An Investigation into Toronto’s Little Italy and its Gastronomic Roots

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Toronto has one of the largest Italian populations of any city outside Italy. To provide a historical overview of Italian gastronomy in Toronto, it is essential to look back upon its history and gain an understanding of the events that led to the development of a large and vibrant Italian community within the Canadian city.

In the century following Italian unification (which occurred in 1861), many individuals left their homes for other cities and regions of Italy, other countries, and even other continents. This emigration was caused by several factors including rapid population growth, unproductive land, scarcity of resources, high taxes, natural disasters, and so on (Zucchi 13). In general, these people were escaping *miseria*: a condition of social and economic misery in their homeland, to which they saw no imminent solutions (Scardellato 79).

Italian immigrants have been present in Toronto since very early in the city’s history; however, a large Italian population did not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth (Scardellato 79). In fact, according to John Zucchi, between the years 1896 and 1915 about sixteen million Italians went off elsewhere in search of better lives—often to the industrializing north as well as abroad (13). Only about one-third to half of these men and women returned to their homelands (14). In Canada alone, there were 3,000 individuals of Italian origin living in the country during the 1890s, but by the early 1970s, this figure had grown to over 750,000. How and where this huge influx of individuals settled significantly influenced the development of Italian communities in Toronto (36). When Italians first arrived in Toronto, they developed complex patterns of settlement based on factors such as their hometowns or provinces in Italy, their proximity to places of work, and access to transport facilities (Scardellato 79). By
the early twentieth century, Italians occupied four major settlement areas in Toronto. The largest and most important of these settlements was located in the area of the city then known as “the Ward” (79), bounded by Queen Street West, University Avenue, and College and Yonge streets (Zucchi 38). A convenient location for the early immigrants, the Ward was mostly comprised of single Italian male sojourners whose jobs and lodgings were provided by labour agents (41). A second new Italian neighbourhood emerged further north and to the west of the Ward in the area of Dufferin Street, near Davenport Avenue. Likewise, a third settlement (the smallest) developed east of the Ward around the intersection of Queen Street East and Parliament Street (Scardellato 79). Last but not least, a fourth settlement emerged around College Street and formed the heart of what is still known today as Toronto’s Little Italy. This area was bounded by College and Dundas streets in the north and south respectively, and by Grace Street in the west and Euclid Avenue in the east. This centre would eventually grow to become the “post-Second World War heart of Toronto Italia” (79).

According to Zucchi, one way of examining the formation of a “Little Italy” in another country is to analyze the features that attract inhabitants: that is to say, its “pull factors” (35). He contends that there are three major forces at play in the genesis of a new Little Italy. The first of these three forces are precursors: the transitory vendors and tradesmen who initially established an Italian presence in the city. Next Zucchi brings up the padrone system, a network of labour agents that were responsible for bringing people from diverse villages and towns in Italy to the North American workforce, largely on railroad and construction projects. The final force that he notes is chain migration, the mechanism by which people of different villages were guaranteed jobs and accommodation when they reached their destination in the New World. It is important to outline these three forces, as they greatly helped immigrants move out of their hometowns and
into new North American cities. Furthermore, the way that padroni provided for new immigrants had a considerable impact on the nature and physical structure of the Italian community (35).

The mass immigration of Italians to Canada transpired in three waves: the first wave occurred between 1870–1914, the second between 1920–30, and the third between 1950–70 (De Klerck and Paina 26). One can argue that the third and final wave of immigrants most aligns with the years of economic and residential development of Toronto’s Little Italy. In other words, the Italians who settled in Toronto during this period significantly contributed to the cultural and commercial development of College Street. For example, an important meeting place for the neighbourhood was the Sicilian Ice Cream Café (located on the corner of College and Montrose), which opened its doors in 1959 as the first Italian café and gelateria to be established in the area. Likewise, the Bar (now Café) Diplomatico opened in 1969 on College and Clinton and contributed to the flourishing of Little Italy in the twentieth century. By the early 1980s, the College Street recognizable today had begun to take root with organizations like the Toronto Public Library and CHIN Radio and Television headquarters adding significantly to the unique identity of Toronto’s Little Italy (28).

The CHIN Radio and Television enterprise in particular was established by a man who for many Italian Canadians will always be synonymous with Little Italy: Giovanni Barbalinardo, more popularly known by the community as Johnny Lombardi (De Klerck and Paina 26). Born in December 1915, Lombardi served in the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War and upon his return to Canada in 1946 opened a grocery business at 637 College Street, near Grace Street and in the heart of what would soon become Little Italy. His grocery store imported specialty Italian foods and catered to the large number of Italian immigrants that were settling in Toronto around this time. Additionally, Lombardi produced Italian radio programmes, concerts,
and community events before eventually establishing his CHIN radio station in 1966. Lombardi played such a pivotal role in the development of Toronto’s Little Italy that his accomplishments and contributions to the community have been recognized by the city through the renaming of a section of College Street as Johnny Lombardi Way (Scardellato 88).

