

Spring 5-2014

# Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found

Christina DeRay  
christina.deray@student.shu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

DeRay, Christina, "Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found" (2014). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 1998.

<https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1998>

Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found  
by  
Christina DeRay

Thesis Mentor: Prof. Mark Senvold  
Second Reader: Dr. Nathan Oates

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts  
Department of English,  
Seton Hall University

August, 2014

“Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found”  
by  
Christina DeRay

Approved By:



---

Prof. Mark Svenvold

Thesis Mentor



---

Dr. Nathan Oates

Second Reader

Introduction

“Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found”

by  
Christina DeRay

Seton Hall University, 2014  
Under the supervision of Prof. Mark Senvold

This thesis is a memoir about the lives of the matriarchs of my family: my grandmothers, Carmina and Marie, but in many other ways the memoir becomes a point of entry for a personal essay that explores the culture of authenticity in American cuisine. As a memoir, I offer a personal history of an original Italian cuisine from my very Italian family— how it was transplanted from the European “boot” to American soil, how it flourished through the lessons Carmina taught my family, and how it got transformed when it hit American. I reflect upon the appearance, after the Second World War, of an American “kitchen of convenience” tradition, and how, with the advent of the “wellness” or “healthy living” trend of American eating, a backlash occurred. Part of that backlash has involved a trend of foodie consumption that I’ve called “the Hipster Rebellion,” the search for authentic food that has become a cultural past-time for a demographic of knowledge workers, a “creative class” in search of great-tasting, authentic food.

Writing this memoir, I initially adopted an oppositional stance to the Hipster Rebellion, but I also found points of connection to it. Their journey toward the authentic and their focus on the genuine cuisine is a response to a heightened awareness about and resistance to the mass produced and chemically-engineered products of the kitchen of convenience. My discovery of “farm to table” awareness, however, arrived in a more personal way. The authenticity of the

Italian cuisine that is the subject of this thesis was and remains part of who I am. But my story, I realize, is also a story of cuisine assimilation— of having been raised in both the kitchen of authenticity and the kitchen of convenience. I’ve come to understand both sides of the coin— I have cooked in them, eaten in them, learned in them, and I have carried their recipes throughout my life. And while I too, have gravitated toward the target of the Hipster Rebellion, toward an authentic Italian cuisine, I’ve also discovered an inherent responsibility to the authentic— for passing along the recipes of my grandmothers and the story of who my grandmothers were, their legacy, their cuisine, to my own children.

The overt subject of the piece, then, is a memoir of two Italian grandmothers and the food they made. Both being born of Italian decent—one was raised primarily in Italy and the other was raised in Jersey City, New Jersey. They each started their own families in the Heights section of Jersey City during a time when life was simpler and the most important thing was taking care of family. Food is the centerpiece of this memoir—the history that surrounds it, the craft and technique of its preparation and my family’s relationship to it from both an Italian immigrant and Italian-American standpoint. Underneath this lies the covert subject, the quest in American culture for the authentic. I look at the American way of cooking through my experiences with Marie— the quickly prepared convenience of processed food versus Carmina’s Italian cuisine and approach to cooking— “home-grown”, authentic, and slow cooked meals. I identify the search for good food as another vehicle for in that on-going cultural quest for the real—for a natural, slow-paced, and health-conscious approach to cuisine.

One of my influences for writing this piece has been Chef Marcus Samuelsson’s memoir *Yes, Chef*, itself a memoir centered upon a love for food and for the way that food draws out the

relationships he has with those closest to him. It chronicles his rise to fame from his earliest experiences with food and family to the opening of his restaurant, Red Rooster, in Harlem, New York. His memoir was an inspiration to me in that I understood and related to his passion for food and those he was able to share it with throughout the course of his life. His mothers and grandmothers were a great inspiration to him and influence through his culinary career. His culture—the mix of his own heritage as well as that of his adoptive parents—made for his deepened appreciation of food and gave him *experiences* with flavor that, through his experimentation with these flavors, allow his diners, to also experience his cultural influences, placing him in high standings in the culinary world.

Like Chef Samuelson, I wanted to acknowledge my upbringing and the appreciation I have for my family's food and culture. It felt important to me—it was something I needed to do for myself, for my family, and a way for me to pay respect to two women I so dearly admired. I had no idea when I started writing that I'd end up learning so much about my grandmothers, my neighborhood and about who I am. I started out in the sentimental—a place where I was wrapped up in memories of my grandmothers and the time I spent with them— with each sentence the story began to transform, grow, and by the time I was finished, I found myself engrossed in the history of Jersey City, of the 1960's, and in the transformations within the culinary world from authentic foods to processed convenience and back again. If this piece is centered around food and the lessons that I have learned from the meals of my grandmothers, the meatball, in many ways, becomes a dramatic organizing principle for the piece—a point of entry for memory and history that transcends my own personal history.

My research involved venturing out into Jersey City to find the places where my grandmothers started their lives in America. I was able to find their first homes and the factory where Carmina worked when she first immigrated to the United States. I spent time in the New Jersey Room at Jersey City's Public library looking through stacks of yearbooks, photos, and directories. I interviewed my parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins about their experiences growing up during the 1960's, about living in Jersey City, and what my grandmothers were like as mothers. I researched historical information about Pisticci and Jersey City, Immigration facts, and anything I could read about Italian-American culture and food as well as the history of food in America like Laura Shapiro's *Something from the Oven*.

I use Shapiro to help me chart what I call the American kitchen of convenience. In her book, Shapiro examines the trend of convenience in kitchens during the 1950's and how foods literally made their way from the front lines of World War II and into American households as a means of creating an efficient and easy-to-make mealtime. Shapiro demonstrates how the big food companies marketed "easy-to-make" methods and, in the process, warped the American palate. They convinced American wives and mothers that cooking authentically was unnecessary—that they didn't have the time or the desire to do it. This manipulation set off an overwhelming need to maintain households where speed became the highest good. The American kitchen of convenience was defined by quickly produced meals that depended heavily upon canned and other pre-packaged products to hurry along the cooking process. Desire for ease turned into an obsession as a post-war era kitchen of convenience took hold and placed authenticity on the back burner.

Today's wellness trend has shifted hard in the other direction, and fast food, highly processed, chemically-engineered ingredients have become a new suspect terrain. The wellness trend has coincided with other trends that recognize and seek to preserve the authentic. The recognition that history and culture live in old buildings, for instance, and the push, beginning in the 1970s, to preserve them, to rebuilt them and rediscover the continuities gained by historic preservation, all of this is part of the American quest for the authentic that is of a piece, surprisingly, perhaps even comically, in my own quest to rediscover the importance of a meatball. My quest involved turning away from the cultural predisposition for instant gratification, toward speed and efficiency above all other concerns, and toward what a select few of the millennial generation—knowledge workers, members the “creative class,” so-called hipsters, have discovered. Theirs is a desire for authenticity. The general sweep of this piece, then, addresses the trend in America that focused first on quantity over quality and then shifted dramatically toward a more European—specifically Italian— ideal of slowing things down and concentrating on the authentic.

The overall writing process has taught me how important it is to focus on sentencng. While discussing edits and comments back and forth with Professor Senvold I've realized how much a story is truly driven at the sentence level and that length and word choice matter immensely when trying to tell a story to the reader. There were a few sections where I was writing with what Professor Senvold referred to as “Chamber of Commerce” jargon without even realizing how brochure-like my sentencng had become. Throughout the editing process I was able to pick up on the negative influence that my background in Real Estate was having on

my choice of words and how I was structuring sentences. Once I was aware of my use of these cliché adjectives I was able to transform them into something honest and more descriptive.

Facts are important. Memoir, though, is a genre where facts are often remembered, from the point of view of the teller. Memory surrounds the story like a landscape. One's memory is the main source for writing a memoir and it is here that the language of the imagination is vital in forming these memories into dramatic realities. But memories can only take you so far. I learned through writing this piece that in order to build the reader's trust in me and my memories, I have to use my tools as a writer, to use my research as a means of showing the reader what is concrete through my discussion of setting and the timeframe in particular. For instance, I describe the factory where my grandmother worked in downtown Jersey City in such a way that it allows the reader to see and understand a permanent part of history, a place with an address and stamp in time, a fact unaffected by my memory.

The language of the imagination allows me to employ a wide range of dramatic devices such as the use of comparison—analogy, as well as imagined scenarios in which I've humorously addressed made-up historical figures in order to help illustrate a point. I use concrete descriptions to anchor the piece in time and place—to help the reader see who, where, and what I am discussing. The overall structure of the piece, too, relies heavily on these devices as well. Scenes are developed through set-pieces, moments are expanded carefully and built upon to add layers of drama until it is finally brought to its climax.

