

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN CUISINE IN AUSTRALIA

by Vicki Swinbank

Part Two of an edited talk given at the Italian Cuisine Expo held in Melbourne in 1994. Part One was published in the March 1995 issue of this Journal.

It is not only via restaurants that the Italian community has had a significant impact on food and eating in this country. The Italian influence in Australia has extended to everything to do with food, from the growing of it, the marketing of it, the processing of it, and as we have seen, the final end-product of that chain, the creation of a highly distinctive, healthy, imaginative and delicious cuisine. This influence is perhaps inevitable when one considers the central role that food plays in Italian culture. Of course, food and all those habits and customs associated with it, are important to all societies and cultures but it is perhaps in Italy and other countries bordering the Mediterranean that a particularly harmonious synthesis has been achieved between regarding food as a subject worthy of both serious and pleasurable consideration. (Another culture that comes to mind here is that of China, where they definitely have their priorities right, describing food as the "first happiness").

Actually, it's interesting to consider the cuisines of Italy and China - whilst this is not the object of this paper - I have long thought that the cuisines of these two cultures have much in common, with their emphasis on fresh seasonal vegetables where the clean, natural flavour of the produce predominates; with the innumerable ways in which the pasta and noodles can be prepared (after all, isn't Marco Polo reputed to have brought spaghetti back from China, although that is a disputed point in food history); with the way meat and fish are often used as complements and adjuncts to dishes rather than as mainstays; and with the imaginative and ingenious use of colours, textures and contrasts.

Interestingly, what these two cultures have in common is that they are traditionally peasant-based societies. Although both have also had upper class cuisines, such as the Medicis in Italy and the dynasties of China, much aristocratic and haute cuisine is derived from the original peasant cooking of the countryside. Peasant cooking evolves from a close connection to the land, an intimate day-to-day knowledge of the

soil, the weather, and the seasons upon which the harvests, and in turn the producer are dependant. There is a real earthiness, a wholesomeness, an immediacy about such cooking that appeals to all our senses - it is truly a celebration of the fruits of the earth. It is this integrated attitude to food that Italian migrants have brought with them to this country. In the post-war years many migrants came from rural southern Italy; many were peasant farmers, uprooted from the soil that they had tilled and cultivated from one generation to the next over the centuries, and were transplanted to a usually urban Australian environment. But they brought with them those aspects of their culture that would enable them to at least survive, if not actually feel at home in a very different, often culturally unsympathetic, even hostile, new environment. Food and cooking along with language and music, are things that bind people together, giving and reinforcing a strong sense of cultural identity and a sense of belonging. And so in the backyards of Melbourne, and other Australian cities, peasant farmers, or to use the Italian word 'contadini', from Veneto to Sicily recreated a largely self-sufficient way of life, growing much of their own food, bottling, drying and preserving the surplus, making their own wine, curing their own hams and salami, even baking bread in backyard ovens. I find it fascinating to wander through Melbourne's inner-suburbs where I live and see orchards and vegetable gardens flourishing in the small backyards of Italian and other migrants' homes - tomatoes, fennel, beans, peppers, apricots, figs, lemons, grapes, olives, plums, apples, and pears etc. - the occupants determined to recreate some of the self-sufficiency in food production that they left behind in their rural communities. I think in this way Melbourne is very special, if not unique as a city; how many other places have this kind of intensive cultivation going on in such an urban setting?

This traditional close connection with the soil that Italians tend to have is also reflected in their involvement in the wholesale and retail



Wartime shortages of fruit and vegetables were relieved at the Cafe Latin by produce grown by Camillo Triaca in his garden.

fruit and vegetable markets. We cannot talk about Italian cuisine in Australia without acknowledging the role that Italians have had and continue to have in our fruit and vegetable markets. Here in Melbourne we are particularly well endowed with markets, the most famous and glorious of course being the Queen Victoria Market. Melbourne's markets are a reflection of Australia's rich and diverse multicultural heritage. Foods representing the cuisine of many cultures are on display, Italian, Greek, Polish, Hungarian, Spanish, Turkish, Lebanese, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian etc. - all of them contributing to and enriching a thriving food culture, and serving a public increasingly interested in and better informed about food. But of course, the major influence has long been, and continues to be Italian, simply by virtue of the fact that people of Italian origin are such a large group in Australia, and have a relatively long presence here.

Certainly since the 1950s, and probably well before, Italian market-gardeners and green-grocers were the dominant presence in the fruit and vegetable markets (the other important group being the Chinese, although their numbers were small due to the existence of the notorious White Australian Policy). It is largely due to

these people, and other migrants, that we now have access to such a vast and exciting range of vegetables. It is hard to believe that vegetables that we now take for granted, such as eggplants and zucchini, not to mention artichokes and fennel, were virtually unknown to the Australian public 30 or 40 years ago. It must have been a real culture shock for Italians coming to Australia in the early days and being confronted with the typical Australian way of eating at the time, a diet consisting largely of meat, often three times a day, a very limited range of vegetables, all washed down with gallons of tea.



