Sicilian Roots: How the Agricultural Pursuits of Immigrant Sicilians Shaped Modern New Orleans Cuisine

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Urban Studies

by

Laura Guccione

B.A. University of Georgia, 1992

August, 2019
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Abstract

The influx of immigrant Sicilians into southeastern Louisiana in the nineteenth century resulted in a parallel rise of the French Quarter as a culinary destination. Through an analysis of menus, recipe books, city directories, newspapers and census rolls, this work maps the growing influence of Sicilian farmers, vendors, and restaurateurs on New Orleans foodways. The often-overlooked community of Sicilians already living in the city in the early nineteenth century set the stage for the mass migration from Sicily to New Orleans later in the century, when Sicilians gained control of the produce food market in southeast Louisiana. A comparison of local cookbooks and recipes from before the mass arrival of the Sicilians with those created after Sicilians began to dominate agricultural production in Louisiana reveals a subtle shift in the use of ingredients, as local cooks incorporated into local dishes the produce made available by Sicilian farmers and vendors.

Keywords: New Orleans, Louisiana; Sicilians; foodways; immigration; Italians; Sicily.
Introduction

“That's how you learn, you share food.”

—Chef Leah Chase

New Orleans is known for its French Quarter, its French culture, and its French colonial past. Policymakers and tourism initiatives have often framed the culture of the city as French. Visitors have often assumed that the classic dishes of New Orleans are also the heritage of France. More savvy observers and consumers of the foods of New Orleans know the contribution of African and Spanish influence on its world-renowned cuisine.

Less known by those outside the city is the profound influence of the Sicilians on New Orleans food culture. To find the contribution of Sicily, you have to look past the main ingredients of creole dishes to the subtle flavorings that enrich and sustain them. Reclaiming the contributions of Sicilians points out the wider legacy of the many ethnicities that have altered and enhanced the foodways of New Orleans.

Using food as a cultural identity marker, this thesis will explore the connection between the influx of immigrant Sicilians into southeastern Louisiana in the 19th century and the parallel rise of the French Quarter as a culinary destination. From the variety of produce that they chose to grow in outlying rural areas to their success in marketing the food in the city, Sicilian immigrants helped shape the cuisine of New Orleans in subtle but important ways. Beyond Sicilian-inspired New Orleans dishes such as the iconic muffuletta sandwich and the standard Italian-American fare, the Sicilian immigrants to New Orleans brought with them new ideas for adding flavor and textures to the city’s already-rich culinary traditions.

This thesis also tells the story of the influence of migration on agricultural practices. It will trace the history of how Sicilians first came to New Orleans before the Civil War and settled
as a small minority in the French Quarter and how this small colony grew exponentially in the latter part of the 19th century to become the influential community of Sicilian-Americans who live in Louisiana today. As they moved from agricultural workers to truck farmers to grocery store and restaurant owners, these transplants from Italy were catalysts for fundamental changes in the cuisine New Orleans.

Through an analysis of newspaper articles, advertisements, menus, recipe books, city directories, census rolls, this thesis will map the growing influence of Sicilian farmers, vendors, and restaurateurs on New Orleans foodways. The thesis will also use these primary documents, as well as interviews and recent research, to point out the often-overlooked community of Sicilians already living in the city in the early 19th century and how they set the stage for the mass migration from Sicily to New Orleans later that century, when Sicilians gained control of the produce food market in southeast Louisiana. In addition, this work will contrast local cookbooks and recipes from before the mass arrival of the Sicilians with those created after Sicilians began to dominate agricultural production in Louisiana, revealing a subtle shift in the use of ingredients as local cooks incorporated into local dishes the produce made available by Sicilian farmers and vendors.