Non-fiction storytelling is a delicate balance between facts and personal truths. Through writing this piece, I've learned what details are important to focus on so that they are emphasized through the use of metaphor, especially in creative nonfiction works, and the overall structure of

a piece— how without these, one cannot effectively tell a story. I've utilized motif and time as a means of structuring this thesis. I return to the subject of the meatball through its place in history as well as on my childhood dinner table and I use the concept of time—the back and forth between the 1960's and present day— to orient the reader. Memoir writing must show the world to the reader and must appeal to the reader's sensorium—to her taste, smell, touch, sight, sound. I learned that I shouldn't explain but instead, I should show the reader what I mean by evoking their senses and describing in great detail the scenes I am trying to create on the page. This plays a role in getting the reader to trust me as a writer and without the readers trust there is nothing. Timeline and structure point the reader in the direction you want them to take on the journey you are trying to craft for them as the writer. Without a cohesive order and flow, the piece can easily fall apart at the seams and the reader will not only lose trust in the author but lose interest in the topic at hand.

Simply writing about something like a neighborhood or telling the story of one's grandmothers isn't enough to pull a reader in. Everyone thinks their story is interesting, when, in fact, creating a nonfiction story that contains universal interest depends upon the teller and the technique. With this piece, I tried to focus on the story *around* my grandmothers, *around* my neighborhood and dive into a cultural critique of their time and the history of their food, both American and Italian. I wanted to look at changes from farm to factory floor and how these changes, in a way, affect our process, our way of being. In writing this, I have found an appreciation for the authentic that I've taken for granted. In some ways, I owe the Hipster Rebellion a debt of thanks. In part through their enthusiasm for what I long took for granted, I began to appreciate the meatball, and all that surrounds it, as a metaphor for authenticity in

cuisine. This piece, in other words, is more than a story about two women and family. It is about Italians and Italian-Americans, Jersey City, the neighborhood, and the culture of the neighborhood in which I grew up. I have rolled behind the meatball from the past to the present and found that it is through food and family that life is truly and authentically lived.

“Behind the Meatball: A Reflection on Italian Cuisine, Lost and Found”

Christina DeRay

Palisade Avenue is one of the busier streets in the Heights section of Jersey City. Apartment buildings sit next to homes where American Flags hang outside of front doors. There’s a newly built fire house on the corner of Congress Street with a dedication to the victims of 9/11— a slab of black marble engraved with the image of NY Firemen hoisting Old Glory above a pile of twisted steel and debris. Moe’s Bait and Tackle sits on the corner a few blocks down with its aged sign and beat up brick storefront. All along this street the new and the old blend into the cityscape. On the blueprint for today’s Jersey City you’ll find trendy new restaurants, coffee shops with free wifi, modern apartment buildings filled with young professionals just starting out, and old, wood-framed houses lived in by families whose relatives first immigrated to America from places like Italy—families like mine.

History, then, is hidden along Palisade Avenue. As you drive toward State Highway, Route 139— the winding, congested highway which leads to Hoboken and New York’s Holland Tunnel in one direction or Journal Square and the Pulaski Skyway in the other— you might pass right by the Van Vorst House. Behind unkempt ivy and overgrown trees, this colonial stone farmhouse was built between 1740 and 1742 by Cornelius Van Vorst and is considered Jersey City’s oldest dwelling. Closer to State Highway you’ll find Christ Hospital, which dates back to 1872. Presidents William Howard Taft and Franklin Delanor Roosevelt used Dickinson High School, just down the street, to make Presidential campaign stump speeches.

From Palisades Avenue you can see where Jersey City ends and Union City begins, above Hoboken's viaduct. Houses here come with a favorable view of the Hudson River and million-dollar views of the New York City skyline—the Freedom Tower built on the site of the old World Trade Center's once-illuminated Twin Towers, and a full on view, every fourth of July, of the booming NY Harbor fireworks with shades of red, white, and blue reflecting off the Empire State Building into the Hudson River below. This section of Jersey City, once called "Hudson City" is called "the Heights" for its views from the Palisade Cliffs that overlook much of Hoboken and New York and it is here that my grandparents, Carmina and Onofrio, bought the property they lived in with their family for almost forty years. It seemed that "the Heights" was where many Italian immigrants began their American lives.

Being close to New York City was important to immigrants during the 60's when husbands and wives were looking for jobs to support households of six or eight children plus their relatives back in their home countries. During a time when immigration became a civil rights issue for Italians and other Europeans—there were immigration quotas set in place to prevent Italians from immigrating to America in favor of Western Europeans— New York and New Jersey became known as the real "land of opportunity" for people longing to fulfill their American Dreams. At the time, Jersey City's own mayor, Thomas Gangemi, was directly affected by these quotas. In 1961, Mayor Gangemi tried to obtain a passport back to Italy, and in doing so, the city learned that its highest elected official was not, in fact, a citizen of the United States, which ended Gangemi's mayoralty. In 1964, the erstwhile mayor became a naturalized citizen and the following year, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 made it possible

for other immigrants just like Gangemi to have the same shot at citizenship—immigrants like my grandparents.

The Hudson River and Ellis Island were the central hubs for this new wave of immigration. They were the first stops for many immigrants traveling to the United States and the places where they would end one life and begin another— often with new, easier-to-pronounce names, little to no money, yet filled with big dreams. The Central Railroad of New Jersey, now Liberty State Park in Jersey City, overlooking Ellis Island, was a docking zone for many immigrants looking for a place to live. Ferries transported commuters from the island to Jersey City and allowed immigrants to venture out into communities other than the bustling ones of New York. Many of these immigrants liked what they saw in Jersey, relocating to “the Heights.” Housing, like today, was not only more affordable in “the Heights” than in New York but it came with more square footage both inside and out to raise their families, the location was close enough to jobs, shops— everything they needed. And so the Italian families came, and they brought their food.

Palisade Avenue in the 1960’s must have smelled like crushed tomatoes and fresh basil mixed with freshly clean laundry hanging from clotheslines and dirt from children’s shoes as they played wiffle ball in the street. My grandmother on my mother’s side, Carmina, always talked about how, back then, the street was cleaner, kids could play ball in the street, sit out on their stoops until their mothers or grandmothers yelled for them to come inside for dinner, and leave their bicycles in their driveways, knowing they would still be there upon their return in a few hours or even the next day. Children not only answered to their own mothers but they

answered to the mothers of their friends as well. Doors were left unlocked and wide open so that neighbors could come inside and make themselves at home.

By the time I came on the scene, things had changed considerably. Traffic whizzing by heading toward Manhattan and ambulances racing toward the hospital down the street with their sirens blaring. So we sat on the stoop. Our sidewalk was like our playpen—four or five squares of concrete that marked an impassable line between our house and the street. Our parents’ “you better stay where I can see you” threats along with our neighbors’ driveways acting as their border patrol, kept us from straying too far from our property line.

All summer long, then, my cousins and I would sit outside drawing on our small patch of sidewalk with chalk while eating our Mr. Softee ice cream favorites and drinking quarter drinks — the hand-sized plastic containers shaped like old-fashioned wine barrels filled with flavored, colored sugar water and topped with a thin metal lid meant to be popped easily by little fingers (You can still find these at any corner bodega in “the Heights”). We would laugh and climb the jungle gym of banisters between our stoop and our neighbors’s as we waited for our grandmother to call us in for the meatballs she had been cooking all afternoon— the scent of browning meat, fresh herbs, and loads of garlic mingling with the Jersey City summer breeze of freshly cut Washington Park grass and accidentally dropped strawberry sour straw candies melting along the city’s steaming pavement. The way a K-9 Unit can sniff out a bad guy in an abandoned building or find a runaway burglar with one whiff of a tattered cloth, just so I could distinguish the smell of my grandmother’s meatballs from any other houses’ meatballs on our street.

There weren't many meatball making families left on our street, though. The two other Italian families on our block during my turn on Palisade were “the Moofies” from across the

street and Vito's family three houses down on our left. "The Moofies" were an elderly couple from Molfetta, who had immigrated to America around the same time as my grandparents. They established a beachhead of sorts, inside their home, and they rarely seemed to venture beyond the driveway to further explore American soil. Indeed, throughout my childhood, they rarely seemed to leave the house. Occasionally the old woman would come to the window and watch the traffic or walk down her front steps to marvel at her husband's strange choice in landscape design. With great dedication, Mr. "Moofie" had sculpted two perfectly round hedges on opposite sides of a bush he had carved out to resemble a chair—in an apparent bid to become Palisade Avenue's topiary Brancusi. This shrubbery was the focal point of the tiny side yard between his driveway and his neighbors' front yard. The old man only came outside to give his chair a trim or before every snow storm to salt his long driveway and stairs and then wait patiently for the first flake to fall before heading outside bundled head to toe and armed with a shovel and bags of salt to prevent a single flake to stick to his driveway.

