

“Authentic” Imports and the Examination of Chicken Parm

Johnny DeCarlo (June 23, 2010)



AT ARTHUR AVE MARKET WITH MY PAISAN

Arthur Avenue is indeed the REAL Little Italy.

After engaging in a lively facebook foodie discussion with my pal Anthony and then reading the recent i-Italy article, “Italian Cuisine: A Victim of Its Own Success,” I got to thinking, what exactly is “authentic” Italian cuisine? I think the way this should be approached is to first go back and break down the regional and generational distinctions of the cuisine. Regional, both in regards to where in Italy one’s bloodline is traced, and also where their families settle in America. Generational, by examining how the Italian-Italian dishes over time became Italian-American (which, back in the day was much closer to Italian-Italian). But now, even that has become diluted into a totally American-Italian menu and a whole separate thing entirely. I’m not an expert over here, but who exactly is the



authority on this subject? Is it not all a matter of personal taste and personal experience just like so many of the various aspects of Italian/Italian-Americana?

Take the “Parmigiana” concept, which did indeed originate in Southern Italy (originally with eggplant only), and upon our Italian grandparents coming to the U.S., they prepared it here as closely as they could to back home. Since the immigrants were generally not wealthy, a dish like that was inexpensive, yet very comforting and able to be stretched amongst usually large families (take my mother, one of six kids—and that was considered average-sized). Later, when chicken cutlets (and then even later) when veal cutlets became popular, the creation of every “parm” dish automatically became an integrated staple. We’re borderlining on total transformation of the original there, but what keeps it “authentic” is if it’s done like the previous generations did it. The sad thing is, too few of us sit down and eat dinner together as a family in 2010, and the family-owned and operated establishments are dying out. Is the “Italian Chicken Sandwich” served at Burger King supposed to be the substitute?! Same deal with Starbucks capitalizing on espresso. I can go on forever.

There has to be a middle ground in all this, because the idea of “authentic” too often mistakenly comes with the pre-determination of being some sort of upper-elite gourmet cuisine only, and that only highly sophisticated chefs can define it. The nonnas in present day Italy are not trained in the culinary arts, but just as their counterparts from decades past who came to America, they created culinary masterpieces. It’s a shame that we’ve gone from the Sunday afternoon dinner to the choices of dining in a stuffy four star restaurant, a sub-par pizza parlor or exposing ourselves to drive-thru fast food crap. What’s really scary is if The Old Country becomes “McDonald-ized” (we’ve all heard of the “Mcltaly” menu introduced in January as an attempt at making the Golden Arches more popular in Italia.) According to former agriculture minister Luca Zaia, the campaign exceeded expectations and will be expanded. Is Jamie Oliver going to have to hault his revolution here and go back to Europe?





Look, this sort of thing happens with many cuisines, but it is most like this with anything Italian-rooted. Moo Shu Pork is a real dish in China and the Chinese-American version obviously has its differences. But there is no such thing as General Tso’s Chicken there. The Chinese-Americans, however, embrace that dish, because they came up with it. So to them, it can in turn be considered authentic, and you’ll never see a non-Asian dishing out their cuisine (at least I never have here in North Jersey). By them continuing to make it, they make it in the way that they see fit—so they own it and perpetuate the authenticity. Plus, they have fun with it by including that always present fortune cookie with your order (another westernized item). Somewhere, Italian-Americans evidently became too preoccupied to seriously embrace the chicken parm and own it. So what happened? Well, everyone else just jumped on the bandwagon. Now, suddenly everything is in a state of confusion? If such a dish is made with nonna’s caring touch and with the best quality ingredients, I don’t have a problem with it. That’s really what defines the authenticity as far as I’m concerned.

Here in North Jersey there are many direct importers of D.O.P. tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella, extra virgin olive oil (the real stuff) and carriers of such products are where I conduct my dealings. You have to know exactly where to find them and make sure you taste and inspect every item. I learned a lot with regards to how to spot the fugazies. My previous occupation before cooking became my profession was as an importer and distributor of olive oil and other Italian products. I did this for several years and I feel that I can speak intelligently on the importing topic and I would like to offer some insight for those that may not be 100% positive if what they are buying is the real deal.

