

The Risen Italian: Italian History Expressed in Easter Bread

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Author's Biography

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Background Essay

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Hunger and Flight

During the 1800s, a collection of kingdoms, islands, pieces of the French and Austrian empires and Papal states were ceded and combined, culminating in Italy's 1861 unification, the *Risorgimento*. In the years following, the primary challenge facing inhabitants of the kingdom of Italy was starvation. The lands were infertile. The geography chopped the peninsula into isolated chunks, with the Alps to the north, the jagged Apennine mountains dividing its length, and the former island kingdoms of Sardinia and Sicily across the sea. The unification that should have fomented cooperation between the agricultural lands of the south with the more prosperous northern mining and central regions had not yet borne fruit, sending Italy into an agricultural depression; Italy's people were starving. By 1898, food riots sparked throughout Italy (Helstosky). The Industrial Revolution had not yet been realized in southern Italy. Animals were needed to work the rocky land and therefore, not available as food. At the turn of the century, Italians were able to eat just 35 pounds of meat per year in contrast to the American average of 121 pounds (Montanari. *Italian Identity in the Kitchen*). Italy was one of the most heavily populated countries in Europe, with untenable poverty and infertile land (Jones), making the promise of America's bountiful harvests and economic growth impossible to ignore. New machinery made it possible for willing workers without trade or language skills to find jobs that earned enough to feed their families (DeConde). Twenty-six million Italians emigrated away from their home to North and South America in the century following Italy's unification (Cavaoli). Between 1871 and 1920, over 4 million Italians arrived on American shores, comprising 78.2% of new Americans that arrived from Europe (Battistella).

Italians endured challenges in their new country, learning a new language, a different culture, geography, laws, and expectations. Initially, many lived in abysmal conditions. Some were victims of "padrones" who facilitated their immigration by exacting exorbitant fees, sometimes as much as 50% more money on top of their passage (Jones). Even as their income grew and a corresponding improvement in their families' health and diet, Italian immigrants contended with their loss of their home, family and friends left behind, and their sense of place and identity. Food remained the driving force to their flight from home. Italian Historian Pasquale Villari asked working class Italians, *contadini*, if they loved Italy. Their reply was, "For us Italy is whoever gives us our bread" (Jones). Even more than this thoughtful answer, a common expression in the northern Italian province of Emilia-Romagna, speaks to the conflation of the hearth with Italian identity. The expression for "Let's go home" is "Andiamo in casa." In Emilia-Romagna, the phrase more accurately means, "Let's go into the kitchen" (Montanari, *Food is Culture*). The concept of home and hearth as one was a cultural reality for Italians; the kitchen was the heart of the Italian home. Without sustenance, the people had felt homeless, unrooted, and left Italy to find a new home that could provide the hearth and nourishment they needed.

The notion of food's commanding position in a person's sense of belonging, of well-being, is not unique to Italian immigrants. American activist Dorothy Day spent her lifetime feeding and housing the needy. She wrote in her newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, that "Food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul" (Day). Perhaps it is in being removed from one's usual living space and culture, in losing one's framework for belonging, that the cultural aspect of food identity is most starkly understood. When 280,000 Italian soldiers were taken prisoner in the Battle at Caporetto in World War I (Macdonald), Italian Lieutenant Giuseppe Chioni assuaged his emotional distress by collecting recipes from his countrymen in the prison camps and creating a cookbook entitled, "Arte Culinaria" (Montanari, *Italian Identity in the Kitchen*). "Young men from the opposite ends of Italy...invented...means of alleviating the excruciating torments of hunger and homesickness...stunning proof of the role played by food in the national Italian identity" (Dickie). Italian immigrants in the United States experienced similar loss, and in food, a similar discovery of comfort and spiritual grounding.

Bread was heavily imbued with economic, physical, and symbolic importance. Wheat was plentiful in America making bread and pasta available daily, a contrast to Italy's unproductive fields, where a third of the country's wheat needs had to be imported (Parescoli). Italy's Prime Minister, Benito Mussolini, initiated propaganda to wean his country from expensive imported flour. Part of his Battle for Grain, *battaglia del grano*, was a series of scientific writings declaring that people of the Mediterranean had unique metabolisms that required less wheat and advocating for better health through eating less wheat. In 1925, Mussolini wrote a poem for Bread Day, a national observance of the beloved food:

Love Bread

*Love Bread,
Heart of the home
Perfume of the table,
Joy of the hearth.*

*Honor Bread,
Glory of the fields,
Fragrance of the earth,
Feast of life.*

(Helstosky)

Cultural Identity

Italian immigrants were earning better salaries at the railroad and factories near urban centers. They were freed from backbreaking and futile toil on the sterile Italian soils, and able to purchase soft, refined, white flour to make favored, familiar foods---bread and pasta---without the forced abstinence demanded by Mussolini. Asserting their independence from fascist rule nourished Italians' dignity. Asserting their identity in their foods helped them to forge their Italian persona in their new home, a comforting, intercultural integration. "Bread becomes the carrier of an Italian identity that is partly remembered, partly imagined and constantly

reconstructed and incorporated through the act of producing and eating food” (Ascione, *This Bread is Part of Our Tradition*.)

