

Mangia, Vermont

Vermont's Italian food heritage lives on — if you know where to look
SEVEN DAYS

By Corin Hirsch [03.09.11]



Vermont Salumi

“The array of appetizers leaves the novice agape. Paper thin slices of prosciutto, a ham processed in pepper and spices. Large, red wafers of tasty salami. Pickled veal. Celery. Ripe olives, the dark, succulent meats falling easily away from their pits.” So appeared the table prepared for paying guests in the home of Barre widow Maria Stefani, as documented by writer Mari Tomasi for the Depression-era Federal Writers Project. The piece was reprinted in Mark Kurlansky’s 2009 book *The Food of a Younger Land*. Stefani’s meal was one of many — known as Italian feeds — that were offered at the time by the widows of granite workers. Harnessing their cooking skills enabled these women to support their families.

The Italian immigrants who worked in Barre’s quarries deeply influenced the local culinary landscape. Rather than the southern Italian food most familiar to Americans — pizza and spaghetti — Barre’s northern Italians brought subtler dishes that included rice, polenta and mild sausage. These were sold in markets, eaten at picnics, and served in rooming houses and private homes. “The food business was one of the most important ways that new arrivals got their feet on the ground economically,” says Jeff Roberts, a food historian and adjunct professor at New England Culinary Institute.

Yet, when Roberts moved to Vermont and sought authentic Italian cuisine, he found it wasn’t so easy to come by. Anyone walking down Barre’s Main Street today might agree: Though there are a handful of pizza places, finding old-school Italian food requires timing, digging and connections.

For instance, you could hit Dente’s Market at Christmastime for some Dead Man’s Bones — flat, hard cookies made with almonds by owner Rick Dente. “Some of the older Italians, they start asking around Thanksgiving, ‘Gonna make your Bones?’” says Dente. Now more of a deli, his market has been around for 104 years.

At the Brookside Country Store on East Montpelier Road, a shopper must traipse past the Doritos to find a refrigerator that houses a selection of Ping’s Sausage, including salamini and zampet.

Or one could be invited to dinner at the Mutuo Soccorso, a local, members-only Italian American club founded in 1906. Twice a month, some of its members gather for languorous meals of pasta, polenta and grilled meat. The sauce recipe is closely guarded; so are the meals themselves, unless you belong to this fraternal society. “Back in the day, if you tried to sell a \$6 loaf of bread, someone would’ve hit you over the head with it,” says one Mutuo member, who asks to remain anonymous, bemoaning the price of artisan bread while extolling the club’s homemade fare.

For the less connected, there is Campo di Vino. In a U-shaped complex on Barre’s South Main Street, Bob and Michelle Campo and their son Kevin have replicated an Italian market — they call it an enoteca and salumeria — complete with freezers full of ravioli and sausage, olive oil and vinegars, and racks of wine. At Campo di Vino, you can also find jars of almost the same mixture mentioned in that decades-old description of Maria Stefani’s Italian feed: “the antipasto, a savory achievement incorporating mushrooms, pearl onions, tuna, anchovies, broccoli — all permeated and tintured with a tangy red sauce.”

Bob Campo is vice president of sales and marketing at Rock of Ages, but he says he spends 25 hours a week in the market’s bright kitchen making ravioli, Bolognese and sausages such as luganiga, vanillia and zampet. The markets he remembers from his childhood “just all started fading away” in the 1960s, he says. Gradually, Campo felt the urge to render his grandparents’ recipes. Two years ago, the business began modestly with a KitchenAid mixer with a pasta attachment and a pair of his grandparents’ silver ravioli trays.

Campo di Vino took off, with customers stopping by during the nine hours each week the market is open or picking up ravioli at the handful of markets that sell it throughout the state. The family still makes its meat ravioli with a delicate formula of durum flour, eggs and water, but now uses an Emiliomiti pasta maker from Milan. Campo’s father, Bob Sr., sometimes shows up to help turn out the ravioli. “He loves to come down here and let loose,” says his son.

Ravioli anchor the business, but sausage and sauce are big sellers, as well; the sausage recipes are those of Campos’ former partner, Gary Rubalcaba. The Bolognese has meat so finely ground the bits are almost imperceptible; the meat ravioli are tinged with an appealing sweetness. Campo di Vino’s luganiga sausage, when sautéed with fresh tomatoes and pan-caramelized onions and served over polenta, is delicate, creamy and faintly acidic, and almost conjures the ghosts of Barre past.