There are many laws and regulations and other factors that go into the importing process, both from the country you are getting the item from, and here in America at the ports. Inspections are very strict, and when you get something from Italy for example, such as cheese or meat, it must be stamped with the country of origin and authenticity is ensured. When you get something like olive oil from Italy, the cans must at least say “PRODUCT OF ITALY” to contain oil made from olives of Italy. However, that distinction may not necessarily ensure that that olive oil contains ONLY olives from Italy. That tin must however, list all of the countries that provided the olives. You have to look closely on the tin at all labels to find out if what you are buying truly is, 100% Italian.





The same deal works with tomatoes, but the laws with tomatoes are a little bit stricter. If you are buying a tomato sealed “SAN MARZANO D.O.P.,” that means they are tomatoes ONLY from the San Marzano region of Italy. But if there is no “D.O.P.” on it, they can be from San Marzano, but also from neighboring areas as well. Truthfully, the only way you can determine if something is 100% Italian (or from whatever country of origin the label claims it to be from), is if the label is written in that country’s native language. If you buy a bottle of Italian wine in America, there will always be an importer listed on the bottle and most of the writing will be in English. But if you saw that same bottle in Italy, the label will be written entirely in Italian. It is the same in any European country or anywhere in the world.

The point of all this is that you have to be careful and read all labels to ensure that whatever you are buying is what you think you are buying. Be careful with certain importers—especially fly by night characters who try to offer bargain basement prices. What they are doing is doctoring up the product and putting false labels on them. A few years ago, a company in Jersey was busted for selling “Italian olive oil” which was nothing more than American-made vegetable oil with food coloring in it. This is highly illegal and immoral—especially if you are an Italian American—thankfully this company was not run by any Italians. The best place to buy any imported Italian product is from old-fashioned Italian markets, located all throughout North Jersey and New York (Bronx, Brooklyn in particular), and 90% are run by Italian families. Those importers take pride in selling only Italian products and would never compromise their own integrity by altering it at all. The chain supermarkets do also have the real deal, but again, you must be careful with what you are buying and should always read ALL labels and fine print. I’d never compromise my own integrity by using anything less than the best.

Years ago, it was a little more difficult to obtain such items, thus another reason for some dilutions/adjustments in the recipes. Reading “substitute bacon for pancetta” in a cookbook is a direct reflection of that. Some people may not know the difference, but foodies and those who traveled to Italy, certainly do. Regardless, cooks and chefs in general are creative and are always going to add in a personal touch or twist. I repeat, quality has to always be the main ingredient, and if it is, the appreciation will be there.

Two things need to occur now. We need to carefully educate the diner on such differences so as not to disrespect the peasant food of yesteryear, while at the same time, bring back those old dishes and make sure that they are done correctly. There is a place for sausage and peppers, ciambotta, pasta fazule, braciola and lentils. But these things don’t need to be reinvented or promoted into some kind of trendy idea with conveniently researched adjectives like “rustic.” I’ve said it before, my mission in life is to simply duplicate the stylings of my grandmothers and recreate the old-fashioned Italian-American Sunday afternoon experience. It starts for me with the meatballs, because that’s where it all started when I was a kid. I’m dedicated to getting my message out there before some non-Italian—or worse, another franchise—opens up and further destroys the classics with another contrived red-and-white checkered tablecloth/Chianti bottle candle holder eatery. And with that being said, America definitely needs to also integrate more Italian-Italian (or I guess perhaps it can be called European-Italian to ease confusion) gelato, pizza Napoletana and dishes that duplicate the foods consumed throughout Italy. But it can’t be an immediate total replacement of the aforementioned foods we so easily recognize.