**Literature Review**

Many food scholars and historians have written about Italian culture and food, but most studies have focused on the Italian cuisine of the larger cities of the northern United States. The food choices of rural immigrants are often neglected, and the foodways of Sicilians who settled in the southern United States are often ignored. Locally, much has been written about the ethnicity, traditions, and political affiliations of Sicilians in southeast Louisiana but little has
been reported of their cuisine. *Bread and Respect* by A.V. Margavio and Jerome J. Salomone is perhaps the most comprehensive book available to date on Sicilians in Louisiana. Sketching a broad history of the Sicilians who settled in and around New Orleans, the authors discuss themes of hunger and food, but do not focus on details of food preparation or production.\(^1\)

In her classic work on the foodways of immigrants, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, Hasia Diner does touch on Sicilian immigrants in Louisiana and their involvement in the import/export business but she neglects to place the farmer and specific foods into the picture. Like that of many studies of Italian immigrants in the United States, Diner’s focus, justified perhaps due to the numbers, is on the northern states, their urban centers, and San Francisco. When New Orleans is mentioned at all, it is usually as a side note.\(^2\)

David S. Shields, in *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine*, calls for a deeper look at New Orleans food history:

> No place in the United States obsesses about food heritage more than New Orleans. Yet the history of the city’s cuisine remains oddly incomplete. What is missing, strangely enough, is the cookery that won the city its international reputation as the premier center of gastronomy in the United States: the restaurant fare of the nineteenth century. Instead, the domestic cookery of the city matrons and their *Creoles du couleur* servants have been preserved and canonized as traditional Creole cuisine.\(^3\)

In his chapter on restaurants in New Orleans, Shields answers many questions about the origins of the idea of a Creole cuisine in New Orleans. He argues that the promotion of all things

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Creole was originally a literary tactic to romanticize and exoticize New Orleans for tourists while promoting the city for the 1884 World Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. As Shields puts it, “New Orleans was served up for national attention a la Créole.”

In *How American Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*, Jennifer Jansen Wallach writes that “the study of United States food history is still in its infancy.” She notes that while many people view food as merely biological without accepting the nuances of cultural choices that are made when we eat, in fact food history is fundamental to understanding history as a whole. In her view, the American diet is an important chapter in the narrative of American culture. She also calls for more research on New Orleans food history; however, she gives Italians but a nod and ignores the Sicilian population of the city before the Civil War:

Like other New World cuisines, cooking in Louisiana bore the imprint of many different influences, combining eighteenth-century French, Native American, African, Spanish, and German ingredients and styles of cooking with the cuisines of other groups such as Italian immigrants who arrived in Louisiana in large numbers in the late nineteenth century.

More recently, some authors have begun to acknowledge the contribution of Sicilian immigrants to New Orleans cuisine. For example, Poppy Tooker’s *Pascal’s Manale: A Family Tradition* delves into the history of the iconic New Orleans restaurant. Tooker mentions the diversity of offerings common to local Italian restaurants, pointing out that the restaurant, founded in 1913, is as well known for its New Orleans classics, like turtle soup and gumbo, as for its veal Marsala and pasta with meatballs.

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6 Wallach, *How America Eats*, xii.
7 Ibid., 60.
As this work was nearing completion, Justin Nystrom’s *Creole Italian*, a study of the commercial ventures of Sicilians in New Orleans, was released. Although the culinary history of the city is mentioned as commerce, the influence of Sicilians and their farming practices on the ingredients, recipes, and foodways of New Orleans does not figure into the story.9

**Sicilians Arrive in Louisiana**

Much of the historical focus on Sicilians in Louisiana begins in the late 19th century, but the relationship between Louisiana and Italy began decades earlier with the citrus trade between Palermo and New Orleans. Citrus had been grown in Sicily since the ninth century, when Arabs brought irrigation and planted bitter oranges and lemons there.10 In fact, even earlier, cultivating and exporting food had been part of the economy of Sicily. Fertile soil and moderate temperatures produced crops that had been feeding the region for centuries, prompting the Roman statesman Cato, around 200 B.C., to call Sicily’s fields of wheat “the Republic’s granary, the nurse at whose breasts the Roman people are fed.”11