Thus, the thrill of snow, mounds of it piled on top of cars, sidewalks and stoops all along Palisade Avenue, the silence of all that snow, and the jolt of possibility that came with it—freedom from school, "snow day!"—was accompanied by the sight, outside my living room window, of "the Moofies'" driveway—untouched, clear, and cleaner than a whistle, as if God had come down and held a giant umbrella over "the Moofies'" stairs and driveway. My grandfather, Onofrio, shoveling our stairs and portion of the sidewalk with the rest of our neighbors would pause from his labors and reflect upon "the Moofies." "There's a-some-thin-a wrong-a with that-a man", he'd say.

Our other Italian neighbors, Vito and his family, had a huge garden in their backyard and would grow anything and everything that would take in our Jersey City soil. He'd share his enormous figs with every house on the block. Vito was a good friend of Onofrio's and they'd often exchange vegetables and fruits after talking for hours about how many times a day they'd water their plants, or how to trim the fig tree and then store it for winter. Vito's garden was like a mini Italian farm with rows of produce and herbs—the only thing missing were the chickens. Onofrio's was much smaller and built from makeshift planters on top of concrete slabs in the backyard. Tomato plants were grown in empty spackle buckets brought home by my father from his construction job in Manhattan. These buckets were deep enough to hold mounds of soil allowing the roots to spread making for a sturdier and healthier plant and were portable enough for rotation throughout the yard for optimal sunlight. So it came to pass that spackle buckets lined the perimeter of the yard. In many ways, these buckets represented my grandparents' immigration—roots deep in their Italian soil but transplanted into an American way of life that could change at any time, but only to promote growth and a better life for each family member on the vine. “You nev pick-a tomato when you see a lil-green on-a the skin”, Onofrio would say, “You gotta wait 'til it's full-a ripe... nice an a-red.”

You could always tell, driving down the streets of “the Heights,” which houses had an Italian family living in it by looking for spackle buckets or for blue plastic tarps wrapped around fig trees to look like oversized blue raspberry blow pops. Sometimes the tarps covered Romanesque fountains—naked cherubs or peasant woman in the front yards of an Italian house. In our three family apartment building, we had no room for such flourishes, but we understood

the importance of those tarps, why they appeared each winter— anything that reminded “the Heights” Italian immigrants of home was worth protecting.

Vito’s kids were all grown and living in different towns, some in different states, with their children, and so Carmina and Onofrio soon became the only Italian grandparents on the block. They had the kids, the figs, and the tomato plants. You would hear “Dinner’s a-ready!”, Carmina shouting out to my cousins, brother and me through the screen door of her first floor apartment. Our grandmother’s signal triggered a cascading call and response cry throughout the neighborhood of other mothers and their children, as Jersey City dinner calls sailed along Palisade Avenue. “La comida!” from Puerto Rican mother’s yelling from the windows of their fifth floor apartments to bring their kids in for arroz con pollo. American mother’s calling out “Supper!” to their children running home to meatloaf and mashed potatoes. The calls of our mothers brought us kids running, and no one had to tell us what we were running to.

Round, baseball-sized mounds of meaty, golden-brown succulence that embraced huge bulbs of garlic, full leaves of the greenest flat leaf parsley, salt, pepper, and the insides of day old loaves of Italian bread that had been soaked in milk for added moistness. These are what made up my grandmother’s meatballs. She wouldn’t make them often— not even special occasions. They were a kind of phenomena, like a hidden waterfall cascading behind thickets of untouched rainforest—or whatever the meatball equivalent of that might be. It seemed my grandmother would make these meatballs appear out of thin air and end up stacked upon each other—hot oil rolling down their sides onto the layers of folded paper towels below. These were not meatballs to be hidden under a sauce. They were best served bare. They were the type of meatballs that only an Italian grandmother from Pisticci in Matera, Italy, could make. One imagines my

Grandma, Carmina, learning from her grandmother how to sculpt them, who would have learned from her grandmother, and so on, across the chasm of time and clattering dinner plates, backward, perhaps, to some distant matriarch, Marcella Gavius Apicus Meatballus, say, of Ancient Rome.

No one would dare suggest it in her house, but Carmina's way wasn't the only way to roll a meatball. In truth, Carmina's highly crafted Italian mode had its opposite number, a simpler American mode, and this is where Marie, my other grandmother, from my father's side, comes in. Marie was an assimilated Italian-American grandmother whom we called Nanny. She made her meatballs based on the entirely different playing field of American ingredients. These meatballs were about the size of a ping pong ball—maybe smaller—with chopped meat, egg, breadcrumbs or any leftover bread soaked in milk, garlic powder, parsley and basil flakes from a spice rack, salt and pepper. Her meatballs were pan fried quickly, cooked for hours in her sauce, and would end up parked alongside baked ziti or spaghetti at almost every family gathering.

Meatballs like Marie's were straight from the post-war era kitchen of convenience. They were rolled using dried, store-bought herbs that got stowed in the pantry, pre-packaged meat, store-bought eggs and breadcrumbs from a can. In the American kitchen of convenience, parmesan cheese came in a tall green can from Kraft Foods. Cans were good. Food came with an expiration date, often a year away from its purchase date. Frozen dinners came in styrofoam trays split into sections for sides, entree, and dessert. Powdered milk could sit on a shelf, without refrigeration, as could Carnation condensed milk. These processed, chemical filled products were meant to outlast their fresh competitors and stock the pantry shelves of 1960's mothers everywhere. Food companies like Kraft, one of dozens of factory food giants that comprise the

Grocery Manufacturers of America, or GMA, a monolithic trade group, marketed products to their house-wife consumers convincing them that cooking authentically was unnecessary in their busy lives. Pre-sliced, pre-chopped, packaged goods began flying off grocery shelves because mothers and wives became hung up on the idea that they had been spending too much time in the kitchen and were convinced that they no longer should. Cans and prepared foods were great for Cold War pantries. You could “duck and cover,” and, if all went well, it seemed, you’d have food to last through a nuclear winter. In the post-war era kitchen of convenience, most “emergencies” were about unexpected company arriving for dinner. Gone were the days of roasts steaming away for hours behind oven doors, the cookies and cakes baked from scratch, the rice that took more than “a minute” to cook. Americans got comfortable in their hurried pace of food preparation— their thoughtless process of emptying cans, containers, or boxes, into pans to heat through before consuming. The less work in the kitchen of convenience, the better.

After years of this fast paced obsession with quick fix meals, people began to realize that this convenience of ready-to-go ingredients, although handy when looking for quick preparation and productivity, doesn’t produce the authentic— the real, natural flavors from meatballs like Carmina would make—home grown herbs, freshly butchered meats, eggs and bread produced locally, by hand. Today consumers read food labels and decide which products they’ll choose based on the number of natural vs. chemically engineered ingredients they find. People are concerned with what they are eating and how it affects their bodies. It is mostly these health conscious people, many of whom belong to the hipster generation, that have started a movement and follow the trend of maintaining a heightened sense of cause and effect in today’s world—if I eat natural based products: my body will work my efficiently, if I take the stairs instead of the

elevator: I am both physically and environmentally conscious, if I wear this organic cotton hand-printed t-shirt: I will be supporting local shops and artists.

Wellness has been taken to a new level. Society as a whole has become more environmentally conscious and in turn has begun to focus on ways to sustain our resources. People are aware that the choices they make in their everyday lives, in regard to where they live, how they commute, and what they eat not only affects themselves but has an even greater effect on the world around them. Wellness has become the focus for many new businesses, clothing brands, and especially for food industries. Restauranteurs and food vendors have opened their eateries based on the all-natural, farm-to-table concept that so many people desire today all while reinventing the comfort foods we know and love.

