings Orchestra's Robin and Rick Gordon**



**Jackson Tovar, Nicole Valente and Stefan Lapcevich**



**Italy's Ambassador to the United States Armando Varricchio (center) and other guests at the holiday buffet table**



**Macarena Dagnino, Lara Gabriele and Faride Zahirpour**



**Karaoke is a Christmas Open House tradition at NIAF Headquarters!**

# MARK YOUR CALENDAR

NIAF is offering the following special events in the coming months. For more information, visit [niaf.org](http://niaf.org).

## MARCH 2017 Italian American Leadership Council (IALC) Summit

*Date:* March 22  
*Time:* 2 - 4:00 p.m.  
*Location:* Pepper, Hamilton LLP, New York Offices, 620 Eighth Ave., 37th Floor, New York, N.Y.  
*Contact:* Alex Benedetto at 202-939-3119 or [abenedetto@niaf.org](mailto:abenedetto@niaf.org)

## APRIL 2017 NIAF-Frank J. Guarini Public Policy Forum

*Date:* TBD  
*Time:* 12 - 1:30 p.m.  
*Location:* TBD  
*Contact:* Jerry Jones at 202-939-3102 or [jerry@niaf.org](mailto:jerry@niaf.org)

## NOVEMBER 2017 NIAF 42nd Anniversary Awards Gala Weekend

*Date:* November 3 and 4  
*Location:* The Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel  
*Contact:* Jerry Jones at 202-939-3102 or [jerry@niaf.org](mailto:jerry@niaf.org)

## NIAF New York Spring Gala

*Date:* March 22  
*Time:* 6:30 p.m. Cocktail Reception; 7:30 p.m. Dinner  
*Location:* Cipriani 42nd Street, 110 East 42nd Street, New York, N.Y.  
*Contact:* Jerry Jones at 202-939-3102 or [jerry@niaf.org](mailto:jerry@niaf.org)



NIAF President John Viola addresses the guests, alongside NIAF Board member Anita Bevacqua McBride and NIAF Vice Chair Gabriel A. Battista

Right: Mark Letenzi, Larry Pugliese and Jason Perezzo



Left: Andrea DeFelice and Jason Melton

Below, left to right: Roger Cochetti and Ginger Ingalls; Joe Moeller, Anita Bizzotto and Larry Pugliese; Buddy Vagnoni, Adriana Barbieri and Frank Van Riper; Guests are sent home with gifts of Nutella, Ferrero Roche chocolates and Bauli Panettone



## Long Island Students Tour NIAF HQ

On Friday, February 24, NIAF hosted a group of 39 students from the Italian Club at Lindenhurst High School, in Lindenhurst, N.Y., that was on a two-day excursion to the nation's capital. But, as the Club's advisor John Rossillo explained, the usual tourist sites in Washington, D.C., weren't the Club's primary focus.

"The idea of the trip was to see the Italian Embassy, and what it does, and to see what NIAF does," he said, "...and then we'll also see the nation's capital."

While at NIAF Headquarters, NIAF President John M. Viola addressed the group and introduced them to some of the artifacts in the NIAF Italian American Museum exhibition. The students also received NIAF gift bags and watched a brief preview segment of the PBS film "The Italian Americans."

Following the NIAF stop, the group was heading to Georgetown University to tour the campus, and take in some of the famous monuments after dark. But what they were equally excited about was on the way back to the South Shore of Long Island, they were stopping in Baltimore's Little Italy for dinner.

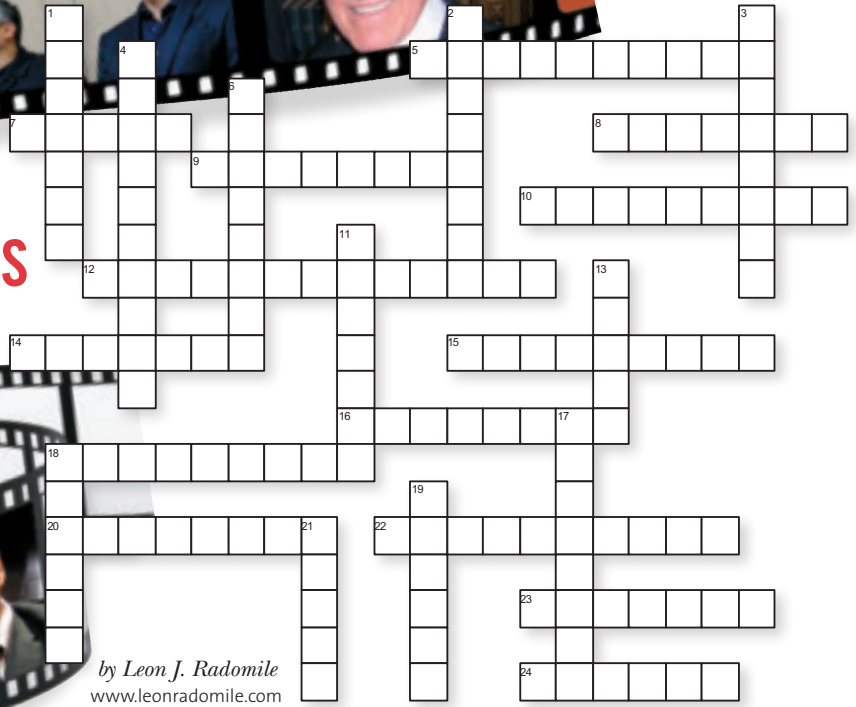
Photos by Don Oldenburg



Clockwise from above: Italian Club students arriving at NIAF Headquarters; NIAF President John M. Viola welcoming the students; and with Lindenhurst High School Italian Club advisor and students.