In the mid-18th century, the global citrus trade exploded with the discovery that lemon juice could cure scurvy as well as prevent it. At first, the Royal Navy of Britain attained lemons from Spain, then turned to Sicily for citrus. As Helena Attlee describes it, by 1803, Admiral Lord Nelson had “transformed Sicily into a vast lemon juice factory.”12 However, less than fifty years later, the British abandoned Sicily when they realized they could get citrus from their own

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colonies in the West Indies. Lemons were first shipped from Sicily to New York in 1807, and by 1840, New Orleans and Sicily had a growing citrus trade with vessels from Palermo, with shipments of fruit arriving regularly at the port of New Orleans. For instance, in 1840, the brig Padang from Palermo brought 1,000 boxes of lemons and 500 boxes of oranges to sell in New Orleans. Food items had been and would be an important link between southern Italy and Louisiana.

Before the Civil War, a small community of Sicilians and other Italians were already living and thriving in New Orleans, and many of these eventually became involved in the food business as either importers or distributors of fruits and vegetables as well as owners of coffeehouses and restaurants. By the 1840s, newspaper articles give a picture of Italians as already an integral part of life in this port city: in 1841, an advertisement for Dr. A. Binaghi in the Daily Picayune mentions that Italian was one of the five languages being spoken in New Orleans. A few years earlier, in the same paper, an article expressed a worry about the Italian residents and their susceptibility to an epidemic in the area. An 1841 obituary in The Daily Picayune reported the sudden death of a 26-year-old Italian fruit merchant who had lived in the city for at least six years. This would mean that this person had lived in and perhaps sold produce in New Orleans as early as 1835.

In her celebrated memoir, Eliza Ripley waxed nostalgically about her childhood in New Orleans in the early part of the 19th century and growing up on Canal Street. Her memories include a mention of an Italian vendor:

15 Daily Picayune, February 21, 1840.
16 Daily Picayune, June 21, 1838.
17 Daily Picayune, July 11, 1841.
The neutral ground, that is now a center for innumerable lines of street cars, was at that time an open, ungarnished, untrimmed, untended strip of waste land. An Italian banana and orange man cleared a space among the bushes and rank weeds and erected a rude fruit stall where later Clay’s statue stood.18

So, by 1840, Italians selling fruit were part of day-to-day life in the city of New Orleans.

In 1848, the Picayune newspaper reported that the Sicilian bark ship Julia had arrived in New Orleans directly from Sicily with over 2,000 oranges and over 500 boxes of lemons. The produce was auctioned off by Sykes and Hyde on the levee in the French Quarter near the market.19 Two years later, in 1850, the Picayune reported that Sykes and Hyde were still selling Sicilian produce with additional items such as chestnuts, walnuts, raisins, figs, and salt, alongside the expected oranges and lemons.20 Cheese from Sicily showed up on the levee auctions in 185121 and in 1853, the cargo of the bark Rover included, along with lemons and oranges, 400 orange trees.22 Also, a crime report in 1856 referred to a coffee house on Elysian Fields owned by a Sicilian by the name of Sparicio.23

In 1847, an advertisement for ice cream in The Daily Picayune described the popular Sicilian treat being sold on “Mr. Falvey’s Vacant Lot” on Tchoupitoulas Street in New Orleans. A Mr. Jansin, who was the owner of the stand, claimed that his ice cream was made in the “Sicilian style, which is preferable to any other.”24 Sicilian style might refer to the original style

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19 Daily Picayune, March 15, 1848.
20 Daily Picayune, March 22, 1850.
21 Daily Picayune, April 13, 1851.
22 Daily Picayune, January 19, 1853.
23 Daily Picayune, June 3, 1856.
24 Daily Picayune, April 15, 1847.
of ice cream created and sold in 1686 Paris by Procopio Cutò, a Sicilian. Mr. Jansin offered delivery by the gallon to any part of the city for balls and parties.25

In 1859, R. Tramontana and Company on Front Street announced in The Daily Picayune that the vendor had for sale boxes of “Sicily Lemons.”26 This advertisement is significant in that it points out Sicilians’ progression to merchant, whereas earlier produce sellers had distinct Anglo surnames. Sicilians were now beginning their foray into the city’s retail produce business, which they would one day dominate.