A truck load of cauliflowers grown by Sicilian market gardeners in Weeribee heading for the Victoria Market in the 1940s.

The typical Anglo-Celtic Australian diet of 100 years ago has been brilliantly and scathingly described by Dr. Philip Muskett in his witty and informative little book *The Art of Living in Australia* published in 1893. In this book, so ahead of its time in many ways, he was highly critical of the traditional meat-based Australian diet, and passionately advocated what would now be called the Mediterranean diet. Philip Muskett would have heartily approved of the impact Italian migration has had on food culture in this country, especially the greater availability of vegetables and fruit, with more fish and less meat in the diet, the use of olive oil, and the

accompanying of food with wine as a healthy and civilised way of eating.

For those of us fortunate enough to live in Melbourne, we not only have a vast choice of Italian restaurants, bistros, trattoria and cafés to eat out in, but also an abundance of Italian food stores, many of them outstanding and stocking every kind of Italian produce, both Australian and imported. In short we have here everything at our disposal to create authentic Italian cooking which is as close as possible to the actual country of origin. The first Italian grocery shops in Melbourne were in Carlton, and they, like the early Italian restaurants, are strongly associated with certain family names - Donchi, Varrenti, Agostino, and Valmorbida, for instance.

DALLA TOSCANA GROCERY

PHONE F 5950

G. DONCHI, PROPRIETOR

GROCERIES AND
PROVISION MERCHANT

FRENCH AND ITALIAN
OLIVE OIL AND
CONTINENTAL DELICACIES

139 and 141 Cardigan Street,

Carlton,

193

King & Godfree which has been a grocery store and a Carlton landmark since 1884, in spite of its un-Italian name, is in fact a very Italian food and wine store, having specialised in Italian food and wine since the 1950s when it was bought by the Valmorbida family.

In 1956 the Valmorbida family also bought a spirits and grocery store in Swanston Street, Carlton, which Frank Agostino and his wife Florence had established in 1937 as Frank Agostino and Coy. Pty. Ltd. This trade name was used by the Valmorbida family to open a chain of stores throughout Melbourne. The first to be opened was located in Lygon Street - it is now Lygon Food Store, continuing the tradition of selling high quality Italian and Australian produce.

Also in Carlton is Enoteca Sileno, started by Gino Di Santo 40 years ago, now run by his son-in-law, John Portelli, and described as a "temple of Italian gastronomy".

Away from Carlton are other bastions of fine Italian produce, such as the enormous and wonderfully stocked Mediterranean Supermarket in Brunswick, Piedimonte's in Fitzroy, Cardamone's in Fairfield and the list goes on. But you don't have to go to specialist Italian food

shops to get Italian food for the Italian influence is now such a part of the general Australian scene that many Italian food items are readily available in supermarkets: cheeses such as ricotta, mozzarella and parmesan, a wide range of pasta, fresh and dried, risotto rice, polenta, salami and Italian other smallgoods, various kinds of pesto together with a huge variety of olive oils. In addition there are the myriad so-called continental delicatessens throughout Melbourne stocking Italian food.

To sum up, it would be hard to over-estimate the positive impact of Italian food and cuisine on this country. Italians have helped introduce a sophistication, plus a spirit of generosity in food, so often lacking in the traditional Anglo-Australian approach to the subject. They have been major contributors to a shift in the traditional Anglo-Celtic Australian attitude to food, in which it was viewed largely as fuel, to a recognition of the importance of good food and cooking being central to a happy and healthy life.

Of course it would be naive to assume that all Australians embraced Italian cuisine wholeheartedly in the early days. Like the non-Anglo migrants, Italians suffered varying degrees of discrimination and prejudice from the dominant culture, and of course, as is often the case, their food and eating habits were often the target of such bigotry. However, we have come a long way since such food was considered foreign and alien, when garlic and olive oil were viewed with hostility and suspicion. Australians are now very open to enjoying the cuisines of the many diverse cultures living in this country, where this openness and interest was paved largely by the new foods and cooking introduced by Italian migrants.

There is much discussion these days on whether there is such a thing as a distinctly Australian cuisine. Whatever the conclusions of that debate, one thing is certain, Italian cuisine continues to evolve and develop in a new environment, inspired by the ingenuity and passion Italians have always brought to cooking, and in addition, continues to have a major influence on shaping the way Australians, both of Italian and non-Italian background, prepare their food.