Stands or stores selling fruit smoothies, frozen yogurt and freshly pressed juices have taken over shopping centers. Fast-food places like McDonalds and Burger King are offering healthier options, like salads and wraps, for their customers. This movement has even changed the way we look at comfort foods like the meatball, which, with its simple form and farm fresh ingredients, has hit the top of the trendy cuisine list for food truck followers and swank restaurants throughout the country. The generation of millennial hipsters who own and run these trucks and restaurants, have adopted the meatball as a kind of vehicle for value-added flavor. But it's not just a meatball. It's history. It's authentically Italian. They have manipulated these traditional balls of beef and spices into a variety of wow-inducing combinations. Urban scenesters have jumped on the food truck bandwagon and announced themselves on social networking sights like Twitter and Facebook. Trucks like New York's "Crusin' Kitchen" featuring Markey Ramones signature sauce or Los Angeles' "Great Balls on Tires" have rolled

along serving meatballs and only meatballs to their flocks of loyal customers. There seems to be a ball for everyone who is hungry and looking to eat.

In effect, the hipsters have rediscovered Carmina's meatballs and added eco-friendly disposable to-go plates or bowls, salad or slaw made with "locally grown" ingredients. If Carmina had her own food truck, hipsters would tweet about the simplicity in her approach, the boldness of her flavors and the local freshness of her ingredients. They would blog about her meatballs, line up like visitors at the Louvre admiring the Mona Lisa, discussing the intricacies of her methods. Carmina's meatballs would change lives. But for my family, they were "what's for dinner."

Marie's meatballs, on the other hand, wouldn't cut it in the Hipster world. They were reliable, well-established, and were served, as a military strategist would say, in overwhelming numbers. She never strayed from the recipe, never followed a trend, never changed her course. Within her kitchen, Marie pursued tactical effectiveness. Her goal: filling the bellies of as many people as possible. In short, Marie's meatballs were, in their implicit nod to her adoptive country, completely and patriotically American—designed with American comfort and satisfaction in mind and produced with off-the-shelf ingredients from the American kitchen of convenience.

Their allegiance to utility— their constancy of form— what industrial food manufactures seek when they mass produce food products with regular, recognizable, repeatable, "brandable" "form feel" and "mouth feel", their plentitude, their almost military bearing, all of these things made Marie's meatballs a precursor to what is known as "comfort food," —the food you've grown up with, the food that reminds you of home, the warm, hearty, satisfying meal that tends to induce a temporary food coma upon consumption. They were the meatballs we depended on.

The ones we knew would be waiting for us in the buffet line at our cousin Louie's house for our family reunions, the ones at the center of her kitchen table on Lincoln Street in Jersey City that were surrounded by pasta, potato salad, pasta salad, roasted chicken and ham. They were the ones she would send home with our parents in small Tupperware containers for us to "pick on later."

Maybe Marie's comfort meatballs, like Carmina's, had some original history— maybe they, too, were descended from some distant Meatball Magnate of Ancient Marema, and maybe Marie's American modifications made them part of historical continuum that would, in its turn, prompt the Hipster Rebellion—the cuisine correction, the deep dive backward toward authentic foods led by a vanguard sporting handlebar mustaches, penny farthing bicycles, artisanal spirits, and listening to "The Lone Bellow," in a pop-up restaurant somewhere in Bushwick or Bed-Sty. What I know is that when Marie served up meatballs, they served their purpose, and we were the grateful beneficiaries. She sustained us for decades, and now she is gone. Now both of these women are gone. I have a new daughter who will never know these two women, never hear them talk, never savor the aromas coming from their kitchens. And thus a different sort of sustaining task falls, at last, to me.

Marie was the Lieutenant of our Army and the one person that everyone could count on to lead us when we needed to be led. She wasn't stern or demanding though. In fact, my Nanny, Marie, perfectly fit the "little old lady" cliché— a white haired woman dressed in "#1 Grandmother" sweatshirt, adorned with pastel roses and hearts, the tiny orthopedic, lace up shoes in an off white color, worn with any outfit, the purse that was a kind of time capsule for candy and assorted things, split and flaking leather peeling all along its strap— this was Marie.

She was also part of another kind of army—the army of pinching grandmothers. I’m not talking about the kind of pinching that has children hiding their chubby cheeks, I’m talking about the kind of pinching that wipes out hotel rooms at Caesar’s Palace, Atlantic City, like a second sacking of Rome. My perfectly sweet Nanny would ransack her comped hotel room, tossing ashtrays, purloined toiletries, filching anything that wasn’t nailed down or wasn’t too big to carry or fit in her overnight bag: a short list would include robes, slippers, towels, wash cloths, floor mats, the little bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotions and bars of soap. “They have plenty” or “they want you to take it,” she would say, if any of us kids eyed her suspiciously. Marie requisitioned by the case, it seemed, drinking glasses, the kind with bubbles at the base in hotel bathrooms and covered by a little paper lid imprinted with the “Caesar’s Palace” golden logo. These she would stack in her cabinets at home— paper lids and all. To this day, when I see these glasses there, I imagine my dear, sweet, Nanny walking out of Caesar’s in her “#1 Grandmother” sweatshirt while carrying a bag clinking and rattling. In one hand she holds the bag filled with purloined goods. In the other she sweetly holds her husband Louis’ hand.

Marie was short and compact—almost pocket-sized if that’s possible. She was fair-skinned, kissed with a subtle blush in her cheeks. She wore cotton pants and shirts under a “house-coat” that resembled a hairstylist’s vest, almost always in some pastel or floral. It had no sleeves, buttons either straight down the middle or at the side, and covered most of her upper body. She wore fantastic glasses. A discerning viewer can tell what decade a picture of her was taken just by tracking the style of those glasses. In the late 80’s she wore large hexagon-shaped frames that took up half of her face and were tinted a trendy amber hue that gave no ground to Elton John. As the years went on the frames got smaller and the lenses got lighter— and we were

able to see more of her. She smelled like the inside of her pocketbook— a mixture of kleenex tissues, caramel suckers, peppermint suckers, a comb, lipstick and spare change. Her hair was salt and pepper but mostly salt. Her secret: hairspray. Straight out of the shower style in a few “spritzes of spray” and you have the salt and pepper look.

Marie grew up in Jersey City and graduated from Dickinson High School before completing beauty school. At her cousin’s beauty salon, she learned to do simple manicures, and to dye, perm, cut and style hair. In her 20’s, she was able to practice the skills she learned on herself transforming from your sweet girl next door to a stunning pin-up inspired knockout—her brown hair full and wavy pinned back on either side to create a bouffant of bangs atop her head, her lips never seemed to be without lipstick, her cheeks rouged, eyebrows perfectly groomed and shaped with skin so clear and smooth she’d looked like she had been photoshopped to perfection. She had long legs and a tiny waist emphasized by her high waisted shorts, skirts, and slacks. She was a knockout.

While looking through pictures with my grandfather, Louis, one afternoon we came across a pile of photos that had been taken of Marie. She was lounging on Coney Island beach and posing on a stoop and a park bench in others. The pictures made me wish I grew up with her back then just so I could walk down the street alongside her in all her class and style. Louis looked at each photo like he was flipping through a 1960’s issue of Maxim Magazine, “Oh yea babe... those legs! I remember those legs!” he exclaimed. “I went AWOL for those legs. Just so I could scoop her right up!” Marie and Louis had the kind of marriage in which each called the other “babe,” in which, after eight kids and decades of marriage, they still held hands. They had a reverse- Lucy and Ricky Riccardo kind of love— Louis’ sense of humor reminiscent of Lucy’s

silly, light-hearted ways and Marie's level-headedness evoking Ricky's "fixer" personality. Their secret was simple and illusive: "Always be good to each other"—advice that Marie would later write in a congratulations card for my husband and I on the day of our wedding, decades after her own. It turns out Louis really did go AWOL for Marie. He left his platoon so he could stand at the alter of St. Paul of the Cross Church in Jersey City and marry my grandmother. Of course he did some jail time for his dishonorable conduct but once that was past them, they never looked back. Louis got a job working as a truck driver and Marie worked as a hairstylist until she started having kids.

Many years later when I was pregnant with my own first child, she told me about her first experience with labor. She delivered my Aunt Joann, I learned, on a bench outside of Christ Hospital in Jersey City. I like to imagine that tiny, 4'9 frame delivering her first child, no medication, no assistance—nothing but a bench. It's then that I get the feeling, as I have had on many occasions with her, that I have encountered a different species of woman, one who can walk into a hospital with the umbilical cord still attached to her just born baby, for example, my grandfather standing in the lobby, stunned.

I watched her in admiration most of the time—amazed at all the things she was able to do and how she always seemed to have control over every situation, every emotion. She was good at everything: cooking, baking, sewing, knitting, painting, raising a family of eight kids as a stay at home mother on one income in the 60's. I watched her carefully and I devoured her meatballs alongside my cousins at her kitchen table, which was only big enough to fit four people at a time. Somehow we managed to squeeze ten people at that table with five to six standing around reaching over everyone to get at the goods. There were so many of us, we would

split family dinners into separate shifts, one to three groups at a time, and on different days for each group. This was the unspoken “12 person max” rule. Without it, who knows—we may not have gotten more than one meatball.

