

## “Non Dimenticar Means ‘Don’t Forget’”

by Leslie Haase

Most kids look forward to sleeping in on a Saturday morning, watching cartoons, and lounging around the house. My typical Saturday morning consists of waking up at eight in the morning to the angry sounds of a tomato grinder softened only by the crooning of Dean Martin and Rosemary Clooney blaring on the stereo. The house smells of tomatoes, and I stumble down the stairs, half asleep, to the kitchen—the obvious source of that familiar smell. I don’t expect to sit down, because there are no chairs open, nor is there any counter space. The entire kitchen is covered in tomatoes—Roma, San Marzano... there must be half a dozen types. I grab a box of tomatoes off a chair, take the seat I will be sitting at for the next several hours, and begin my part in our family tradition.

I am a third-generation Italian-American, something I have never been allowed to forget. Typically, a person’s heritage and traditions, although still important, do integrate themselves into the life he or she leads in the United States. My family, however, has kept most of the traditions and lifestyles, both good and bad, of customary Italians. Holiday traditions such as the “Feast of the Seven Fishes,” a Southern Italian custom to celebrate Christmas Eve, involves the cooking of seven different fishes for Christmas dinner and ends before Midnight Mass. The process of preparing a meal for a large group of people takes several days and is incredibly difficult, but because of the importance and longevity of the tradition, it remains a prominent part of the Italian Christmas season.

One reason these traditions remain intact, despite the amount of time spent in this country, was the tendency of Italian immigrants in the late 19th century to migrate to places with large Italian communities, such as Pittsburgh or New York City. Living in an environment with a familiar culture and heritage gives immigrants little or no incentive to fully assimilate themselves into the larger culture of the United States. When my mother’s family first came to the United States in 1905, they moved to Pittsburgh because they had relatives already living there. Their decision to live in an Italian community once within the United States, I believe, directly contributed to the strong traditions that our family has today.

Another integral part of my family’s Italian heritage, although not a traditional custom such as weekly family dinners or making me go to Italian Sunday school (think *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, but with Italians), involves the universal Italian love for music, and of course, food. I grew up listening to songs like “Mambo Italiano” and “Mama, Get the Hammer (There’s a Fly on Papa’s Head),” which at some point in the song involves papa getting hit on the head with a baccalà (dried, salted codfish). It seems no matter the strangeness of the song or the obscurity of the tradition, Italian Americans identify strongly with their background (de Sanctis 2).

But back to the Saturday morning ritual I find myself thrown into. The heat is killing me, the smell overwhelming. My mom and I are leaning over the massive pot on the stove, bubbling over with thick, red liquid. I want to run upstairs and crawl back in bed to go to sleep—something any normal teenager should be doing on a Saturday before noon—but as I daydream about rest, my mom pushes a strong-smelling herb under my already overworked nose. A person can only smell so many things in one day, but there is no rest for the Italian cook on “sauce day.” Identifying the smell as rosemary, my mom starts up on her weekly lecture as she sees me slightly roll my eyes. “You need to know this, Leslie. What happens when I’m not here anymore? Don’t you want to know how to make this?” Yes, I know this is a family recipe. Yes, I know that this is my mom’s favorite Italian pastime, one that got her published in the *Washington Post* Food Section two years ago (Weinraub

F1), the article which is now framed and mounted on our kitchen wall, forever a reminder to me that I will never be completely Italian because I have—gasp! —shunned a tradition.

What my mom fails to realize, however, is that straying from traditions is becoming more common among the younger generations. Generally, Italians have a certain disregard for privacy or personal space. Your business is most definitely their business. When I was visiting my relatives in Southern Italy, they followed us literally everywhere—from the moment we stepped off a train from Rome to the time we boarded one a week later on our way to Florence. I tried to express my concern to my dad, the only non-Italian in the group and therefore not tainted by the genes that make you slightly crazy and unable to see why anyone could possibly want space. My dad, who is smart enough not to get involved with these types of things, also felt the same way about my mom's relatives. Neither of us understood that in Italy, being a personal tour guide to visiting family members was just polite, and that leaving us alone would have been an insult, not to mention incredibly rude.

Younger generations, like myself, have moved away from customs that are commonplace to Italians like my relatives in Italy. As an Italian-American, I haven't gone quite so far. I have incorporated the idea of personal space and privacy from being an American citizen with the Italian traits that have been passed down to me from my ancestors. I believe that many people about my age have been turning away from tradition in search of their own identity, separate from the stereotypes and customs that bind us to our parents and our heritage. We also shy away from tradition because although we often have "strong feelings of identification with the Italian culture, [they are] paradoxically coupled, in many instances, with only a partial understanding of its core elements" (Boscia-Mulè 128).

While many traditions are an important part of who we are and why we are that way, my generation truly desires a chance to break away from convention. In an attempt to do so, we have created a newly combined subculture of our own, reflective of the traditions that are relevant and important to our lives. I know that my mom will never understand that I don't want to wake up early on a Saturday morning to make tomato sauce that, despite being one hundred times better than store-bought sauce, can actually be bought in a store! Although the recipe is no longer a "secret" family recipe—I can, in fact, access it online or in print (Weinraub F1)—I know that the sauce is more than just cooking; the sauce is a reminder of who we are as Italians, and my mom is not willing to let that tradition fade. While I appreciate her love for our ancestry and the heritage intertwined with being Italian, I choose to pick the traditions I feel I associate with the most and will carry on when I have a family. As in one of my favorite Saturday morning Italian songs, "non dimenticar means 'don't forget,'" and despite my attempts, I won't be able to.

#### Works Cited

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