It is no doubt that Little Italy is an eclectic neighbourhood, and at one point in time—in the late 1990s and early 2000s to be specific—the neighbourhood was even acclaimed for its “trendiness.” In 1997, the popular magazine Utne Reader characterized Little Italy as one of the five “hippest” places to be in North America (Hackworth and Rekers 218). However, all periods of prosperity must eventually come to an end. In 2002, one reporter for the National Post aptly wrote:

> Like all living things, city neighbourhoods go through natural cycles. They’re born, they have growing pains and identity crises, they have a Golden Age, and then they settle into maturity with varying degrees of dignity. In Toronto, rarely is more than one neighbourhood at its peak at one time. In the 60s, it was Yorkville; in the 70s, Cabbagetown; in the 80s, Queen West; and in the 90s, it was Little Italy. . . . Basically, [the Golden Age] ends where gentrification begins. (qtd. in Hackworth and Rekers 218)

According to geographer David Ley, gentrification is a “spatial expression of a critical class politics, built on the notion of consumer dominance, if not sovereignty” (qtd. in Hackworth and Rekers 213). From this viewpoint, neighbourhoods commonly experience gentrification because tastes and preferences change. For example, a large part of society might grow to reject the suburbs (typically due to factors such as a lack of diversity, having to commute to work, or a feeling of isolation) in favour of inner-city living (213).
When Italians began moving into the College Street neighbourhoods in the early years of the twentieth century, they replaced predominantly Irish and Jewish communities in the western end of the Ward (Zucchi 45). Within a few decades, College Street witnessed a proliferation of commercial businesses owned by local Italian immigrants that were designed to serve the needs of their fellow community members and newcomers; however, this identity began to experience a gradual shift after the end of the Second World War as hundreds of Italian residents, who were suddenly less stigmatized by Canadian society, began to move away from College Street, at first to St. Clair Avenue West and then into other areas like Vaughan, Mississauga, and Woodbridge (Hackworth and Rekers 218).

We can assume that this mass exodus of Italian immigrants was further accelerated by the increasing financial stability of many Italian families that had earlier arrived in Canada with little means. All of those factors that had initially attracted Italian immigrants and helped to establish a strong Italian identity (or italianità) in Toronto gradually receded. For instance, one of the three major forces in the genesis of Little Italy was the existence of transitory vendors, tradesmen, and small businessmen that had established an Italian presence in the city. As a result of inevitable gentrification, these individuals were gradually displaced and the sense of community that they had fostered, which in earlier years had served as a magnet for new Italian families, waned.

As Anita Mancuso, owner of the restaurant Sotto Voce in Little Italy, has highlighted, Italian immigrants were able to maintain their culture partially because of the ghettoization that they had experienced upon arriving in Canada. Since many had come from small towns, Italian immigrants from various regions bonded over the shared experience of immigrating and having to adapt to a new, urban environment (Harney 142). They learned about other regions’ feste and
developed a new culture for themselves in Toronto—a melting pot of Italian regional traditions that produced a unique Italian-Canadian presence (156).

Early immigrants arriving in Canada as part of the padrone system were labourers, and their settlement was not always permanent nor stable (“The Global Gathering Place”). These men had come to Canada for jobs that were not available to them in Italy; however, many were sending money back to their families in Italy and even returning for periods at a time until they could afford to have their wives and children join them abroad. With a largely male population working simply to feed themselves and their families, the more social food scene that we now associate with Little Italy had not yet emerged in Toronto. As Mancuso points out, however, these men did not arrive here rich and so made foods for themselves. As such, it was easy for them to hold onto traditional dishes and culinary techniques.

College Street’s Little Italy can be understood as a response to the Italian community’s need to “recreate the piazza,” as Nicholas DeMarco Harney puts it in *Eh, Paesan! Being Italian in Toronto* (10). Rocco Mastrangelo Jr., son of the original owner of Café Diplomatico and now co-owner himself, explains the opening of Bar Diplomatico in 1969 as fulfilling the needs of the community at the time. The intention was to mimic a traditional Italian bar. (Note that the name changed from “bar” to “café” in response to changes in the community’s demographics, which did not associate “bar” with coffee as the initial Italian immigrants did.) Bar Diplomatico was a popular meeting place for the Italian community from the moment that it opened its doors in 1968. Between the years 1949 and 1983, an estimated 433,159–506,057 Italians immigrated to Canada, many settling in Toronto (“The Global Gathering Place”). Rocco Mastrangelo Sr.’s act of converting a clothing store into Bar Diplomatico was aptly timed with a decade in which there was a need to reduce the sense of alienation associated with the immigration process. Featuring
one of the first patios in the city, Bar Diplomatico succeeded in recreating the experience of the
piazza in Toronto.

