The Joy Of Growing Up Italian

The following article, *The Joy of Growing Up Italian*, has been circulating the Internet for a number of years. We have no idea who wrote it, but we'd like to congratulate him or her for a well-written and moving tribute.

Here is the article in parts. The article is written from an East Coast point-of-view but it captures the essence of growing up Italian starting in the 40's and 50's until the present.

If you are not of Italian ancestry, please do not be offended if we identify you as the "other group of immigrants." Although you do not have to be Italian to be a member of the ICF, it really does help. But then again I am the Heritage Chairperson, so my responsibility is to keep those old Italian stories alive.

I was well into adulthood before I realized that I was an American. Of course, I had been born in America and had lived there all of my life, but somehow it never occurred to me that just being a citizen of the United States meant I was an American. Americans were people who ate peanut butter and jelly on mushy white bread that came out of plastic packages. Me?? I was Italian.

For me, as I am sure for most second-generation Italian-American children who grew up in the 40s or 50s, there was a definite distinction drawn between US and THEM. We were Italians. Everybody else – the Irish, German, Polish, Jewish – they were the "MED-E-GONES." There were no hard feelings, just – well – we were sure ours was the better way. For instance, we had a bread man, a coal man, an ice man, a fruit and vegetable man, a watermelon man, and a fish man; we even had a man who sharpened knives and scissors who came right to our homes, or at least right outside our homes. They were the many peddlers who plied the Italian neighborhoods. We would wait for their call, their

yell, their individual distinctive sound. We knew them all, they knew us. Americans went to the stores for most of their foods – what a waste.

Truly, I pitied their loss. They never knew the pleasure of waking up every morning to find a hot, crisp loaf of Italian bread waiting behind the screen door. And instead of being able to climb on back of the peddler's truck a couple of times a week just to hitch a ride, most of my "MED-E-GONE" friends had to be satisfied going to the A&P.

When it came to food, it always amazed me that my American friends or classmates only ate turkey on Thanksgiving or Christmas. Or rather, that they only ate turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. Now we Italians – we also had turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce - but only after we had finished the antipasto, soup, lasagna, meatballs, salad and whatever else Mama thought might be appropriate for that particular holiday. This turkey was usually accompanied by a roast of some kind (just in case somebody walked in who didn't like turkey) and was followed by an assortment of fruits, nuts, pastries, cakes and, of course, homemade cookies. No holiday was complete without some home baking; none of that store-bought stuff for us. This is where you learned to eat a seven-course meal between noon and 4:00PM, how to handle hot chestnuts and put peach wedges in red wine. I truly believe Italians live a romance with food.

Speaking of food – Sunday was truly the big day of the week. That was the day you'd wake up to the smell of garlic and onions frying in olive oil. As you lay in bed, you could hear the hiss as tomatoes were dropped into the pan. Sunday we always had gravy (the "MED-E-GONES" called it "sauce") and macaroni (they called it "pasta"). Sunday would not be Sunday without going to Mass. Of

course, you couldn't eat before Mass because you had to fast before receiving Communion. But, the good part was we knew that when we got home, we'd find hot meatballs frying, and nothing tastes better than newly-fried meatballs and crisp bread dipped in a pot of gravy.

There was another difference between US and THEM. We had gardens, not just flower gardens, but huge gardens where we grew tomatoes, tomatoes, and more tomatoes. We ate them, cooked them, jarred them. Of course, we also grew peppers, basil, lettuce and squash. Everybody had a grapevine and a fig tree, and in the fall everyone made homemade wine, lots of it. Of course, those gardens thrived so because we also had something else it seemed our American friends didn't seem to have. We had a grandfather.

It's not that they didn't have grandfathers; it's just that they didn't live in the same house, or on the same block. They visited their grandfathers. We ate with ours, and God forbid we didn't see him at least once a day. I can still remember my grandfather telling me how he came to America as a young man "on the boat". How the family lived in a rented tenement and took in boarders in order to make ends meet, how he decided he didn't want his children, five sons and two daughters, to grow up in that environment. All of this, of course, in his own version of Italian/English, which I soon learned to understand quite well.

So, when he saved enough, and I could never figure out how, he bought a house. That house served as the family headquarters for the next 40 years. I remember how he hated to leave, would rather sit on the back porch and watch his garden grow, and when he did leave for some special occasion, had to return as quickly as possible. After all, "Nobody's watching the house." I also remember the holiday when all the relatives would gather at my

grandfather's house and there'd be tables full of food and homemade wine and music. Women in the kitchen, men in the living room, and kids, kids everywhere. I must have half a million cousins, first and second, and some who aren't even related, but what did that matter? And my grandfather, his pipe in his mouth and his fine moustache trimmed, would sit in the middle of it all surveying his domain, proud of his family and how well his children had done. One was a cop, one a fireman, one had his trade, and of course there was always the rogue. And the girls, they had all married well and had fine husbands and healthy children and everyone knew respect.

He had achieved his goal in coming to America and to Rhode Island and knew his children and their children were achieving the same goals that were available to them in this great country because they were Americans. When my grandfather died years ago at the age of 76, things began to change... Slowly at first. Then uncles and aunts eventually began to cut down on their visits. Family gatherings were fewer and something seemed to be missing, although when we did get together, usually at my mother's house now, I always had the feeling he was there somehow. It was understandable, of course; everyone now had families of their own and grandchildren of their own. Today they visit once or twice a year. Today, we meet at weddings and wakes.

Lots of other things have changed, too. The old house my grandfather bought is now covered with aluminum siding, although my uncle still lives there, and of course my grandfather's garden is gone. The last of the homemade wine has long since been drunk and nobody covers the fig trees in the fall anymore. For a while we would make the rounds on the holidays visiting family. Now we occasionally visit the cemetery. A lot of them are there, grandparents, uncles, aunts, even my own father.

The holidays have changed, too. The great quantity of food we

once consumed without any ill effects is no good for us anymore. Too much starch, too much cholesterol, too many calories. And nobody bothers to bake anymore – too busy – and it's easier to buy it now and too much is no good for you. We meet at my house now, at least my family does, but it's not the same.

The difference between US and THEM is not so easily defined anymore, and I guess that's good. My grandparents were Italian Italians. My parents were Italian Americans. I'm an American Italian, and my children are American Americans. Oh, I'm an American all right and proud of it. Just as my grandfather would want me to be. We are all Americans now – the Irish, Germans, Poles, and Jews. U.S. citizens all – but somehow I still feel a little bit Italian. Call it culture, call it tradition, call it roots. I'm not really sure what it is. All I do know is that my children have been cheated out of a wonderful piece of their heritage.

They never knew my grandfather.