Because of the crowd at Marie’s, I spent most of my childhood a half-mile away at Carmina’s house on Palisade Avenue. We had dinner there at least three nights a week, not because we needed to but because she was cooking—so we were eating. She lived on the first floor, our family was on the second floor, and Aunt Silvia’s family lived on the third. Her dining room and table was oceanic compared to Marie’s. At Carmina’s we could fit twenty people seated in the dining room and another ten at the folding table in the kitchen—easy. Some nights it would be “just us,” which meant, during the week, everyone who lived in our house: aunts, uncles, cousins. On the weekend “just us” ranged more broadly from immediate aunts, uncles, and cousins to extended second and thirds. And it was here, in this noisy, boisterous crowd of relatives, my real education in meatballs, the art and audience of them, began.

Carmina was in charge in the kitchen—who am I kidding? She was in charge of our entire three family apartment building. She had a way about her that would set things into motion like a wave lifting and moving shells into place on the shore. She knew exactly how she wanted things to look, taste, and smell and she made sure that it happened that way. Dinners, especially during the holidays, were like well sung performances of *La Boheme* and Carmina was the Composer/Producer/Conductor/Choreographer. These meals were full-mouthed. Carmina’s special Mikasa china passed through greasy hands—the sure sign you’d been sneaking fried artichoke hearts from their aluminum tray on the counter before dinner. Utensils chimed against plates, the scent of braised meats and sautéed vegetables intermingled with drops of spilled wine

and chicken soup. Silence set in only when plates were full and the gourmandization of supper—the true performance—had begun. The dance of the sweet peas and mushrooms, the song of the steaming cucuzza, the poetry of the sautéed rabbit that only Carmina could recite, captivated us entirely. We were her audience, spectators *dell'alimento*, “of the food” and it was from her that I learned to perform in this same way.

I watched every move Carmina made in the kitchen, for example. I stood on my tippy toes, to her right at the stove while she fried meat for her gravy. She would fill one pan with olive oil and fry hot and sweet sausage—poking holes to “let them drain their juice.” She would plop the browned sausages into the adjacent, simmering pot of Cento crushed tomatoes (one can filled with water to each can of tomato), fresh basil and parsley that smelled like a blend of moist soil and warm licorice and pepper, bulbs of garlic and a stream of salt poured straight from the dispenser instead of sprinkled from the shaker. She would never change the oil in the pan. She’d scrape its bottom and add lamb “pops,” browning them until you could smell the fat melting from their bones, and then slide them into the gravy pot. She was a maestra conducting her orchestra as she fried the remaining pork ribs and beef, scraping the pan in between and occasionally adding more olive oil if the pan started to run low. Every movement between pan and pot sounded like a different note. The sizzle of each piece of crusted meat provided a new smell and layer of flavor to her already steaming pot. The bubbling and steaming of the remaining oil that she’d pour right into the gravy pot after frying all that meat made the bright red of the tomatoes deepen to what looked like a red liquid rust. I’d watch her pour oil or salt and ask how much. I’d watch her pull basil and parsley leaves from their stems and ask how many.

I'd ask how long, how big, and how small but to every question I asked, every answer seemed to be "I don't know Stina, just taste it."

Oracles seldom explain themselves. That job falls to others. Carmina grew up on her family's tobacco farm in Pisticci, Italy— at the instep of the toe and heel of the boot. Her town was small by American standards but was the second largest city in the province of Matera, in the Basilicata region, with its two provinces: Potenza and Matera, two of the poorest in Italy. Matera is the larger of the two. Today, 203,627 people reside in all of Matera's 31 communes. The capital city of Matera has a population of 59,265 and includes historical caves, the Sassi, that date back to the Palaeolithic period and are thought to be the location of one of the very first human settlements in Europe. More recently they became kind of a slum for the region's poor, but today the Sassi is experiencing a modest sort of Hipster Rebellion of its own—the Sassi's revitalization has involved juxtaposing the ancient caves in all their eerie authenticity with modern architecture. All over the caves remarkable architecture and engineering you'll find streets literally built into the roofs of homes that had somehow been carved into the side of a mountain.

Pisticci is not a tourist destination, but there you will find everything that is typically, authentically Italian—people enjoying their evenings walking the passeggiata, or promenade, everyone knows each other, their families, their friends, their business. Food, the experiences you have with it, and the people you choose to share it with are the most important things here. All of their food is served simply and slowly. Meals are meant to be savored. Dining is never rushed and people sit with one another for hours just eating and talking, until there is nothing left to do but say goodnight, kiss once on each cheek, and head off to bed. Their lives are simple but

it's not because they're saying "No" to consumerism. There just isn't much money for luxuries or time spent outside of working, so they value the ritual of eating— and eating *together*. This focus on food as a central organizing principal of life, worn loosely like an old garment in Pisticci, has become, with the advent of the Hipster Rebellion, a form of self-branding, a way of spending one's time and disposable income off the beaten path in search of authentic experience, and so, inevitably, in the same way that foodies in Brooklyn would discover and monetize entrees that very much resembled Carmina's meatballs, Pisticci has become of late a go-to destination on the American foodie map.

As it happens, Pisticci came to me— without my knowledge. I've grown up eating many of Pisticci's staples. Carmina's lessons, in effect, were lessons in developing my palate—lessons in taste, in what will and what will not suffice. As a result, I find myself (by default) an inadvertent snob when it comes to food. I will spend almost fifteen dollars on a small container of Locattelli Pecorino Romano cheese at the supermarket because to me, it is the best tasting cheese. My taste came not from a posting on an internet foodie blog but from *la nonna*, herself. My refrigerator and pantry will always be stocked with foods from Carmina's hometown— her version of subliminal messaging *tramite la cucina* or via the cuisine.

Like my thick, espresso brown hair, I've inherited Carmina's appreciation for simple foods with elaborate flavor, her ability to taste and identify every ingredient in a meal, to enhance and recreate new favorite dishes and trending cuisine. A Hipster Rebellion foodie could study and research all their lives to mimic Carmina's, or my level of skill in the kitchen but for them it would be hard work, something that must be learned— for us, though, it's always been part of the given. It's the way the sun penetrates soil, warming roots and seeds in such a way, that

only the sun could do, to make the grass grow greener, stronger, brighter. Pisticci is in our genetic makeup, Italy our DNA, food and its preparation the blood that pumps through our veins. Hipster foodies can twirl their mustaches and grow out their beards, but they have nothing on us.

Orichette pasta, or “little ears”, originated near Pisticci. It’s considered the region’s most popular pasta and is usually served with sautéed vegetables like peas or simply done with chick peas and scallions— a meal Carmina would prepare for my cousins and I with a broth of salted pasta water thickened with freshly grated Pecorino Romano. Pane di Matera, the bread I’ve grown up eating all my life, with its soft airy inside and hard, thin crusted exterior is one of the province’s proudest contribution to the Italian culinary experience. It’s the perfect bread for sopping up deep gold olive oil and the broth from a big bowl of white wine steamed clams or mussels in marinara sauce. Chili peppers known as *diavulicchiu* or “little devil” are dried and ground up to be served in almost every dish imaginable— the reason, I’m sure, Carmina had such a long life penchant for seasoning her own plate with its go-to American counterpart: crushed red pepper flakes. In the same way, Pecorino Romano— a salty, sheep’s milk cheese— is grated and served with every pasta dish to add an extra layer of flavor. I don’t need to learn about these foods while backpacking through Europe because I’ve lived them— every day of my life. I’ve made these foods, seasoned them, served them, eaten them. They are a part of me the way that I am a part of Carmina— her genetic counterpart born on American soil, grown by the Italian sun.

Drinks, especially coffee and liquor were a big part of the Pisticci *tramite la cucina* grooming process as well. My cousins and I grew up watching our aunts and uncles drink Amaro Lucano— an Italian bitter, after dinner drink made of a secret blend of herbs and citrus notes,

that originated in Pisticci. Its signature red and yellow capped bottle features a woman traditionally dressed in a white, long sleeve blouse, a long, full, red skirt with suspender-like straps over her chest and a blue waist apron over top—their straps alongside those of her skirt. Her hair looks short but it is actually set in the typical Pisticcesi style of light waves pinned into somewhat of a crown wrapped around her head to kind of frame her face. She has one hand placed on her hip as she smiles slightly— head turned to the side, chin tilted over shoulder— and she carries a small basket of flowers in the other. An eagle and gold coins fill in the background space behind her and above her head in elongated text reads “Amaro Lucano” in red below a seal marking “Pisticci” on the left “1894” in the middle and “Lucania” (the region’s name under Mussolini) on the right.

