

Common Threads, Common Heritage

By Lisa Volpe Yakomin

When my father died three years ago, I was filled with grief. Losing my father was hard enough, but his death also represented the loss of one of the strongest links I ever had to my Italian heritage. My father was the last surviving Volpe on our branch of the family tree: his brother's only son died years ago and had no children, and since my father never had any sons, there was no one left to carry on our family name. My father was also the "keeper of the history" in our family, the one who sat at my grandmother's knee and absorbed all of the stories about her and my grandfather's daring trek from their native Italy to America. He would regale us with obscure memories of the past with crystal clarity. He spoke with pride about my great-grandparents, and how hard they worked in order to send their children here, in the hope that they might provide a better life for the generations to come.

All four of my grandparents came to America through Ellis Island from Naples, Italy. As such, I had a childhood that was rich with tradition and steeped in the Italian American culture. My parents both understood spoken Italian, but since my mother's parents died when she was just a teenager, she stopped hearing it at home and soon lost the language. My father spoke Italian to his own parents, but only rarely—my grandparents believed strongly in the American dream, and part of achieving that included adopting the ways and embracing the language of their new country. Like so many second and third generation Italians, the only Italian words I learned were the ones you couldn't repeat in good company.

Every weekend throughout my childhood, we drove from one end of Brooklyn to the other to have a traditional Italian dinner at my grandparents' house. Although this was a regular occurrence, each time, it was like an event.

We ate in the large kitchen in the basement of the house, with two long tables plus a kid's table to accommodate all of my aunts, uncles and cousins. The meal started with an antipasto and lots of warm Italian bread. During cold weather months, we had chicken soup next, with little pasta bow ties instead of noodles. The best part was putting huge spoonfuls of grated romano cheese on top of the hot broth, and watching as it quickly melted into long, salty strings that clung to the spoon. There was pasta, naturally, only we called it macaroni, and the red meat sauce served with it was always known as "gravy." Each week, my grandfather saved the heel of the Italian bread for me to dip into the gravy so that I could tell him if it was done just so. It always was.

The meatballs were fantastic spheres of heaven, made from a special recipe that my grandfather never revealed, even to my grandmother. She said she knew how he made them, but hers never tasted as good as the ones he made, and he took the secret with him to the grave.

There was salad, too, but I never bothered with that. I needed to save room for the braciole and sausage. Everything was washed down with my grandfather's homemade red wine. Until I made my First Communion, I had to mix mine with soda. Nowadays, I'm sure that would be frowned upon. But I learned from an early age that wine was meant to be consumed with food, as a complement to the meal. It represented the fruits of my grandfather's labor, and was meant to be savored. As a result, consuming alcohol just for the sake of it has never held much appeal for me.

There was so much food, and it never occurred to me what a huge undertaking it must have been for my grandparents, week after week. I'm sure the expense must have involved some sacrifice on their part, but they never spoke of it—they were just happy to have their family around them.

My favorite memories of my grandparents' home were from our time spent after the meals: the men sat around the table, playing cards and cracking walnuts and talking in loud voices about nothing in particular, their conversation punctuated by bursts of raucous laughter. Meanwhile, the women clustered together as they washed and put away the dishes, whispering secrets, offering advice, and of course, sharing juicy gossip.

I played in the back room near the pantry, spinning on my grandfather's worn wooden sewing stool, mesmerized by his old black Singer machine. I didn't find out until years later that he was a master tailor for Oleg Cassini, sewing original fashions for then-First Lady Jackie Kennedy and her children. He was modest and never bragged about his extraordinary talents, and I never actually got to see him sew. Our time together was usually spent cooking, eating, gardening, and just enjoying each other's company. He kept his work life separate from his family life, and when he died, his expertise died with him.

I never realized what a tremendous loss this was until years later, when I took up sewing, and desperately wished that I had my grandfather there to guide me. There was a great deal of trial and error at first, but I persevered, and found that I had enough natural ability to teach myself. Each time I sit down at my sewing machine, I feel more connected to my grandfather's spirit, as though an invisible thread runs between us, binding us closer with every stitch.

As the years passed, my cousins went off to college and got married and started families of their own. My aunts and uncles sold their empty-nest homes, and our family began drifting further apart. The large weekly dinners and huge holiday get-togethers became few and far between, and when my grandmother died, yet another link to my heritage slipped away.