In its early years, Bar Diplomatico did not have a kitchen; instead, it served coffee,
pastries, and gelato from an ice cream drum. Eventually a hot table was added, and meals were
served from food that had been cooked at home and brought into the bar by mothers, aunts, and
grandmothers. By this example alone, it is clear that Bar Diplomatico developed into something
of a community hub for Italian immigrants. In comparison to the village experience that many
had come from, city life could make face-to-face interactions very challenging (Harney 10), but
establishments such as Bar Diplomatico and Il Gatto Nero alleviated this challenge by becoming
neighbourhood landmarks that fostered a sense of community among immigrants. Early cafés,
bars, and restaurants functioned as gathering points: places where one could speak Italian and
engage in Italianità.

Mastrangelo attributes his family’s success to the simplicity of their establishment, and
many chefs and restaurateurs agree that the simplicity of Italian food is what has turned it from a
display of culture into a universally loved cuisine. “More than fifty years after Italians arrived on
the biggest wave of immigration this country has ever seen,” Rosanna Caira writes, “Italian food
has been embraced by all and is available in all parts of the city and beyond” (14). Mancuso
explains that she purchased Sotto Voce from its previous owner in order to stay true to her ethnic
background and cook what she knows for others. A first-generation Italian Canadian, Mancuso is
motivated less by creating a community hub than providing a space for people who have since
moved out of Little Italy to return to. In that sense, Sotto Voce and Café Diplomatico were both
opened for the same purpose: to keep Italian culture alive.
Today, Little Italy is less demographically Italian with Portuguese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and native Anglo-Canadian residents (now almost 50% of the population) dominating the area (Hackworth and Rekers 218). Alongside this decrease in the Italian residential identity, the area experienced a slow but gradual decline in its Italian commercial identity between the years 1970 and 2000. In 1970, 44.8% of the approximately 154 businesses along College Street between Euclid and Shaw (the boundaries of the current Little Italy Business Improvement Area [BIA]) openly identified with Italy or had incorporated the Italian language into their names. By 2000, this percentage had dropped to 29.2% percent, while businesses with no clear ethnic identification had grown to 64.9%. It is also notable that, in 1970, only 9.6% of businesses in Little Italy were restaurants, while 21% were grocery stores. By 2000, restaurants had come to dominate with 31.2%—the largest single category—of businesses while grocery and clothing stores had dropped to 10.9% and 13% respectively. Given this burgeoning of restaurants and diners, realtors had begun to call this area the “restaurant district” (222).

In order to better understand why and how this new “restaurant district” had emerged, we thought it important to gain insight from individuals who had worked, lived, and essentially been raised in the eclectic neighbourhood of Little Italy. Based on our interviews with the owners of Sotto Voce and Café Diplomatico, restaurants in Little Italy were once primarily established for the purpose of accommodating Italian immigrants and creating a sense of community or a sense of belonging. Today, however, these restaurants have significantly expanded their clientele to include tourists and young professionals.

Some owners like Mancuso of Sotto Voce are committed to promoting authentic Italian cuisine. In our interview, she expressed a passion for introducing non-Italian clients to authentic recipes and traditional flavours. When she uses ingredients, she makes a conscious effort to go
beyond serving typical pizzas, spaghettis, and meatballs in an attempt to expand the public view of what “Italian food” really entails. By contrast, Mastrangelo Jr. of Café Diplomatico is proud of his family’s adaptability, as demonstrated by their “Canadian-style” menu which incorporates a fusion of traditional Italian and Canadian foods.

So where does that leave Little Italy? In Buon Appetito Toronto!, a book outlining the impact of Italian food on the city, Rosa Caira states, “Today’s Italian chefs are re-creating their grandmother’s recipes and serving dishes up with a twist” (13). Toronto’s Little Italy may no longer be the heart of Italian culture and cuisine, but this does not negate the fact that many historical and iconic Italian hotspots are still around today. While many Italian restaurants have survived by adapting to Canadian food culture and creating a gastronomic union of both Italian and Canadian tastes, there are other establishments such as Sotto Voce that retain and uphold purer Italian traditions. It seems that the Italian food scene has grown far beyond the confines of its Little Italy, both geographically and culturally. Of course, what is Toronto if not a marriage of traditional immigrant and new Canadian cultures?

Works Cited