# BEHIND THE SCENES IN CINEMA



by Leon J. Radomile  
www.leonradomile.com

**ACROSS**

- 5 The first woman nominated for an Academy Award for directing "Seven Beauties." Also known for directing such films as "Love and Anarchy" and "Swept Away."
- 7 He persuaded Dino De Laurentiis to build a movie studio in Wilmington, N.C. A studio executive, he later became president of EUE Screen Gems Studios in 1984. Largest such facility east of California.
- 8 Responsible for instituting the film-rating system which protects and informs the public on the content of films. A past president of the Motion Picture Association of America.
- 9 Filmmaker and screenwriter best known for directing such movies as "Harry Potter," "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Home Alone." He also wrote "Gremlins," "The Goonies" and "Young Sherlock Holmes."
- 10 Composed and arranged scores for more than 400 film and television productions. He received an Honorary Academy Award Oscar in 2007.
- 12 Dynamic team directs Marvel Comic superhero films. They are collectively known by their last name.
- 14 Actor and film director has starred and supported a bevy of successful films and TV series including: "Reservoir Dogs," "Desperado," "The Sopranos," "Fargo," "Boardwalk Empire" and "The Big Lebowski."
- 15 This filmmaker and screenwriter is famous for his nonlinear storylines, excessive violence, ensemble casting and movie soundtracks primarily containing songs and score pieces from the 1960s to the 1980s.
- 16 A San Francisco native, he is the president of Lakeshore Entertainment. Worked with Clint Eastwood to produce the 2004 Oscar Winning Best Picture "Million Dollar Baby." This esteemed CEO is also president of the Producers Guild of America.
- 18 Italy's largest film studio complex founded in 1937 and has been dubbed Hollywood on the Tiber. The HBO series "Rome" was filmed there from 2004-2007.

- 20 First female to direct a motion picture ("Big," 1988) that grossed over \$100 million, along with "A League of Their Own." Her brother was also a major TV director and writer. Birth surname was Masciarelli.
- 22 Highly regarded writer and film director who brought Shakespeare and grand opera to the masses. His film version of "Romeo and Juliet" received an Oscar nomination and had huge financial success.
- 23 Director, producer and writer whose career spanned 40 years. Known for his psychological thrillers and suspense filled crime films. Among his successes are: "Carrie" and "Mission: Impossible."
- 24 Four of his movies won Oscars as Best Foreign Language Film. One of them, "Two Women," based on the novel by Alberto Moravia, won Sophia Loren an Oscar for her performance.

**DOWN**

- 1 Best known for his work and contributions to the first two X-Men movies. Also produced "Transformers" for DreamWorks and Paramount.
- 2 He has produced and written for such shows as "The Rockford Files," and "Northern Exposure." Best known for his critically acclaimed HBO drama, "The Sopranos." What is David Chase's Italian surname?
- 3 This screenwriter and film producer won an Oscar ("Gladiator") for Best Original Screenplay in 2001. His best known screenplays include "King Arthur," "Gladiator," "Amistad" and "Jumpin' Jack."
- 4 His film "The Last Emperor" won nine Academy Awards in 1987, including Best Movie, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screen Play.
- 6 He was the producer of all but one of the first 17 James Bond movies.
- 11 A director, she also received an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for the comedy-drama "Lost in Translation" in 2003.

- You may also have heard of her father.
- 13 Formed a production company with Dino De Laurentiis to produce a number of major films, including Fellini's "La Strada," and "The Nights of Cabiria," both winners of Best Foreign Language Film Oscars. Husband of Sophia Loren.
- 17 Of Sicilian heritage, his movies have garnered 80 Academy Award nominations. Of those, 20 were Oscar winners. Simply put, he is widely regarded as one of the most significant and influential filmmakers in cinema history.
- 18 "The Deer Hunter" received nine Oscar nominations and won five, including best picture. Its director won two of them for co-writing and directing. Who was he?
- 19 Cofounder of Jersey Films. The production company is known for films such as "Pulp Fiction." Actor, director and producer, he gained prominence for his TV character Louie De Palma on "Taxi."
- 21 Italian film director, producer and screenwriter, credited as the inventor of the "Spaghetti Western." Think Clint Eastwood.

**SOLUTION**

- ACROSS**
- 5 Lina Wertmüller
  - 7 Brian DePalma
  - 8 Jack Valenti
  - 9 Chris Columbus
  - 10 Ennio Morricone
  - 12 The Russo Brothers
  - 13 Anthony & Joe
  - 14 Steve Buscemi
  - 15 Quentin Tarantino
  - 16 Gary Lucchesi
  - 18 Cinecittà
  - 20 Penny & Garry Marshall
  - 22 Franco Zeffirelli
- DOWN**
- 1 Tom Desanto
  - 2 David De Cesaris
  - 3 David Franzoni
  - 4 Bernardo Bertolucci
  - 6 Albert Broccoli
  - 11 Sofia Coppola
  - 13 Carlo Ponti
  - 17 Martin Scorsese
  - 18 Michael Cimino
  - 19 Danny De Vito
  - 21 Sergio Leone
  - 23 Franco Zeffirelli
  - 24 Vittorio De Sica



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