



Me and Chef Boyardee

How Cleveland's first celebrity chef made me the woman I am today

by Elaine T. Cicora

I owe my career to Chef Boyardee. No, not a can of Beefaroni. The real, honest-to-goodness man *behind* the can, Ettore Boiardi—groundbreaking chef, visionary businessman, savvy restaurateur, and by all accounts, a really nice guy who hung his toque in Cleveland on his way to becoming a multimillionaire in the packaged foods industry.

Like his eponymous boxed dinners, Ettore—or Hector, as he was known following his 1914 arrival at Ellis Island from the northern Italian town of Piacenza—was pretty much the complete package.



Photo Gallery

To begin with, he must have been a mighty chef. In an era when Italian immigrants were sneered at as “garlic eaters,” or worse, and their cuisine denigrated as smelly, impoverished, and even sinful, Hector made short work of the long climb up the ladder of culinary success. He started out as a 17-year-old cook in the kitchens of New York’s tony Plaza Hotel. One year later, he was a head chef, presiding over President Woodrow Wilson’s wedding banquet at West Virginia’s even tonier Greenbrier Resort.

Cleveland was a pretty tony town in those days, too, and local hoteliers wasted no time in wooing the Italian wunderkind to the North Coast. Hector arrived at the Hotel Winton, on Prospect Avenue, in 1917, where he commanded the kitchen and caused a veritable sensation with his exotic spaghetti dinners, which—much like sushi in the 1980s—proved to be a thrilling departure from Clevelanders’ usual Midwest fare.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to call the chef a groundbreaker. Historian Pamela Dorazio Dean, curator for Italian-American history at the Western Reserve Historical Society, explains. “Italian food was foreign at that time,” she says. “It was pungent; it was offensive. Yet Clevelanders liked his food so much, they were asking how to make it at home.”

Like any rising-star chef, Hector’s next step was to open his own restaurant, Il Giardino d’Italia (or Italian Garden). Settled on East Ninth Street and Woodland Avenue, in the former Big Italy neighborhood, it was a similarly huge hit, attracting locals and visiting celebrities alike. In Hector’s 1985 *Plain Dealer* obit, son Mario described the place as “the meeting ground for all the Metropolitan Opera singers and maestros” in town during tours in the 1920s and ’30s. “When they were here, they wouldn’t go anywhere else,” he said.

According to legend, the chef's spaghetti sauce, in particular, proved so irresistible that guests started begging to take some home. At first, he obliged by filling cleaned milk bottles with the red stuff. By 1928, the chef was making and packaging his sauce—along with spaghetti and packets of Parmesan cheese—in a series of ever-larger Cleveland factories, while quickly branching out into national retail sales.

In the process, the chef-restaurateur broke another type of ground: as one of the world's first culinarians to catch on to the potential of "convenience" foods.

The packaged-foods business eventually led Hector to an abandoned mill in Milton, Pennsylvania, where in 1938 he opened a 300,000-square-foot processing plant to meet the ever-growing demand for his products. Sometime during these years, he brilliantly changed his company's name to the phonetic Boy-Ar-Dee, making it easier for American tongues to wrap themselves around his brand.

Meantime, back in Cleveland, Hector's restaurant empire continued to grow. In 1931 he opened Chef Boiardi's at 823 Prospect Ave., changing the name to Chef Hector's after his branding epiphany. In 1945, he joined fellow restaurateur Albert Caminati in operating Pierre's Italian Restaurant on nearby Euclid Avenue. And in the 1950s, the duo opened Town & Country restaurant on Chagrin Boulevard.

During the war years, Hector garnered fame and glory—not to mention a gold medal from the U.S. military, the Order of Lenin from the Russian government, and a Cross of Honor (and the title "king of the spaghetti dinner") from the Italians—by creating and producing field rations for the troops. In 1946, when opportunity came knocking in the guise of a purchase offer from American Home Foods (now ConAgra), the former Italian immigrant was able to leverage his business acumen and international reputation into a \$6 million payday.

As Boiardi family friend Mary Garvey puts it, "He was the American success story, personified."

It was in the mid-1950s, when I was 4 or maybe 5, that fate finally brought us together.

For this, I must thank my father, George. A first-generation Italian American, former U.S. Army cook who served in Italy during World War II, and himself a better-than-average eater, George had a massive, if somewhat unexplainable, fondness for Chef Boyardee products. Was it nostalgia for the war years? The bonds of Italian brotherhood? The allure of a cheap dinner? Who knows the source of this attraction. But for years, the arrival of TGIF time in our suburban home was marked, not with martinis or manhattans, but with the emergence of the cheerful yellow box of Chef Boyardee from the kitchen cupboard.

Dad's brand loyalty extended to a memorable visit to Chef Hector's restaurant, an odd little space reached by a long walk through what was at the time the area surrounding the old Central Market (now occupied by Quicken Loans Arena). Twisting and turning through the narrow streets, I recall making our way up a little alley until we finally emerged on Prospect Avenue, in front of a door that led down a set of stairs into a dim, subterranean dining room.

I ordered the spaghetti.

I ate the spaghetti. In fact, to have heard my dad tell it, I more or less hoovered the spaghetti right off the plate.

My childish enthusiasm so tickled our waiter that he asked my parents if he could bring me a second serving of spaghetti—on the house, to be sure—which I also inhaled.

"She's *such* a good little eater," he told my parents with an approving nod.

And with that benediction from a waiter at Chef Hector's, the die was cast and my career as a professional food writer was assured.

I've gone on to dine at fine restaurants throughout the world, spending more than two decades reviewing and writing about the Cleveland food and dining scenes. As for the chef, he enjoyed the fruits of his labors for an additional 30 years, closing Chef Hector's in 1967, Pierre's in 1974, and finally retiring as a consultant for American Home Foods in 1978. He had homes in Shaker Heights and Hollywood, Florida. He savored the company of friends and family, including wife Helen, son Mario, and several grandchildren, great grandchildren, and assorted nieces and nephews. (Indeed, grand-niece Anna Boiardi made a brief splash in 2011 with her cookbook/memoir *Delicious Memories: Recipes and Stories from the Chef Boyardee Family*.) By all accounts, Hector remained a gentleman throughout. Those who knew the plump, mustachioed chef—who continued representing his brand in print and on television until 1979—describe him as elegant, charming, and never without a tie.

“He was very European—formal, but very warm,” recalls family friend Dorothy Ceruti, who dined at the chef's home on at least one occasion. “He cooked very simply—steak, I think—and cautioned [perhaps tellingly] against using too much garlic.”

Mary Garvey, whose *nonna* had won a dance contest with a young Hector, remembers him stirring polenta in her parents' kitchen. “He was jovial, fun loving. He always had a twinkle in his eye,” she says. When Hector died in a Parma nursing home in 1985, his obituary made *The New York Times*. He was buried in Chardon, at All Souls Cemetery. He left an estate estimated at \$60 million. Ten years later—the year that Helen passed away—Chef Hector was posthumously inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Culinary Hall of Fame. During the awards ceremony, the James Beard Foundation spokesperson characterized him as “one of Cleveland's most recognizable contributions to the food world.”

Whatever gastronomic nirvana Hector may now inhabit, I hope Cleveland's first celebrity chef sometimes takes a moment to relish his many accomplishments. Somewhere on that list, as a tiny footnote to his many greater deeds, is this: He set at least one good eater on the path to a tasty career.

Congratulations! Elaine Cicora won the 2017 Grand Prize M.F.K. Fisher Award for Excellence in Culinary Writing from Les Dame d'Escoffier International for this story.