See in my opinion, The [Olive Garden](#) [2]/[Macaroni Grill](#) [3] chain joints ruined everything because they continuously attempt at fooling the public into thinking that they are somehow the originators of the dishes I grew up with. To me, I don’t think THEY even know whether what they are serving is Italian, Italian-American or something else entirely. Seems to be lots of made-up stuff on their menus judging by the goofy commercials. Yes Mexicans have to deal with the disgrace that is [Taco Bell](#) [4], but to go back to the Chinese (and even the Japanese who don’t have a “Sushi Bell,” and still are the only ones who seem to be serving sushi), they have it figured out by taking personal ownership and



responsibility in the food’s perpetuation, even if it’s not all identical to what’s eaten in Asia. So there is indeed a place for the old-school Italian-American classics, but as I’ll reiterate, it’s all about who is preparing it and how it’s done. If it’s done in honor of the way our grandmothers started it, it should never be a sloppy mess. My grandparents grew all kinds of vegetables in their garden, jarred their own tomatoes, made homemade vino, my uncle made sausage in his basement. Too many of those extra steps got lost in translation, and that’s what needs to come back, first and foremost.



I’m all for the abolishment of [Pizza Huts](#) [5] and the like, but the second and third generation “red sauce” places who do it right can’t be lumped into the problem. Arthur Avenue is indeed the REAL Little Italy. The lesser quality copycats always ruin things, and that goes for food and really anything else. Unfortunately, Mulberry Street’s Little Italy has become almost totally commercialized and too many of the “Italian” spots in Jersey which are run by non-Italians. My friend Chris, who owns [Ah’Pizz](#) [6] in Montclair made a brilliant move with the naming of his pizzeria—which is the dialect word of how many East Coast paisans pronounce pizza. But he serves 100% Pizza Napoletana, just like you’d get in The Old Country, with an oven identical to one you’d find in Naples. At the same time, by calling his place, Ah’Pizz, he’s also paying homage to the very authentic amalgamated second and third generation Italian-Americans who created their own sub-culture, which I obviously consider myself to be a part of and call CUGINE life.

We’re headed for disaster if Pizza Hut introduces an “Ah’Pizz Pie,” in the way [Dominoes](#) [7] concocted some sort of “Brooklyn-Style Pizza” a few years ago. Just like to me, it didn’t work to have Henry Winkler as “The Fonz.” That portrayal came off as phony and over-the-top. But Tony Danza nailed “Tony Micelli” to perfection because he took elements from his real sub-cultural upbringings and added sincerity to the role. An outsider wouldn’t know the difference, but we in the community always should, and should not automatically put both down. I know where to get the finest prosciutto di Parma around, yet I can call it “pro-shoot” with pride, even though I know it’s technically pronounced pro-shoot-oh. Again, it’s all about taking ownership. If a non-cugine talks like that, he is bastardizing the word. The reason I am mentioning the slang terminology in all this is because this food issue often goes from a civilized discussion to a heated debate, like the whole “Goomba-Italiano” speech vs. formal speech. That social class divide within our community tends to creep into everything when some of the highbrow professional-types—who only preach love of art and opera as “authentic” Italian—look down on the blue collared goomba/cugine, who are all about friends and the close-nit neighborhood values. Respecting the differences and not taking one side of things too far will keep us united. Yet you have the extremists on both sides who ruin it when the condescending activists wage war against the shallow guidos. Neither represent the masses of the heritage. But I’ve discussed that topic to death and again, I only bring it up because I think it’s so insane how we seem to be in an ethnicity with so much in-fighting over one thing or another!

This is all a daily challenge, similar to the one I am facing in trying to describe REAL New Jersey and explain to the public that it is so far from “[Jersey Shore](#) [8]” with my endeavors. But I am confident in myself and I know that in time, everyone will hopefully understand what I’m trying to do. If one of these cable stations gave some airtime to showcase places like [Corrado’s Family Affair](#) [9], [Hanky’s Market](#) [10], [Campania Ristorante](#) [11], Ah’Pizz Pizzeria, [Sotto Zero Gelateria](#) [12] and several of the other real Italian spots in New Jersey that I’ve been blogging about, that would be a start. Will there ever be a family show about food and fun within the I.A. community? This can only be achieved by working as a united front as Italians and Italian-Americans and the in-fighting must cease, no matter what the topic is. Time will tell. So until next time folks, I’m going to enjoy a nice glass of Chianti and think about Sunday mornings in my old neighborhood.

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