It was right around that time that I met my husband. He was perfect for me in every way—but he was not Italian. His family hailed from an island in Croatia, just a short boat ride to Northern Italy across the Adriatic, but he may as well have been a Martian as far as I was concerned. Both of his parents were only children, so he had no aunts, no uncles, and not one first cousin.

I, on the other hand, grew up with 20 aunts and uncles and 25 first cousins. At our wedding, the bride's side handily outnumbered the groom's side, and looking at the sea of familiar faces, it was impossible to accept that my Italian ties might be slipping away. After we married, I dropped my maiden name and took Rich's surname because it was the traditional thing to do. The feminist notion that it would somehow cause me to lose my identity seemed silly. Changing my name didn't change who I was, or where I came from—but it was yet another step farther from my roots. Suddenly, when someone heard my last name, they'd say, "What IS that?" rather than, "Volpe? Ah, nice Italian girl!"

Over the years, I began seeking out ways to keep my Italian heritage alive. I cooked our traditional foods and kept a pantry filled with all of the things I remembered on my grandparents' shelves. I dried hot peppers in the boiler room, grew basil and tomatoes in my garden, and made macaroni on Sundays. I even began hosting the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve for my husband's family.

I thought I was doing a pretty good job of carrying on my family's traditions, until my father's death forced me to confront the reality of just how disconnected I had become. Being Italian American is so much more than just cooking up old recipes or hosting an annual holiday gathering. My grandparents came to this country with nothing but a dream of prosperity, and the willingness to work their fingers to the bone in order to make it happen. They took pride in their work, yet they understood the importance

of family. They were generous in spirit, and always considered the needs of others above their own. They lived the motto “Service Above Self,” and I am a better person for having had those values instilled in me. With my father gone, I became afraid that this connection to what it truly means to be an Italian American would slowly slip away and be forgotten. I knew I needed to look for some way to keep that connection, but I didn’t know where to find it.

Luckily, it found me. A few months after my father died, I got a postcard in the mail, inviting me to an Italian Heritage celebration, hosted by my local UNICO chapter. I had never heard of UNICO, but felt the pull to check it out and see what it was all about. When I arrived, I was greeted at the door by a woman I’d known through the school where our daughters attended. I was surprised to see her there: her last name is Brown—I had no idea she was Italian. And me, with my Croatian surname...I’m sure she was confused, too.

I walked into the room and was immediately struck by the familiar sounds and smells of my childhood. Italian music played while people gathered around large tables filled with a variety of traditional foods and adorned with photos of Italy. When it was time for the “Italian lesson,” the Unican who was conducting the class asked everyone what part of Italy their families hailed from. Everyone proudly declared themselves Sicilian, Neapolitan, Calabrese, Genovese—it became quite the contest to see which town owned the room. Then he asked how many of us actually knew how to speak Italian—and nary a hand was raised. “That’s okay,” he said. “Now, how many of you would like to learn?” We may have been fractured in our hometown loyalties, but we were united in our desire to reconnect with our ancestry. For the first time, instead of mourning what I’d lost, I celebrated the creation of a new link to my family’s past.

That was almost two years ago. Since then, I have been a part of something so much larger than I ever imagined. Together, my local chapter members and I have raised money for a 6-year-old cancer victim, supported charities like the St. Jude Children's Hospital and Cooley's Anemia, aided a local boy who suffered a traumatic brain injury, awarded scholarships to deserving athletes and Italian American scholars, and held heritage events that brought more members into the fold. We have supported one another through the loss of jobs, celebrated the birth of a new baby, and shared our memories of what it was like growing up Italian American. All the while, we have worked together to make a positive impact in our community, upholding the work ethic and values with which we were all raised.

At a recent celebratory gathering with my fellow Unicans, we sat around a big table together with glasses of champagne. One of our members offered a toast, quoting an old Italian proverb: "Un amico vale piu di cento parenti!" Translation: "Better one good friend than a hundred relatives." I smiled, and took a moment to look around the table at this hard-working group that I had joined. Within minutes, the men were engaged in loud, boisterous conversation punctuated by bursts of sudden laughter, while the women clustered together, whispering secrets, offering advice, and sharing gossip. Suddenly, I was transported right back to my grandparents' kitchen, surrounded by loving, good-hearted people who exemplify the very best of what it means to be Italian American.

No, these are not my relatives, but they are more than friends. They are my family.