



More Than Meatballs. Encounters With Celebrity Chefs, Foodies and the Universal Italian-American Bond of Our Cuisine

Johnny DeCarlo (March 26, 2010)



Food brings Americans together, especially those of Italian ancestry...



When my paisan and I greet each other with our usual “ciao,” the next thing we discuss is what (and where) we’re going to chow. Is that double entendre that automatically segue us from our hello-to-mangia gameplan in two seconds time, just blatantly obvious to us alone? Madonne, I’m getting hungry for a dozen clams-on-the-halfshell from my favorite fish stand in the Bronx. Let me say this though, it aint just those ice cold fresh shucked littlenecks that draw me over the GWB from my neck of the woods in the great Garden State—it’s the draw of Arthur Avenue—that pride and passion emitting from THE PEOPLE. There’s a certain vibe that these “Little Italies” have—whether we’re talking about New York or the 9TH Street section of Philly or Boston’s North End, or anywhere else. I certainly got that vibe of zest off everyone I met in Italy when I traveled there in ‘07.

The bottom line is, food brings Americans together, especially those of Italian ancestry. I’ve experienced this phenomenon time and again. No matter what part of Italy your relatives originally hail from, and regardless of where in the U.S. your family calls home, the one thing that links us all together is food! We don’t need a special occasion either, anytime we congregate, it’s special. The cuisine itself, and the style in which it’s cooked, is different from region to region—both in Italia and amongst us here in America—where we all have varying interpretations on a dish or a recipe, and our own views (and debates) on what should be considered the most “authentic.” There’s also those variances with how we pronounce certain words from dialect to dialect, and the tweaks on how our families integrate and carry on certain religious and ethnic traditions and practices of the old country. It’s the various subcultures that make up what is Italian-Americana, that I personally think makes our nationality as a whole, the most interesting and unique of all. But amongst all of these factors, I think the culinary aspect is the strongest—as it is something that fuels the most excitement, more than any dazzling Versace gown, shiny Ferrari or piece of artwork!

I met some unbelievable individuals through food. We all have our similarities, but we indeed also have those differences I spoke of. At the end of the day, being fluent in linguine is the primo bond. The meal is the unifying quality that makes us put aside any of our “beefs” (pun certainly intended), and simply break bread as cugini. Is it “gravy” or “sauce”? I’m sure you’ve heard that discussion (argument) before. That East Coast quarrel is as prominent as the old-timers and the young bacciagaloops fighting over which New York catcher is better: Yogi Berra or Mike Piazza. (For the record, it’s obviously Berra.)

Speaking of sports, a week before this past Thanksgiving, Lorraine Ranalli, the author of “Gravy Wars - South Philly Foods, Feuds & Attytudes” and I first met when my family traveled down the Turnpike to The City of Brotherly Love. I was there to collect on a friendly bet (a cheesesteak from famous Geno’s) after my beloved Yankees beat Lorraine’s Phillies in the World Series. We also had our first meatball and Sunday gravy (or sauce) cook-off and demonstration in Philadelphia’s Italian market, which was ultimately called a draw. But more importantly, I felt right at home as Lorraine treated me and my family like we were part of her own.

Then, in honor (or defiance) of St. Patrick’s Weekend we met again, this time at Chef Central locations in Paramus and Hartsdale, where we turned both places into our own Little Italies for the day. Sure it was a “battle” for the best, but it was all in good fun. These events are less about competing for bragging rights, and more about celebrating our backgrounds—even though they aren’t exactly identical. Her hilariously relatable book talks about many such dinnertime squabbles, regarding the fodder itself and other regional discrepancies—“cucina chatter” as she calls it. Oofah, does it really matter what the red stuff that goes on spaghetti is referred to, as long as it’s prepared with passion? Lorraine and I shared tales of our childhood with the crowd, and had a wonderful day. If we had a little vino and some music it would have been a real party! See, story-telling, cooking, eating, friends and family gathered together, that’s just the Italian way no matter where you are. It’s more than just what goes from the stove to the plate and into our mouths, it’s what these gatherings represent.