GIS map created by Laura Guccione using the 1850 New Orleans City Directory (courtesy Louisiana Division, main Branch, New Orleans Public Library), the 1856 Colton map (ancestry.com), Geographic Base Layers (data provided by City of New Orleans Department of Information Technology and Innovation Dataset 2017).

25 Daily Picayune, April 15, 1847.
26 Daily Picayune, January 21, 1859.
By 1850, antebellum New Orleans was home to 915 Italians, of which 97 percent were Sicilian, which meant that more southern Italians lived in New Orleans than in any other city in the United States, including New York City, often portrayed as ground zero for Italian-American immigration.\textsuperscript{27} Outside the city limits, twenty Italian-born settlers, including three farmers, were living in Natchitoches Parish.\textsuperscript{28} So even before the Civil War and well before the more well-researched mass immigration of Sicilians to New Orleans in the late 19th century, Sicilians were turning the soil and farming, selling produce, and marketing food in Louisiana.

**Sicilians on the Plantation**

The end of the Civil War brought the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, and Southern plantation owners looked for replacements for the newly freed slaves and the labor that they had provided. This need eventually led to a much greater number of Sicilians immigrating to New Orleans, and as the population of Sicilians in Louisiana grew, so did their influence on New Orleans foodways.

In 1866, the State of Louisiana appointed Commissioner of Immigration to find new agricultural laborers. Louisiana state agents were sent to Italy, Mexico, Germany, and Belgium for workers. They even tried to recruit Chinese laborers living in Cuba.\textsuperscript{29} Other southern states attempted to lure immigrants for agricultural labor, but most failed until they went to southern Italy, where the economic and political situation had created a group of workers willing to emigrate. The numbers show that Louisiana had the most success in attracting this Italian labor: according to the census reports from 1880 to 1920, Italian immigrants to Louisiana numbered

\textsuperscript{27} Scarpaci, “Immigrants,” 169.
\textsuperscript{28} Russell Magnaghi, “Louisiana’s Italian Immigrants Prior to 1870,” *Louisiana History: The Louisiana Historical Association* 27, no. 1 (1986): 57.
64,222, predominantly Sicilian; while Texas recruited 22,802; Mississippi 5,508; and Arkansas 3,908.  

Several factors contributed to Louisiana’s success in attracting laborers from Sicily. First, the citrus trade had already created established routes between Sicily and New Orleans. These trade routes simplified the physical movement of laborers to New Orleans since ships were already bound for that city from Sicily.

Second, Sicily was in the midst of famine and political upheaval, both of which left people starving and desperate for work. Between political turmoil and recent famines, many looked for work outside of the country. In 1850, the Marquis of Ormonde penned a travel book in which he pointed out just how widespread hunger was in Sicily. He spoke of trying to find food in a town near Catania, Sicily, and wrote that he could find neither milk nor macaroni and that the poor peasants claimed that they did not even have bread. They showed him some rancid cheese and explained that they felt lucky to have it to live on. To think of Italian peasants without so much as bread reveals why they might have arrived at the port of New Orleans in search of pane e lavoro (bread and work).

A third factor in the success of Louisiana in attracting Sicilian immigrants was similarities in religion and culture, two crucial factors in immigrants’ choice of destination. Both Louisiana and Sicily were largely Catholic, and both had similar experience of being ruled by the French and Spanish. Some Sicilians saw New Orleans as a transplanted Mediterranean city, and many of the local Catholics recognized what they had in common with the Sicilians. As the

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scholar Paolo Giordano has written, “Louisiana has always maintained a southern European flavor.”