The Amaro Lucano bottle has been part of my family’s dining landscape for as long as I can remember. This bottle sat in the middle of Carmina’s dining room table next to Onofrio’s homemade wine that was so strong only he and my Irish aunt, Ellen, could handle it, random bottles of red table wine given as gifts or bought by my uncles because the bottle “looked like a good one”, store-bought Santa Margarita Pino Grigio— the one and only white wine anyone would buy or drink, Marie Brizard — special for my mother, RoseMarie, or anyone looking to add a little sweetness to their coffee, Sambuca— the backup for the Marie Brizard in case Scopa, the Italian card game my uncles, cousins, and grandfather played after dinner, ran a little longer than expected— garnished with espresso beans, sipped alongside a steaming hot demitasse of espresso.

Growing up in Pisticci, Carmina resembled the woman on the Amaro Lucano bottle— dressed the same, fair-skinned, young and thin with her dark brown hair pinned back, ready for

work in the fields. In America though, Carmina was short, round, big chested, and vibrant. She had an olive complexion that, after a day of sunning at the beach or by our pool on Palisade Avenue, became a beautiful honey caramel. Her hair, for as long as I can remember, was curly but not tight curls that sat neatly on her head, they were fat, wild curls that spiraled out in every direction—untamed and surrounding her head like a lion’s mane. She always kept it shoulder length and wore it down but on hot summer days she would hold it back in the palm of her hand as she sun-bathed to keep it out of her face— fat curls sticking to the back of her neck.

She married my grandfather, Onofrio, on May 12, 1955 when she was twenty-one years old and soon after became pregnant with their first child. Onofrio travelled to America with help from his Aunt (Zia) Antonia so that he could start a life for his budding family. He was given a job at a plumbing company where he learned the trade and all that it entails. He sent money back to my grandmother and their child in Italy, saving every penny for what eventually became a life for all of us. Back in Italy, while Onofrio was fixing sinks in America, Carmina and Emanuele lived in a small, shed-like house in Pisticci with eight other family members. The house was built right on the farm and looked like something the big bad wolf could huff, puff and blow down in one roaring breathe. It was bare and spare— a few beds with minimal linens, chairs, pots, pans, and a long wooden table where they prepared their meals and ate their dinners. Emanuele, or Uncle Manny, recalls their time on the farm as “torturous.” As the oldest of eight siblings, my grandmother spent her life raising her brothers, sister, and then her own child, worked all day on the farm, and took care of the household chores. He tells me how they would farm the tobacco that was sold directly to the government and that they would line racks outside of the house with the tobacco leaves that they thread onto a line one by one in order to hang them in the sun to dry.

Eventually Onofrio sent for them in 1958. Carmina and Emanuelle travelled together to America by boat. After two years, my grandparents were reunited and my grandfather saw, for the first time, his son.

Carmina and Onofrio, like all immigrants to the United States, wanted a better life for their family, for their children and neither of them wasted any time working toward that when they got here. Carmina got a job working as a seamstress at Joy Togs on Montgomery Street in downtown Jersey City. She never had any schooling or experience as a seamstress other than making clothes for her and her siblings from a young age but her boss, Sam Coopersmith, seeing how well she worked with her colleagues, and the care and efficiency with which she sewed, quickly promoted her to floor manager. Carmina went from picking tobacco on her family's farm to working alongside fashion big shots with connections to the couture, celebrity life people fantasize about.

Her boss, Sam, had three sons: Sam Jr., Larry and Paul— they were the type of guys who knew important people, did important things, and set trends instead of follow them. Where music and fashion collide, the Coopersmith boys had a front row seat. Their involvement with the hit play *Jesus Christ Superstar* gave Carmina a very close view of the back-stage business-end of show business— she was recruited to make the original costumes for the show as well as the seamstress for the original “coat of many colors” in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. They were the kind of guys who were friends with Barry Manilow—ones you'd find on the cover of Time Magazine dressed in top notch hippie garb with a sly “I'm sexy and I know it” expression on their unshaven faces. She loved her job and worked her way from floor manager to

a sample fabricator for Victoria Secret where she worked with designers and sales representatives who eventually sold her piece in stores.

She was passionate about what she did, so much so that she held on to the sewing machines that Mr. Coopersmith had given her when Joy Togs closed down and Carmina was transferred to another textile company not far away in Hoboken. The people she worked with were her first real friends in America and each of them were from different countries than her and spoke other languages than she did. Working in the factory taught her to speak dialects of Spanish and Polish and gave her the opportunity to learn basic English. Somehow these women managed to communicate with one another, regardless of how different they each were and how foreign each other's culture was from their own. The factory became a home for them on a street in a new city, in an entirely unfamiliar country for them all.

Downtown Jersey City looks almost exactly the same today as it did in the 1960's when Carmina started working at Joy Togs. Decades later I would eventually work around the corner from that factory on Montgomery Street, eat lunch on the corner where Carmina caught the bus, walk right by the factory on my way to and from the light rail. Not once did I give that building a second look, but now it brings me up short. It is a narrow, five story building with a parking lot to its left and a row of apartment buildings to its right. It's been repainted a pale yellow with hunter green molding and architectural detail. It has somehow managed to maintain its old school vibe with its classic brick lined upper floors, each story's windows separated by what look like columns marked with light gray accents and an ornate gold-painted filigree piece that accentuates the middle point of the building. The top floor displays a row of four beautiful Palladian arched windows that line the wide, decorative entablature of cherub looking mermaids

that seem to be holding up the building's roof. The exterior at the first and second floors were modernized with the removal of the building's original brick front and replaced with wider windows that have been framed out in hunter green metal—the change in textural design helping to distinguish and draw attention to the first floor's retail space that was once used as textile factory space and now houses a Subway Restaurant. My eye had always been drawn to that Subway. I'd walk by, look in its windows at my passing reflection or the busy atmosphere of the deli behind the glass, and make my way toward the corner of Warren Street where I'd usually stop for sushi at Komegashi Japanese Restaurant—the same corner, I've come to learn, where Carmina would catch the bus to and from work everyday.

I never looked up as I walked the streets of Downtown Jersey City. The buildings never mattered to me—their history, what purpose they used to serve, the people that used to work or live in them, the time that has passed through their doors. I never looked at the framing of the buildings doorways or the windows, the exquisite workmanship and attention to detail decorating their fronts, the materials they were built from, the bricks and stone, the bronze and copper, the historical markings of dates or seals embedded into the fronts or sides of their exteriors. I never looked at these buildings as I passed and thought “I wonder what they used to do here” but today, as I drive through Jersey City with my daughter, Sophia, and my Aunt Silvia and talk about where my grandparent's life began I think about what Carmina used to do here—which buildings she'd go into for lunch, which storefront's windows she'd catch her passing reflection in, if she did her banking next door to the factory at the bank with massive dark doors, heavy molding and arches framing each window and door making it seem as if they were portals to a world of commerce that could swallow you whole if you dared to pass through.

Despite the seemingly untouched architecture, I feel an overwhelming sense of change whenever I drive through the streets looking at the buildings for clues of the past— change that seems to happen all around the city without taking away from what had once been there. The colors and detail in their design made Jersey City a beautiful place to start a life in the 1960's and those characteristics remain in 2014 but go unnoticed. As we drive past these old buildings I see new construction all along the waterfront— condo buildings that are so close together they feel as if they've been tightly filed in a row by giant cranes that plop them into their designated lot like Leggo blocks stacked by a child.

There are renovations of buildings further into the city— a single house that has been rebuilt to suit today's family or the refinishing of a house in a way that makes it look like it doesn't belong on a street lined with so many that do. You can see cobblestone peeking out beneath the street's pavement and along some sidewalks in areas that are either in the renovation stage or are so worn from years of commuters and pedestrians that the layers of concrete haven't withstood the beating. New pavers replace pavement along the waterfront's condo's borders to accommodate transit commuters making their way to and from the light rail stations along the Exchange Place route. There are noticeably wider streets surrounding the newly built Jersey City Medical Center making room for more traffic and bigger cars. Everything looks cleaner, shinier, brighter compared to the aged, rugged and sometimes unkempt properties that once had families of immigrants flocking to the streets.

