

The United States is one of the most diverse countries in the world, built on a foundation that our immigrant ancestors, neighbors, relatives, and friends had laid out for us. This particularly reigns true in larger cities, like New York City where you can go on a tour of the world without leaving the city. While this may be the case a few tend to be more popular than others and that can be seen on how much influence it takes on American Culture, arguably the most influential of which is Italian. Italian food is everywhere in the United States, and it had stapled itself into American Cuisine, making it as American as almost anything else. Growing up Italian, just outside of New York City had let me experience culinary euphoria. All of the various types of pasta that line the store shelves, paired with delectable homemade sauces, various types of entrees then following, and lastly of course all of the different cakes, and pastries that came to follow. All of these foods are staples in Italian households in the United States, leading many to believe it must have come from Italy along with their families. However that is not the case, across the Atlantic Ocean in Italy the cuisine is something entirely different than that of which we eat in the United States. However the question remains, why are these two cuisines with the same label so different from each other?

This heavy Italian influence on the United States comes from an event known as the Italian diaspora, where those who were native to Italy fled the country

due to various conditions within. Many of these immigrants packed up everything they owned and went to other countries hoping for a new life, and of course took their culture with them. Some of the reasons may have been World War I, World War II, Fascist Italy, and most importantly the socioeconomic conditions plaguing Southern Italy at the time. Many Italians primarily from Southern Italy had decided to leave the country and make an attempt at starting a new life elsewhere. Many of whom fled to various nations. Some of which include but are not limited to, Libya, Argentina, Brazil, and lastly the United States. Of course as many fled their native nation many aspects of their culture had gone to their new homes with them including their native cuisine, Italian cuisine. National Geographic reaffirms this by highlighting , “as a wave of Italian migrants began to arrive, mostly from that country’s southern region, so did their meals”

When many Italians left Italy and came to the United States of course their food was brought with them, being such a predominant factor of their culture. Italian food is a staple in American culture and it is commonplace in the United States, however that was not always the case. For many years Italian’s were marginalized by those who lived in the United States, especially their food as it was not suited for the palette of the typical Americans at the time. Even mentioned by a nutritionist, “the food is garlicky and spicy, and increases a craving for

alcohol,” says Ray. (There’s no contemporary science backing that up.) And, in that era, alcohol was considered such a threat that Prohibition was passed. By linking garlicky food to drinking more booze, the ‘consensus at that point is that you have to go against Italian food,’ says Ray.” This quote being taken from during the prohibition era makes it one that draws lots of negative attention towards Italian food due to the societal resentment towards alcohol at the time. This leads to the question: what is Italian food like in the United States?

Italian food in the United States is easily one of the most recognizable cuisines in the country. Hosting many popular dishes such as, spaghetti and meatballs, pizza, chicken parmigiana, and pastries with a snowfall of confectioner’s sugar on top. Most Americans would assume these dishes are as Italian as Italy itself, however this truly is not the case. These are dishes that are rooted from old recipes in the motherland, and have come to grow and evolve into the dishes they are today. As mentioned before many immigrants came from the south leading to lots of southern influence upon the common foods eaten in the United States. National Geographic even mentions, “For most of the 20th century, the Italian food served in restaurants came from southern Italy: olive oil, pasta with red sauce and meatballs, pizza.” highlighting the origins of many of these earlier iconic Italian dishes.

But, since these dishes originated in Italy they must be Italian, right? While that may be a common line of thinking among Americans, that is somewhat not the case. While yes that may be partially the case due to the large amount of traditional Italian influence on the cuisine for many popular dishes that is not entirely the case. For example Spaghetti and meatballs, meatballs are apart of the traditional Italian cuisine. Escoffier Culinary School mentions, “In Italy, meatballs are most often a stand-alone dish. Called polpettes, Italian meatballs are often served sauceless and are much smaller than the meatballs you’re probably used to. Traditional Italian meatballs typically contain equal portions of meat and soaked bread, and other additions such as egg and vegetables. They may be made with beef, lamb, turkey, or even fish, depending on what meat is available. Regions of Italy use their local ingredients, and polpettes can look very different from one region to another.” The concept of meatballs was not some sort of frankenstein invention of Italian Americans, but one that existed in Italy, and was even noted as potentially being hundreds of years old, “Many sources say the first meatball was made in ancient Persia, but this is debated by food scholars. Nevertheless, these meatballs, called kofta, caught on and inspired new recipes as the Persians traded with neighboring countries and exchanged goods and knowledge. Meatballs were probably introduced to regions throughout the Middle East before making their way to Italy centuries ago.” As history shows the dish known to Americans as