Finally, Sicilians were primarily coming from a farming economy and recognized similarities in the farming economy of the American South, in contrast to the industrial North. Louisiana’s warm climate also felt familiar, and their agricultural experience easily transferred. From their homeland, Sicilians brought food items new to Louisiana. One observer in 1867 reported that in Louisiana “the wasted fields, now deserted, would, under their patient labor, become fruitful with the grape, the olive, the fig, the orange, the lemon, and kindred products.” Unfortunately, they found that grapes and olives could not thrive in the humid, hot climate and rich soil but the citrus business did certainly take off in southeast Louisiana under the Sicilian immigrants as did the strawberry industry, along with a host of other new food items that would soon be incorporated into the repertoire of New Orleans cooks into the twenty-first century. Strawberries had grown wild in the new world, and were not cultivated, but the larger European variety was brought in and cultivated successfully by the Sicilians. As a publication from 1955 stated, the “largest group of foreign white stock in Louisiana is of Italian ancestry and this group runs predominately vegetables, fruit, and especially strawberries.”

Food appeared to be central to the community life of Sicilians once they did arrive in Louisiana. These peasants came from a land of hunger and famine, so food was always of utmost importance. Word of the abundance they found in their new home made its way back to Sicily and probably served as encouragement for even more migration. At the time of the mass

33 Giordano, “Italian Immigration,” 163.
35 Alvin Lee Bertrand, The Many Louisianas: Rural Social Areas and Cultural Islands, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1955), 24.
migration of Sicilians to America, rumors came back to Italy that those who left Sicily for the New World were eating food that “costs less than bread.”36 *La cuccagna*, meaning plenty or abundance, was an imaginary place that symbolized to the Sicilians a world of economic and social equality and bountiful food.

Those who came to Louisiana may not have found streets paved with gold, but ample food probably made up for riches, a chance to never go hungry again being reward enough,37 and the search for *la cuccagna* drew Sicilians to Louisiana.

**Creating Italian Identity in the New World**

Popular writing and producers of text often treat Italians in the New World as coming from one homogeneous cultural community from which some transplanted to North America. However, this community did not in fact exist back in Europe but only emerged in their new situation. With a long history of invaders and migrations since its inception, Italy was not even Italy at the time of their immigration: the people who traveled to Louisiana for work were not technically Italians, since Italy did not exist until after 1860. In fact, they did not see themselves as either Italian or Sicilian, rather they identified as being from certain villages or regions. When connecting with others from similar locales, some of these local ties dissolved as they found that they had more in common with other immigrants from their area of the world than with the native New Orleanians, and it was in their new home, America, that their “Italian” heritage was born.38

Even though the circumstances in Sicily might have been dire, many of these immigrants did not look to the United States as a permanent home but rather as an opportunity to make enough money to return and buy a small plot of land. It was common throughout their history for these migrants, no matter where they went, to have the intention of eventually returning to their villages. Since the Middle Ages, Sicilians had been forced or had chosen to leave their villages for a variety of reasons, but eventually most wanted to return to their “beloved home.” This home was not a nation or even affiliated with a people, but rather a place, the patria or paese. The word paesano as a term of endearment showed a bond to the homeland and connection as an ethnic place marker, denoting that the speaker was from the same town or district.

This love of home may have actually originated from the long experience of Sicilians having had to leave their home – temporarily or permanently. Many people from the island depended on seasonal agricultural work to survive – making it necessary to move with the growing seasons from the mountains, where most of the Louisiana Sicilians had lived, to the coast or to the other islands or the peninsula that is now part of Italy.

Throughout its history, Sicily and its inhabitants had been exposed to the movements forced by issues of climate, war, and economic ebb and flow, so it was understandable that long-distance migration was also not new to the people of Sicily. In The History of Sicily, the authors write that the island had served as “both a gateway and a crossroad, on the one hand dividing the

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42 Gabaccia, Italy’s Many, 23.
eastern and western Mediterranean, and on the other hand linking Europe and Africa as a stepping stone,“⁴³ and as such, witnessed the collision of many cultures and nations.