As someone who loves to cook (as a hobby and profession), I try my best to duplicate the classic dishes that I grew up eating—that’s very important to me in this age of fast food and drive-thrus. The “Sunday dinner” experience, which was an all-day affair when I was a kid—with relatives who came from miles away—is something I also try to recreate, both in my own home, and for all of those I service as a caterer. It all starts with finding the best possible ingredients and putting love and care into the meal, and into the day itself. That devotion was appreciated so much by another



fellow Italian-American, Alicia Vitarelli, that I was featured on her News 12 New Jersey broadcast last week, in a shopping segment at Corrado's Family Affair in Clifton—an Italian supermarket that's been around since 1950—passed down through the generations, and run by people who also know all about the importance of continuing the Sunday dinner celebration.

I would love to someday share all this with millions of people just as rock 'n' roll Californian-Italian celebrity chef, Guy "Guido" Fieri of The Food Network does. I met the tattooed, spiky haired star when he was filming a New Jersey edition of "Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives" a few years ago. From the moment he stepped out of his '67 Camaro, gold chain sparkling in the sun, he was super cool and treated me like we knew each other forever—and what brought us together was our love for the long-standing White Manna landmark in Hackensack. I also met Gordon Ramsay when he was filming an episode of his show at my friend Chef Joe Cerniglia's Hawthorne restaurant, Campania. He too, was extremely down to earth, despite his intimidating tough British TV persona. Perhaps he was softened by the warmth that Chef Joe and his Italian family extended, welcoming him as an honorary paisan—and with Gordon's expertise, Campania was elevated to one of the most successful restaurants around—with folks lining up to dine on Joe's award-winning "best meatballs in New Jersey" (as proudly declared by the customarily critical Mr. Ramsay.)

It meant a lot to me that Chef Joe came out to support me in my own "meatball throwdown" at Chef Central, as well as my pal Anthony "Tony Mangia" Scillia, who is probably someone that shares more of a zeal for food than anyone I know. Tony hosted an Italian-American radio show for several years that had an audience which bridged together all ages and genres. Besides playing music from Sinatra, Bon Jovi, Pavarotti, Angelo Venuto and everything in between, his show featured a buffet of celebrities, celebrity chefs, authors, and all Italians and Italian-Americans who have extreme pride in their heritage. His show was all about positivity, and these simple things I've been talking about that link us together. See, our reality is NOT about Tony Soprano, or about how many times one can "hook-up" or win a bar fight at Seaside Heights. Just as I said at the Calandra Institute colloquium, when I auditioned for "Jersey Shore," it was with a hope to be the resident cook of the house. Because even though my style and "look" may be like one of those guidos, I'm the real deal. And every day, I try to learn something and carry myself with class and with respect for my background, and where I came from.

I know that wherever I go, whether if it's as a famous writer or as a Food Network star, I'm going to follow those basic principles. Life is about making people happy, which in turn should provide one's own inner happiness. And I get happier with each new person I meet that has that same old-school mentality—whether that's a regular Joe from down the street or someone famous in the entertainment industry. It could be a coincidence that all the great aforementioned individuals I've encountered have roots from the boot. Their hearts of gold are matched by olive oil in their veins. Hey, it could be all about the meatballs, but as I said, I feel it's so much more.

Enjoy yourself and live life to the fullest. And as the old goomba saying goes...life is too short, eat the salad last! Ciao for now.

In April, Lorraine and I will team up again at Corrado's Market in the newly-opened Wayne location (see below)

"Gravy Wars" at Corrado's

11am

Sunday, April 25, 2010

201 Berdan Ave

Wayne, NJ

Join Lorraine Ranalli and Johnny DeCarlo for "Gravy Wars" at Corrado's! Lorraine will be autographing copies of "Gravy Wars - South Philly Foods, Feuds & Attytudes" and sharing Italian-American stories with the crowd. Johnny D, a longtime Corrado's shopper, will hand out complimentary meatball



samples and direct fellow store goers on which Corrado's supplies he uses in his award-winning recipe. Johnny's meatballs will also be available for purchase in the store deli case!

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