The concept of the “self” incorporated into bread is central to Roman Catholic tradition. A core difference between Catholic beliefs and those of other Christian religions is the belief that the consecrated Communion wafer becomes the body of Jesus Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation: God is physically present in the bread that Catholics consume in the sacrament of Holy Communion and they become one with Him (Ratzinger). Italians, unlike Catholics in other countries like Ireland or Poland, lived with the head of the Church within their own borders. The Pope lived in the Vatican City inside Rome, creating political stress between the demands of the Church and those of the secular government of Italy. Italian nationalism was strongly opposed by the Catholic clergy (Jones, p.209). In signing the 1929 Lateral Pacts, Mussolini formally recognized the Vatican as a nation-state: the Catholic faith became the official national faith, every Italian classroom was required to display a crucifix, further blurring the line between government and religion (Hooper). For all Italians, including those who did not internalize Catholic beliefs, centuries-old traditions and assumptions were entwined with the Church’s festivals, feast days, and holidays. Continuing familiar rituals and foodways in the United States lessened the sting of alienation. “They clung to what could give them protection and comfort, the Church, the family, and their ways” (Hooper). Breaking bread with other Italian immigrants offered communal solidarity and a shared cultural heritage that strengthened their growing roots in North America. Eating communally was a new tradition; in the Old Country, town folk gathered for feast days and holidays, but *contadini* workdays did not allow for family dinners or with friends. “...peasant and worker consumed foods hurriedly and usually alone. The ritual of shared home-cooked meals simply did not exist for the majority of the population back in Italy” (Helstosky). Sharing familiar foods with fellow immigrants became a collaborative bereavement for what they left behind, and celebration of successful transition.

Easter Breads

The symbolism of bread and salvation is not subtle for a Catholic. Bread was the gift that Jesus Christ shared with his Apostles in the Last Supper. Bread is what every Catholic receives in the Sacrament of Communion. Manna, or bread from Heaven, is what saved the Jews from starvation in the desert on their way to the Holy Land, a journey that must have resonated with immigrants who had left home for a better place: “their daily bread is the fruit of the promised land” (Ratzinger). In 2020 America, bread is generally seen as optional carbohydrates, but a century ago, bread had a different role. “It may be difficult for us to imagine just how crucial bread was to the diet of traditional European societies: Homer defined human beings as ‘bread eaters,’ and the first practice of making and eating bread, in the Mediterranean world, defined civilization, indicated humanity itself” (Mazzoni). Being able to provide nourishing bread to one’s family after suffering deprivation was a consolation and cause for celebration. There was hope and satisfaction in bread.

The Catholic calendar's most significant day is Easter, observing Christ's rising from the dead. The preparation begins with Carnevale, a medieval word whose etymology bids farewell to meat: carne (meat) + levare (to remove) (Brombert), followed by 40 days of fasting. The 40 days of Lent reenact the time in which Jesus Christ fasted in the desert and in Catholic tradition of the time, "all healthy individuals were expected to abstain from all animal flesh and animal products (milk and butter, in addition to eggs)" and to eat no more than one meal per day (Gentilcore). In denying oneself the pleasures of animal products, the reverent hoped to purify themselves, and through spiritual and physical effort, resist temptation as Jesus had. Easter Sunday ends the Lenten season and was celebrated with a feast. Easter coincides with Spring, the earth's awakening from winter dormancy, and parallels Christ's resurrection. "It is the celebration of nature, reborn after the 'death' of winter" (Brombert).

Traditional Italian Easter meals focused on foods denied during Lent: lamb, ham, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, and sweets. Special breads were typically on the Easter menu, and in wide variety: sweet or savory, some for breakfast, some for dessert, but all were rich and made use of accumulated eggs. In Umbria, the Torta di Pasqua (or Crescia al Formaggio) is a full-flavored, cheesy Easter Bread eaten for breakfast "with boiled eggs, blessed wine and cold cuts just matured from the pork that has been killed in January" (Ascione, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture*). Pizza Gaina (also Pizza Chena) is a quiche-like pie whose principal ingredients are eggs, cheese and ham (Jefferson). Some Easter breads are shaped like doves, symbolizing peace (Colomba), like babies, with a whole egg baked on top for a face, symbolizing new beginnings (Pupazze, Pupu cu l'ovu, Cuzzupa), like a lamb (Agnello di pasta Mandorla), as a crown of thorns, a cross, a basket of whole eggs or chickens (Bastianich, Becchi, Field). Most of the sweeter loaves are scented with citrus, flavored with anise or wine, and sometimes studded with dried or candied fruits. Dozens of versions of Italian Easter breads exist, reflecting the varied, ancient, smaller kingdoms and states on the Italian peninsula until the 1861 *Risorgimento*. What connects each of these different baked goods is their ritual intent: a gustatory tribute to spiritual renewal.