This long tradition of movement and the desire to return home sheds some light on the practice of many of the Sicilian immigrants who traveled to Louisiana that is often ignored: many of them worked as short-term migrant workers. Much like present-day workers from Latin America, these migrants would travel to the United States during the harvests, make their money, and return home. When these men returned to Sicily, they were often referred to as “Americano” since they had tasted life outside the village and the mere fact that a name was given them reinforces that there were many returns. The number of returners from New Orleans has been impossible to determine, but Gabaccia referenced a study by Betty Boyd Caroli that claimed that 54 per cent of southern Italians returned from the United States during the years 1900-1914.⁴⁴

This group of mostly young men would travel to Louisiana at harvest time and many return after the work was finished. Many of these migratory Italian immigrants were laborers on plantations who lived in the area on an annual basis, during the harvest season.⁴⁵ Census activity revealed the number of inhabitants varied according to harvest time, so these migrants went back to Sicily or possibly traveled to areas within the United States where higher-paying jobs existed.⁴⁶

As this search for food and work brought more and more Sicilians to Louisiana, they often began their new lives with seasonal employment in the fields of sugar cane. Capable men were needed for the backbreaking harvesting and grinding of the cane. As Rosolino Mormino, a

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⁴³ Finley, Smith, and Duggan, A History, 1.
⁴⁴ Gabaccia, Italy’s Many, 73.
⁴⁶ Scarpaci, “Immigrants,” 171.
native of Alia, Sicily, wrote from a sugar cane plantation in Napoleonville, Louisiana, “Il pane e’ molle, ma la vita e’ dura” (“the bread is soft, but life is hard”).

But working with sugar cane would not have been a new experience for many Sicilians – sugar cane had been grown in Sicily since the Arabs brought it there, along with citrus fruits and other edibles, in the ninth century. It was with some irony that the founding of the New World and its abundance of sugar did perhaps, along with drought, put an end to Sicily as a commercial sugar grower but centuries later, Sicilians would return to working in la zuccherata, or the sugar cane season, as it was known back home.

The passenger list of the S.S. Bolivia, which landed in New Orleans on October 25, 1898, after 23 days at sea, provided a snapshot of who was traveling to Louisiana at the height of immigration from Sicily. According to the ship’s log, of the 1,375 immigrants aboard 1,048 were men and 327 were women (half of those were wives) with a mean age of 27 and were classified on ship papers as “peasants.” According to other research, only about half of the Sicilian immigrants who landed in New Orleans stayed in New Orleans. Many would pass through New Orleans but continue on to rural Louisiana to work in the cane fields only to return to Sicily after the harvest.

An example of this migratory process of Sicilian families is the family of Rosa Purpura, who was born in Marina di Tusa, Sicily, in 1888. Rosa’s parents both immigrated to Louisiana from Sicily in the early 1900s and ran a general store in Batchelor, Louisiana, selling local produce and supplies to immigrant workers. However, by 1918, Rosa, her two American-born sons, and her husband would return to Sicily. Her Sicilian-born husband did not like life in the

47 Diner, Hungering, 48.
48 Finley, Smith, and Duggan, A History, 52.
49 Margavio and Salomone, Bread and Respect, 34.
United States, but Rosa always thought she would return. She would never live in Louisiana again but one of her sons, Joe, would return, not to sugar country but to the city of New Orleans. Joe would live near the French Quarter, in the Tremé neighborhood and later, after marriage, would move to Old Metairie. The store that Joe’s relatives owned is still open today as a convenience store on the main road through the little town of Innis, Louisiana, and still caters seasonally to the migrant farm workers who these days hail from Mexico and other Latin American countries.51

