

# How America became Italian



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When baseball legend Yogi Berra passed away last month, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred called the late Yankees catcher “[a beacon of Americana.](#)” Sportswriter Frank Deford had employed the same theme a decade earlier, calling Berra “[the ultimate in athletic Americana.](#)”

That is quite a testament to a man born Lorenzo Pietro Berra to Italian immigrant parents and raised in the Italian enclave of St. Louis known as the Hill. There, he developed the outsize personality that would color the American experience with Italian wit.

Traditionally, when we think of Americana, we recall Grant Wood’s “[American Gothic](#)” or Betsy Ross sewing the Stars and Stripes. Now we can also invoke Berra and his famous quote, “It ain’t over till it’s over.”

Berra, an anchor of the dynastic New York Yankees of the mid-20th century, exemplifies the broad influence that Italian Americans have had on American culture since arriving as impoverished and denigrated immigrants isolated in urban ghettos. From sports and food to movies and music, they haven’t just contributed to the culture, they have helped redefine it.

That would have surprised many native-born Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was on the rise. Most Italians came from the poverty-stricken southern regions of Sicily, Calabria, Campania and Abruzzo (although Berra’s parents were part of the minority that hailed from the North). These immigrants worked mainly as semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, providing much-needed muscle for the United States’ booming industrial economy. They toiled in steel mills and coal mines as “pick and shovel” day laborers or as brick- and stone-laying masons, as my grandfather and great-grandfather were.

Americans of that era saw Italians as a poor fit for democratic citizenship. Since many Italian immigrants were illiterate, immigration restrictionists sought to impose a literacy test for admission to the country that would have excluded Italians in large numbers. There was also a common belief that Italians were prone to violence. In 1893, [the New York Times called Italy](#) “the land of the vendetta, the mafia, and the bandit.” Southern Italians were “bravos and cutthroats” who sought “to carry on their feuds and bloody quarrels in the United States.” Three years later, the Boston Globe published [a symposium titled](#) “Are Italians a Menace? Are They Desirable or Dangerous Additions to Our Population?”

Nearly half of Italian immigrants were “birds of passage” who eventually returned to Italy. Those who stayed in America often settled together, forming poor ethnic neighborhoods. But

these barrios were not simply replicas of their residents' native country. Regional cultures — which distinguished Sicilians from Neapolitans — blended along with American customs that children brought home from public schools.

Two events in particular helped develop the Italian American identity. Congress passed immigration quotas in the 1920s that primarily targeted people from Southern and Eastern Europe. The Immigration Act of 1924 slashed the annual quota for Italian immigrants from more than 42,000 to less than 4,000. Stemming the flow of newcomers into ethnic neighborhoods caused Little Italys to gradually shrink, and Italian Americans moved to the suburbs and diverse neighborhoods where they were more influenced by purely American music, movies and culture.

Then came World War II, which forged a strong feeling of national unity — one that was more inclusive than the nativist campaign for “100 percent Americanism” during World War I. At the beginning of the war, Italian immigrants who had not become U.S. citizens were deemed “enemy aliens.” But President Franklin D. Roosevelt determined that the designation was counterproductive as he sought Italian American support for the war and [lifted it on Columbus Day 1942](#), so Italians largely escaped the fate of interned Japanese Americans. A half-million Italian Americans (including Berra, who earned a Purple Heart) served in the U.S. military during World War II, with some of them fighting in the Italian countryside that had been their parents' home.

As they joined the military and integrated into suburbs, Italian Americans shed the popular stereotypes surrounding them. Gradually, the customs developed in Little Italys found acceptance in the mainstream and were absorbed into broader American culture.

Food is a good example of this phenomenon. In the early 20th century, Italian immigrant dishes were scorned and became the root of slurs like “spaghetti bender” and “garlic eater.” Garlic's pungency seemed un-American and uncivilized, and the strong smell was seen as evidence of Italians' inferiority. Its popularity in American markets and recipes today shows how drastically this perception has changed and how enmeshed Italian American culture has become in broader American life.

That's also apparent in red-sauce dishes that are staples in U.S. homes and restaurants. Big plates of spaghetti and meatballs, baked ziti, and chicken parmigiana are not common in Italy, but they reflect the unique Italian American culture immigrants created. Red sauce became prevalent in immigrants' kitchens because canned tomatoes were readily available in U.S. markets. Meat was a rarity in southern Italy but abundant in America, and the growing incomes of even working-class Italian households allowed for larger portions of meatballs and other dishes.

Pizza, believed to have originated in Naples, epitomizes Italian Americans' outsize influence on our culture, where pizza took on an entirely new meaning. Generally, Americans don't like the original Neapolitan pizza, whose crust tends to be a bit soggy in the middle — unlike the crispier Italian American version. An Italian restaurant owner who opened a pizzeria in New York featuring Neapolitan pies told me his customers complain that his pizzas are undercooked.

Italian Americans have continued to put new spins on the Neapolitan creation. In Chicago, they created the deep-dish pizza. New Haven's legendary Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana is famous for its white clam pizza, as well as its regular red-sauce and cheese version. In the classic American way, corporations also got into the act, from Domino's to California Pizza Kitchen. Few foods are more ubiquitous in the American diet, and few are more synonymous with American cuisine.

While Italian Americans' kitchens were changing the nation's palate, their creativity was winning over the popular culture. Before the dawn of rock-and-roll, many of the singers who defined American music were Italian Americans: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Vic Damone, Tony Bennett, Perry Como and Louis Prima among them.

Sinatra, specifically, transcended his time and has influenced American music beyond his death. His songs have become the cornerstone of what critics call the Great American Songbook. The music itself is a cultural mash-up, borrowing from African American jazz with lyrics often written by Jewish songwriters. But with his cocked hat, Sinatra possessed an air of confidence that popularized Italian American swagger and sartorial style. He sang without an accent, but between songs listeners heard a voice from the streets of Hoboken, N.J., with Italian-dialect slang thrown in.

Italian Americans have also made a mark on film. Two of the four greatest American movies, [as judged by the American Film Institute](#), were not only directed by Italian Americans but narrate stories about the Italian American experience. Martin Scorsese's "[Raging Bull](#)" is a gritty, hyper-realistic tale of the rise and fall of middleweight boxing champ Jake La Motta. And Francis Ford Coppola's "[The Godfather](#)," based on the novel by Mario Puzo, is a tale about the tensions of assimilation, as Michael Corleone abandons his American ambitions to take over from his father as crime boss.

Coppola and Puzo were walking a fine line with "The Godfather." The movie reinforced the connection that many Americans made between Italians and organized crime, a stereotype that bothered Italian Americans. But Coppola and Puzo turned the Corleones into classic American characters, embodying the broadly relatable conflict between fathers and sons, tradition and modernity.

Italian immigration, at least on a large scale, is now a thing of the past. But the influence of Italian American culture remains. These immigrants and their children did not simply melt into a homogenous stew of Americanism; they created a lively ethnic community that helped shape mainstream culture.

Today, Americans are once again concerned about the number of new immigrants and their ability to assimilate. It might not quite be "deja vu all over again" (to borrow from Yogi Berra), but the Italian American experience reminds us that immigration is a process of transformation for the individuals and for American society. That bilateral cultural evolution will continue to mold who we are as a nation.

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