meatballs has gone under many facelifts throughout history evolving it into various different dishes among different cultures in the world, and the idea of meatballs was not a concept original to Italians. Variations of this dish remain prevalent in the world as the idea of cutting meat with filler had been more of a concept rather than a dish native to one region. In Italy polpettes were a common dish, and historically it makes sense to use eggs, and soaked breadcrumbs when making meat, because it adds more quantity to the food itself. This allowed poor families in the South of Italy who were undergoing poor economic conditions to stretch their meals further. First We Feast highlights this in their article by mentioning, “Most Italian immigrants who traveled to America came from the south of Italy. In these poor regions, meat was scarce and diets consisted mainly of vegetable dishes, grains, and little of what we imagine to be quintessential Italian ingredients.”

When meat was scarce the ability to add soaked breadcrumbs, and eggs making polpettes, allowed poor Italians to use smaller quantities of meat to feed more people. However, this dish that was not a staple in the traditional Italian cuisine grew in popularity when these immigrants had arrived to the United States, due to the large amount of readily available meat. The same article later points out, “Cheap, plentiful pork, beef, and chicken must have been thrilling to these new Americans...It’s also evident in the baseball-size meatballs that came out of the era, which could only have been invented by someone extremely excited by the

prospect of an abundance of meat. Cinotto says that the American surplus of raw materials was particularly meaningful to these food-obsessed people, who came from a place of disenfranchisement and had seen more privileged people in their villages eating well. In America, they were able to dine more like the elite. The roots of Italian-American cuisine, thus, are not of gross American bastardization, but of optimism and hope.” Leading to the creation of what Americans know as the meatball today.

Southern influence plays a huge role in the difference among the two cuisines reigns the cultural influence creating them to what they are. While the traditional cuisine in Italy varies from region to region, it remains uniform across the United States. This is due to the heavy influx of immigrants from regions within Southern Italy. As mentioned earlier the common dishes in the United States have heavy Southern Influence, like as mentioned earlier with the high prevalence of tomatoes. Red tomato sauce in the United States is one of the identifying factors of the cuisine. First We Feast states, “Yet this 19th-century culinary culture bore a new one centered mainly in Little Italy and East Harlem, but also in cities like New Orleans, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago, with an emphasis on sauce, meat, and colossal portions.” The heavy Southern influence left all of the focus on the cuisine towards tomato based red sauce. Saveur draws attention to its popularity by stating, “Every cook had a version, and it became the

food on which immigrant mothers staked their eminence within their neighborhoods. Growing up, we would no more insult a friend's sauce than we would his mother or grandmother. The sauce was sacred." The term in the quote "the sauce was sacred" really emphasizes the cultural significance that tomato sauce has on Italian American cuisine. Savuer in that quote also mentions the popularity by saying how every cook had their own version, showing how widespread the sauce had become in Italian American cuisine.

Another major difference between the two cuisines is the cheese used when making most dishes. While to a normal person Mozzarella cheese is just Mozzarella cheese, that really isn't the case in the United States with the difference being the moisture of the cheese. In a video done by Adam Ragusea he cites the growing popularity of Italian cuisine upon the arrival of soldiers from WWII. The cheese commonly used in Italian American cooking in the United States is Low Moisture Mozzarella cheese. During this time period cheese manufacturers in the United States were looking to mass produce Mozzarella cheese, however the traditional style was, "Too wet and soft to work with on commercial scales, and it's not very shelf stable" claims Ragusea. Proving its difficulty to mass produce in the United States, leading to the invention of the more common cheese used today, Low Moisture Mozzarella. He goes on to mention, "By removing some of the fat and a lot of the whey they got a firmer more stable product that was better for mass

production” showing how the process of making the cheese was altered to make it more easily mass producible. The mass production of this cheese not only made it more prevalent on shelves, but made it, “More shelf stable” , Ragusea affirmed. The cheese being more shelf stable logically makes it more desirable to the consumer, causing it to grow in popularity.

Italian American cuisine is something that is sacred to those who have the privilege of calling it their own. One of the most popular cuisines in the United States, and something that has become so commonplace in the United States that it can be found all across the country with each City’s variation and twist. It had evolved from its predecessor due to unique circumstances in the United States, such as availability, producibility, heavy influence, and culture. Allowing it to grow into something completely unique and something that differs from what can be seen in Italy today. While many may argue over which cuisine is superior to the other, others learn to accept them as different, and don’t apply the term good as mutually exclusive. Italian American cuisine is not changing to conform to traditional Italian Culinary standards anytime soon and that’s okay, it has evolved into its own unique cuisine with its deep history, and its own subculture.

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