Most of the buildings have been totally gutted and remodeled like the Dixon Mills Factory buildings along Wayne and Varick Street that have been renovated as a luxury apartment complex with the advertising tagline "Own a Piece of History!" No one cares about what went

on inside that factory, just that something that was authentic did, whatever that happened to be. Of importance is that the new owners own a part of something that was real. Driving past the Dixon Mills apartment complex, I find myself a part of the Hipster Rebellion—connected to these foodies and millennials sniffing out the historical and the genuine in a world of the unoriginal and the fake. If most people just want a hotdog, I often find myself on a food quest—in search of food trucks in the city and expecting to taste something real, something fantastic—something like a meatball made from chopped pork blended with prosciutto and hot capicola, seasoned with chunks of fresh basil and garlic, and stuffed with mozzarella and roasted peppers soaked in balsamic vinegar, for instance. I appreciate the original, the unrecognizable and I want to find that uniqueness wrapped up in a vintage bow— new and innovatively done with a nod toward the past. Maybe because I have spent so much of my life noticing only the present—what is in front of me— that I have become time’s ingenue— searching for what’s vanishing in the history of the streets on which I’ve spent almost all of my time, so much of it asleep.

The same cannot be said of my grandfather, Onofrio, who not only notices all of the newness around him but can remember it alongside its past as if he had a series of before and after photos embedded in his mind. Like most people, Onofrio sometimes forgets the day of the week or what he had for breakfast but unlike most people he is able to remember streets, addresses, and describe buildings to you so vividly you would think he was standing there looking at them. He has the most accurate map of his American hometown etched into his memory. Onofrio is the guide to this city in both past and present— remembering what was and what is today, where and how things have changed, moved, grown, and decayed. Searching for the first home Zia Antoniette lived in when she moved to America, my Aunt Silvia and I drive

past Dixon Mills Pencil Factory. We are lost. Years have come between us and the city. As we drive, my aunt calls my grandfather, Onofrio, on the phone, to see if he can help us. I hear Onofrio, or Pop as his grandchildren call him, tell her to “make a left off of Varick” and I realize how fixed this landscape is in his mind. He speaks to her as if he himself is driving through these streets during the 1960’s—a landscape that no longer exists. His map works. Ours doesn’t. My aunt and I are lost in the present, in the physical, but Onofrio was like a laser beam honed in on its target— accurate and precise. His mind guides both him and us through a permanent image of what the city was to him. We find the house. It is a two story brownstone with dark red brick that looks so perfect and new that I’m almost positive it was fake. It has a set of ten or so stairs leading up to brown double doors with long glass panels allowing you to see through to the hallway behind them. There are overgrown plants in potters sitting in the home’s concrete patch of a front yard surrounded by a short wrought iron gate. I stare at the house wondering if Onofrio would remember the building to look this way. Through the window of her car my aunt looks toward the house and says, “This is definitely it.”

Onofrio talks about Italy in the same way he talks about Jersey City. He can direct you through the streets of Bernald, his hometown, and Pisticci, Carmina’s, all while standing in his American living room in a way that modern GPS systems could never do. Onofrio would never need to recalculate the image of these towns in his mind, in his heart. Most of my cousins and I have never been able to travel to Italy to visit our grandparents home towns. We have though, been able to learn about them through Onofrio’s stories, his boxes upon boxes of pictures, and, most of all, through food—the food Carmina would make for us.

The lessons were passed on to their children. Uncle Manny is the only one of Carmina's five children who was born in Italy and experienced life and food there with her for a short time. Her cuisine was also a part of him and directly linked to their time in Italy. Like Onofrio, he talks about the farm as if he could still walk through it. "There are figs of course, tomatoes, oranges, olives. Prickly pears! Those things grow like weeds. And Kiwi! Bet you didn't know that you could grow Kiwi in Italy." Uncle Manny now lives in Bayonne, NJ where the houses are stacked together, not like the days back on the farm. He has a garden surrounded by concrete. There most of his plants grow from his limited green space along the perimeter of his small yard or out of big pots and planters he has collected through the years. His fig tree is one of the biggest you'll ever come across in a city space and is the living transplant of an original tree that was grown in Jersey City, a few houses down at our neighbor Vito's house. He remembers the chickens, pigs, and mule on the farm and explains that everything they ate, everything came from the land that they worked. They made their own cheese, dried their own sopressata and pickled or canned their own vegetables—something Carmina taught my cousins and I how to do. Food preservation became a kind of history lesson, too.

Indeed, that word, *cuisine*—to cook— has a long reach outward and back to the very fields surrounding Pisticci where Carmina used to labor. Carmina's cuisine was of Pisticci, of her bones, her blood, and of her grandmothers. It was a type of food she had crafted throughout the years by pulling what she learned from her grandmothers and their grandmothers before them and stirring all of that into each new pot. It's a broader sense of cuisine in which I imagine her learning how to tuck a basil leaf into her hair while working on the farm, so the hot sun beating down on her like a flame, enables the basil's essential oils and its sweet licorice scent, to

commingle with the beads of sweat on her scalp. Cuisine in this sense, and labor go hand in hand, each replenishing, sweetening, lightening, freshening, a moment.

Carmina left her life on the farm when she came to America but carried the tools she learned there into her roles as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. She fed and clothed five children— three boys and two girls. From her we learned another aspect of cuisine that could be applied more broadly into a life-long ethos: we learned values of the farm—never waste a thing. Pickled eggplant would last months with the olive-oil filled to the very top of the mason jar—pushing out the air. Dried meats and cheeses were the perfect snack before dinner alongside slices of Italian bread and olives covered in minced garlic or red pepper flakes. We would joke at every dinner that Carmina always “made too much food” while she passed plate after plate of soup, lasagna, lamb, pork, veal, rabbit, beef, broccoli rabe, mushrooms and peas, dandelion, squash, pearl onions, string beans, asparagus and a simple salad layered with tomato, cucumber, occasionally some thinly sliced onions, and drenched in homemade red wine vinegar and olive oil. That none of it went to waste was part of the cuisine—the ethos— and maybe this is what separates what I’ve learned from those pursuing the Hipster Rebellion. They’re looking for the authentic, sure—but it’s still a commodity. Wasting nothing, a cuisine gets born out of necessity, out of poverty, out of austere economic limits. For foodies, historic and socio-economic origins of cuisine become an interesting grace note to a night’s entertainment.

It was an ethos, moreover, that allowed us to never go without. We didn’t have filet mignon and lobster for dinner, we rarely ordered takeout and even rarer was it that we went out to a restaurant to eat. We ate leftovers that were transformed into what seemed to us like brand new meals, we used Sunday morning’s bagels as “dunking bread” for Sunday night’s dinner, we

ate fruits and vegetables that were grown from spackle buckets in our yard, we always ate together, and so we had it all. And there was even more to squeeze from the given, by means of invention and improvisation. Carmina learned from The Food Network, for example, how to transform leftovers into new and improved meals. She was like a culinario mad scientist in her cucina laboratory. I remember coming home from school one day to a plate of her “grandmanadas”—her spin on the traditional empanada that she learned how to make while watching Guy Fieri. She filled pockets of dough with shrimp, rice, and vegetables from the previous night’s dinner and fried them up until they were golden brown and delicious. In Italy she cooked this way because she had to—because it was necessary to survive, but in America, she cooked this way out a habit, a habit that—in a new mode of *luxe Americana*—became a hobby, as something she enjoyed doing that brought her family together. Carmina’s over-compensation of what we were given growing up, especially in regard to food, was a reflection of the deprivation she faced on the farm and the lack of security she had in knowing where they would get their food and how long they could make it last.

There were new indulgences, of course, her American adaptation of a “more is better” ethos carried over in her assimilation to American fashion and individuality. Carmina would have her hair and nails done every Saturday after setting her kids up with snacks and tickets for a show at the local movie theatre next door from the salon. When she was done, she’d take the kids across the street for burgers and milkshakes—their favorite weekend tradition spent sitting in a mom-n-pop restaurant with their mother looking like she was about to step onto a red carpet. They were mesmerized by her, everyone was. She deployed an arsenal of couture from work. At home she wore comfy, oversized t-shirts and shorts but when it was time to go out, Carmina

dressed in hand-embroidered pieces, in stunning shades from champagne creams to wine reds. She almost never wore black— turning heads at restaurants and parties in vibrant, bold colors and patterns—incapable of blending into a crowd.