Campo di Vino’s antipasto comes from a recipe handed down from Campo’s grandmother, Ida Poli, and includes mushrooms, peppers, green beans, olives, anchovies and tuna in unctuous, tomato-flecked olive oil. “It’s a long process to make it and jar it,” says Campo — two hours to turn out a single batch.

Traditional Italians might raise their eyebrows at some of the Campo family’s ventures, such as food-and-wine pairings, and at their interest in eventually opening a wine bar. But they hope to keep the traditions alive by attracting new clientele. “We’ve got to the point where we’re almost going to lose this from generation to generation,” says Campo. Those looking for authentic Italian food have to travel far these days, he laments. “Where do they go? They go to the North End of Boston. So I’m glad we’re doing it.”

Not all of Vermont’s Italian-food traditions are hidden or precious — or in Barre. At Cate Farm in Plainfield, Peter Colman cuts, seasons and grinds pork into sausage that he sells to restaurants, in his own farm shop and at the Montpelier Farmers Market. (He cures it to ribbony prosciutto and capicola, too, but they’re not for sale yet.)

Colman, 29, was born in Assisi, in the Umbrian region of Italy, but moved with his mother to Vermont when he was a toddler. On Cate Farm, his mother and stepfather grew organic greens and vegetables. Colman assisted on the farm, but returned to Umbria each year to visit family. During such a visit about five years ago, he considered learning to cure his own meat and asked a great-uncle to direct him to a teacher; he was told to return when the weather turned cooler. In Italy, curing is a winter task.

So Colman waited. When he returned, he spent a month studying how to slaughter pigs and cure the meat. It was a task shared or watched by groups of men. “I love that people would hover around that process,” Colman says. “You’d never find yourself alone butchering a pig.”

Upon his return to Vermont, Colman purchased three piglets from a farm in Norwich, then raised and slaughtered them. It was the first time he had killed animals by his own hand. “I had emotions of pain, loss and sadness,” he recounts. “I can slaughter other people’s pigs and not be emotional. But it was difficult to create a relationship that would end.”

Once he got over that hurdle, Colman set about using every part of the pigs’ bodies for something edible — capicola, prosciutto, even headcheese. It was a challenge while also working 50 hours a week at an office job; he would butcher and cure late at night, trying to recall what he had learned in Italy. Those three pigs eventually filled his freezer. “I was inundated with pig for a year,” he says.

Colman claims there’s suspense in watching prosciutto age. “The legs of prosciutto go through the seasons and get moldy,” he says. “Then you slice into the layers, past the fat, into the deep, deep red color and to a part of the animal that’s never seen the light of day.”

Prosciutto can be eaten at five months, Colman says, or eight, but he waits patiently for another year. The lengthy curing process connects us to our primal urges for food preservation, he suggests. “It’s like a squirrel stashing away acorns. Winter is coming, and you’re preparing and storing your own food.”

In addition to curing meats for himself, Colman grinds sausage under the name Vermont Salumi and has a retail outlet in Plainfield. He makes special sausages for Salt Café in Montpelier. With the help of friends, he built a processing room and aging room in his barn to turn out traditional Italian sausages such as Roma — an almost gentle, aromatic blend — and the Daily Grind, a more robust, traditional sausage. He also makes chorizo and traditional English bangers seasoned with thyme and nutmeg, and will soon start selling salami.

Though born of Italian tradition, Colman’s sausages are intensely local. He buys pork from Vermont Family Farms in Enosburg Falls, wine from Lincoln Peak Vineyard in New Haven, beer from Greensboro Bend’s Hill Farmstead Brewery, cider vinegar from Lost Meadow Cider Mill in Calais and “lots of garlic” from Burlington’s Bella Pesto.

In Italy, curing and sausage making are social activities that foster connectedness, Colman says. Though the craft is currently practiced in isolated pockets in Vermont, Colman believes it will make a comeback. “It’s a form of preservation that allows us to get away from refrigeration. I think you’re going to start seeing more legs of prosciutto hanging in people’s basements,” he says.

For now, Colman seems happy to be part of the informal network of Italian home winemakers, bakers and fellow sausage makers who speckle the Barre region, citing their names easily as friends and acquaintances. “It’s all fun and engaging,” he says. “That’s what these traditions can offer.”