Italian immigrants brought Easter bread traditions to the United States and improved upon their recipes with the abundance of finely milled flour and refined white sugar. Through their baking, they maintained historical continuity with their traditions, acculturating their American children to their foodways. Easter breads represent their stewardship of intangible values. In baking these breads for their families, Italian American grandmothers asserted a connection to something of deep, ancient value, a culinary inheritance (Brulotte et al.). Thousands of recipes for Italian Easter breads can be found online, in libraries, and mostly in well-thumbed personal recipe collections (Donofrio, FlorCruz, Jefferson, Trzepakowski). Many tend toward fluffy, lemony, anise-flavored dessert brioche. The emotional content of the recipes is perhaps their most enduring aspect, outlasting use of the family's native tongue (Calvo). In an increasingly urban Italy, fewer families bake their own Easter breads (Field, Counihan), opting for a commercial product, which, rather than being hand-shaped into a fanciful bird, may be iced with the letters, "BP" for Buona Pasqua---Happy Easter. The handmade breads required intimate, experiential knowledge to decipher its meaning, but not the latter (Counihan). It is easy to find Easter bread

recipes and traditions flourishing among Italian American families, testimony to the successful rebirth of the immigrants who brought them from the Old Country.

Two well regarded histories of Italy (with identical titles “The Italians”) were written 50 years apart, but have the same, sad conclusion: the unification is as yet, unsuccessful and “Italy” is an idea more than a reality (Barzini, Hooper). But in 2020, confronted with the horror of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of over 35,000 Italian lives, Italy did, in fact, unite in the country’s approach against the virus. “It cohered into a nation and brought a fierce national will to bear on the virus” (Cohen). Without unraveling the larger arguments posed by historians like Barzini and Hooper, perhaps the single idea of Italian Easter bread can be considered. The variety of Italian Easter breads reflects a unified, collective expression of symbolic tradition and ritual embracing a new beginning. The tradition of Easter bread, imported to the United States by hopeful Italian immigrants who have enriched the American landscape is an apt embodiment of the American motto, E Pluribus Unum, “Out of many, one.”

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Primary Source Recipe

Recipe name: Easter Egg Bread

Author: Teresa Zeoli Dahl

Cookbook: *God Bless 'Em: Look at 'em eat!* (Self-published; fewer than 1000 copies distributed.)

Publication date: 1993

MLA citation for the recipe

FlorCruz, Celia. *God Bless 'Em: Look at 'em eat!* Self-published. 1993, 33.

Easter Egg Bread

18 eggs, lightly beaten	1 lemon rind, grated (1½-3 teaspoons)
½ cup butter, melted	2 (one ounce) bottles anise flavoring
2 packages yeast	14 cups all-purpose flour
2 cups sugar	

1. Eggs must be room temperature. Mix eggs with melted butter, add yeast and sugar. Cover bowl and let stand 5-10 minutes to allow yeast to soften and ferment slightly.
2. Add lemon rind and anise; mix thoroughly. Add flour a cup at a time until well incorporated. Turn dough out onto a floured surface; knead until the dough is smooth and elastic. If the dough is under or over-kneaded it will not rise properly and will have a coarse texture. Remove the dough to a clean bowl that has been lightly oiled. Turn the dough once to oil the surface of the dough. Cover with plastic wrap or a clean dish towel and set in a warm place to rise. Let dough rise until doubled in size.
3. Punch dough down, pressing out all of the gas bubbles. Shape the dough into loaves and place into oiled baking pans. Allow to rise until doubled in size.
4. Bake at 350 ° for 10-15 minutes, or until golden brown. Flip loaves over to brown the other side; remove from oven when golden brown. Makes 8 to 9 loaves.

Background explanation

My mother-in-law was born in Poughkeepsie, New York to immigrant parents. Her mother, Gelsomina Paolinelli, came from Tuscany in 1907 and her father, Carmine Zeoli Campania in 1909. The recipe is interpreted from family traditions in Central and Southern Italy. The recipe does not include icing and sprinkles, but she often used them, as in many other recipes for Italian Easter bread. A century ago, white flour and sugar were priced out of reach for most Italians and dried fruits were used to add sweetness to breads (Field). Adding icing and sprinkles reflect the plentiful sugar at American grocers. Easter breads and pies contain a lot of eggs, contrasting with the 40 Lenten weeks preceding, when Italians abstained from animal products in keeping with the centuries-old Christian practice (Gentilcore). Easter eggs symbolized the end of fasting a new beginning and new life. This recipe was similar to that of Lidia Bastianich and 2 personal interviews with women whose grandmothers, like Teresa, made dozens of loaves every Easter: rich in eggs, citrus and anise (Bastianich, Donofrio Kneram, Trzepakowski); it is a prototypical Italian Easter bread.