Carmina's children taught her how to speak the English they learned in school and years later, her grandchildren taught her the American slang they learned on Central Avenue in Jersey City and from reality shows on MTV. She was Italian by blood but wanted nothing more dearly than to be American— her accent stabbing at her meaning in English as she spoke to our next-door neighbor, Mary, about her rose garden. She breathed their sweet aroma— the flowers grown from American soil, the dirt from their freshly cut stems falling onto her bare Italian toes in the yard of her American home, the fence built by her American son-in-law dividing property lines that were unequivocally American, in which her American grandchildren played in the pool behind her, soaking in the sun. I think of her in that setting and wonder if moments passed when she thought how far she'd come from the farm, maybe even smiling that she was living a dream whose name by now has become too familiar to us to even see or believe anymore—but she saw and lived it, and she found her place in it.

A few blocks down, my Nanny, Marie, was drawn closer into the modes of *luxe Americana*—raised her eight children on Lincoln Street—five bell-bottom wearing, Farah Fawcett haired, platform stepping daughters and three pool shark, dart throwing, Beatles loving sons. Their apartment, housed in a small two family home, had four bedrooms, one bathroom, a small kitchen and living room. They watched TV together in the living room— Yankee games, Golden Girls and American Bandstand— on one 27 inch screen. Lincoln street was always full of kids playing while their parents conjugated on their porches or the porches of their neighbors.

The street was lined with houses just like my grandparents— filled of families with multiple children and barely enough room to keep them all. The street seemed like the obvious solution. My father, aunts, and uncles played man-hunt, tag, hopscotch, and jumped rope with their friends until dark. They could stay outside all day long if they wanted but dinner time was family time and they all needed to be home together.

“Together” in Marie’s home usually meant all the girls were in the kitchen helping with chores and dinner preparation while all of the boys watched TV, waiting to eat. If Marie was the Lieutenant, my aunts, Marie’s daughters, are the Sergeant Majors of our family. Five personalities, each so different from one another, yet they all have one thing in common— every good thing about them, every skill they have, every smile and laugh is because of Marie. Aunt Barbara, Marie’s youngest daughter, and her family live on Lincoln Street in the apartment upstairs from where she and her siblings grew up. She takes care of everyone and everything in the way Marie had always done. She uses the same bowls Marie used to make chocolate pudding in to serve her ambrosia for dessert after a pasta supper packed with the most delicious meatballs she learned to make from Marie. Aunt Roe dominates in the kitchen. She kicks out meals that five star restaurants couldn’t produce from her tiny kitchen in Belleville, NJ. She laughs hard, loves deep, and hugs strong just like Marie.

My dad has never really talked about what it was like for him growing up, neither have any of his brothers or sisters. Occasionally they’d talk about vacations down the shore over the summer, holidays spent with their aunts, uncles, and cousins, or their weekly trips to Howard Johnson’s for ice cream. They especially didn’t talk about family problems or stresses because they wanted to protect their mother from worry. Marie worried constantly. She used to jokingly

say “being a DePinto means you just worry a lot about everything”. She said it was “in our blood” to worry as if worrying was some kind of hereditary ailment like diabetes or high blood pressure, and she was probably right. For Marie though, when things were out of her control, her way of dealing with the worry was through distraction— doing laundry, tending to the needs of her family— and through making dinner.

She’d stand at the stove stirring a big pot of pea soup made with the tiniest pieces of the previous night’s ham dinner—bone and all. Her daughters would be scattered around the kitchen setting the table while her sons would wait to be called in for dinner from their designated spots in the living room. She relied on soups to feed her big family and to help carry dinner from one night to the next. Soups froze easy and were inexpensive to make which was always something she kept in mind when preparing her meals. She’d make a cross between a quiche and a frittata with eggs, onions, and sliced potatoes that made you feel like you were starting the day right with each bite. In her pantry, she kept an assortment of candies in mason jars: jelly beans, tootsie rolls, snow caps, sugared jellies, Mike and Ike’s, caramel. She’d bring these out after dinner alongside bowls of pretzels, chips, cheese puffs and marshmallows—the perfect ending to any meal. She stirred her stresses into her pots only for them to disappear onto plates emptied by hungry family and guests.

I always thought that Marie seemed to be prepared for anything. I think all of the time she spent worrying was actually her way of crafting plan b’s, and if something came up that she couldn’t have anticipated, she did her best to figure out a way through it—and she usually did. She wasn’t a risk taker unless she was sitting at her slot machine playing penny slots in Atlantic City with my grandfather, a few of her older daughters and their husbands. She focused on what

was important to her—the little things— like mailing birthday cards to each one of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren with a handwritten “Love You Always” hidden beneath ten dollars taped to the inside of the card, like her steady hand and detail when painting the finest lines on the different ceramic pieces she made over the years, or filling little baggies with candy and a few dollar bills to hand out to her visiting grandchildren on halloween, knitting blankets with the softest yarn she could find, and giving dishtowels as Christmas gifts because “everyone needs fresh dish towels.” She smiled all the time. I can still see her standing in her hallway on Lincoln Street, peering behind the half opened front door with her right hand covering her denture free mouth, greeting me with her sing-song “Hiiiiiii-yaaaaaa! How ya dooooooooin?” in the sweetest of Nanny voices—like a familiar song I’d grown up with all my life, played over and over again on the radio. I didn’t know that the last time I’d hear that song was at my daughter’s baptism last year.

Marie passed away unexpectedly on a beautiful May afternoon surrounded by my aunt, cousins, and my grandfather. We all rushed over the house to be together—the way she taught us—unable to say goodbye or tell her how much she meant to us. When Carmina passed though, we knew it was coming. She had been in the hospital for three months catching infection after infection, organs loosing function, diabetes battling every healthy cell in her body. She died this past January, two weeks before my daughter’s first birthday. I said goodbye to her that morning draped in a yellow hazard gown, surrounded by machines,wires, and tubes as I kissed her forehead and held her hand for the last time.

That night, back at my grandparents apartment, my husband, John, pointed out how well Onofrio, or Pop as we call him, seemed to be dealing with everything as we sat around his

dinning room table listening to him talk about the pictures he pulled from the cardboard box he marked “FAG- Pic Fotocrafts” (“Fragile- Pictures, Photographs”). He didn’t mention Carmina but instead kept pulling pictures of her with all of my cousins and I or pictures of Carmina with her kids or siblings asking “you rememb this?” passing pictures around the table.

The Sunday after Carmina’s funeral arrangements, Onofrio wanted to have everyone over, of course, for dinner. He insisted on cooking and told us all he was making ravioli—the favorite amongst the cousins. Almost no one could go. Family from all over had taken time off of work, driven in from out of town, spent hours—if not days—away from their homes and after the services were over, tried to step back into their routines. We wanted to stay home too. Laundry had piled up and life with a soon-to-be one year old hit me hard in the face as we walked into our kitchen where dishes had made a new home in our sink, pots and pans were left uncleaned on our stove, and piles of paperwork and pictures were scattered amongst stained and empty wine glasses on our kitchen table.

Despite all this, we came to dinner anyway. We walked into the apartment that smelled as if Carmina was going to walk into the hallway and greet us—a blend of her perfume and her gravy. She wasn’t there. Pop scooped our daughter, Sophia, out of my arms kissing her face and ushered us into the living room. “Call you broth. He comin? Where’s Roc?” he asks while my husband and I hug my mother and stepfather—the only people at the house. I was glad we were there. I could see how disappointed he looked that no one had arrived for dinner yet. My cousin Rocky came through the door just as we were settling in and after a quick conversation with my brother, I let Pop know that he was held up at work and wouldn’t make it.

“We should tell them”, my husband said, his lips pulled back in a tight smile. That morning we found out that we were having another baby and John thought it would put a smile on my grandfather’s face to let him in on the news before everyone in the family knew. I wasn’t sure I wanted to. We just buried Carmina on Friday and here we were taking a pregnancy test Sunday morning—overwhelmed with emotion in finding out we were expecting. Such good news right on top of such bad news. I wasn’t sure how Pop would react. We decided that if anything it would be a happy distraction and told him the news. “We’re having another baby,” I said. I watched Pop smile with excitement and inside I could feel this pulling at the fresh pain we had all just been through together. In that moment I wished I could see Carmina’s face smiling next to his.

We sat at the table and Pop stood at the stove stirring the gravy and portioning the raviolis into bowls. He was standing where Carmina always had, doing what she had always done. It felt very foreign to me—probably to everyone there—but it looked like Pop had been doing it for years. She taught him too without any of us realizing it. He sat at the table and explained how he’d gone to the store to buy all of the “ingred” so he could make the gravy—something I had never seen him do in my entire life. It tasted almost exactly like hers, too.