

The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City

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Italian Americans are a most powerful case of a migrant group constructing their ethnic identity--and an entire ethnic economy--around their eating habits. At the turn of the twentieth century, some three million Italians migrated to the United States. As part of this massive and dramatic human movement--often spurred by hunger--mobile Italians put food at the very center of their experience, inventing in the diaspora a national Italian cuisine that did not exist at the time; using food rituals in the family and the community to foster networks of solidarity, negotiate conflicts, and cope with the many material, cultural, and psychological stresses they encountered in the process of migration and settlement; and building a complex and far-reaching system of food importing, processing, distribution, and retail that not only allowed for the self-subsistence of the community in terms of its distinctive foodways, but offered to many immigrants the opportunity for occupation and social mobility and helped keeping the transnational connections with the "homeland" (Italy) alive for decades to come. As numberless movies, novels, memoirs, and other cultural artifacts suggest, Italian American foodways have come to represent the most meaningful symbol of the group identity and public image in multicultural America and, indeed, on a global scale. In his talk, Simone Cinotto addresses these issues by discussing his new book, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (University of Illinois Press).