This family story is but one example of the migratory nature of the Sicilians and how families who may have been divided by immigration remained tied to roots in both the old country and in their new homeland. In 1905, the authors of a travel book noticed the lack of men in the countryside of Sicily with the worrisome words that parts of the country “are secretly dying, because their young men all go away to the Americas. Mere villages have sent out hundreds of emigrants. Their women will follow, and their old men will die…”52 This image is in striking contrast to the images of Sicilian men arriving at the docks of cities like New Orleans. However, the travel book authors may have been mistaken in predicting the desertion of the villages. Even though many would stay in the United States, many did return to their Sicilian villages. According to statistics, between 1899 and 1924, 2.1 million returned home of the 3.8 million who travelled to the United States from Italy.53

In 1905, the same year that the travel book expressed concern over the lack of men in many villages in Sicily, the secretary of the New Orleans Progressive Union, H. M. Mayo, released a statement in the Times-Picayune possibly explaining the destination of many of these

51 Personal Interviews with Jeanine Lemoine and personal history of author.
52 Sladen and Lorimer, Queer Things, 97.
men and stating a hope that many would decide to eventually stay. He made it clear that at least with the progressives, the presence of Italian laborers was welcomed in Louisiana.

Owing to the particular agricultural conditions in southern Louisiana, and even among the cotton fields, the Italian has been found the most desirable and most available class to partially take the place of the constantly disappearing negro, and after a careful education in agricultural methods common to cotton, sugar and rice fields, become settlers and home seekers in the proper sense of the word, and contributors to the general prosperity of the entire South.54

In addition, creating permanent routes between New Orleans and Sicily had the potential for helping the Louisiana economy with a balance of trade since New Orleans already imported sundries such as fruits, olive oil, and wine from Italy, and in return, Louisiana could potentially expand its exportation of cotton, rice, tobacco, and cereals to Italy.55

**Putting Down Roots**

Once they arrived on the plantation, the Sicilian immigrants received a meager wage, a place to live, and sometimes about a quarter-acre of land on which they were permitted to grow whatever they chose. Allowing the immigrants the use of these small plots of land encouraged the stabilization of the plantation owner’s workforce,56 a way to inspire them to stay and put down roots. Ridley LeBlanc, a worker at Raceland Plantation, reported that on these plots of land, they grew corn, sweet potatoes, and peas in addition to raising goats to make cheese. They also made their own spaghetti and baked their own bread.57

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54 *Times-Picayune*, September 1, 1905.
55 Scarpaci, “Immigrants,” 170.
57 Scarpaci, “Immigrants,” 173-75.
While working on the plantations, the Sicilians often attempted to re-create their homeland in some ways. In a letter of December 28, 1893, Thomas R. Chaney, the owner of the Oneida Planting and Manufacturing Company, located about fifty miles from New Orleans in St. James Parish, described one of the living areas of his Sicilian workers as a picture of a “pretty” Italian village complete with a store, a blacksmith, carpenter shops, shed, and barns that had sprung up alongside the houses that he provided for the workers. These houses were usually former slave quarters.

In addition to their work in the owners’ fields, and in their small plots of land alongside their houses, workers would often ask permission to plant on other parcels of land that were not in use. On these plots of land, the immigrants grew a variety of produce, including eggplants, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, beans, squash, and greens. They grew these vegetables not only to feed their families but also to make money that could be spent at the plantation stores, which often charged ridiculously high prices. For the most part, these new arrivals only bought items at the stores that they could not grow or make themselves, such as soap, sugar, flour, and salt.

One of the most detailed descriptions of the immigrant Italians’ successful gardening on a plantation was described by Alfred H. Stone in a rant against African-Americans, contrasting the work ethic of the Italians versus that of the enslaved while failing to take into account the lack of motivation of enslaved workers to till a field or harvest produce that he or she could not own or sell. Stone described the subsistence gardens of the Italians on a cotton plantation and how

58 Thomas R. Chaney, MSS #516, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA. December 28, 1893 letter.
hard these immigrants worked to grow food from early spring through the fall and into the winter. He described the Italian as “so jealous of the use of every foot for which he pays rent” that he planted in small, overlooked places and even got plants to grow in the bayous. Stone described the homes of the Sicilians as being “literally covered with strings of dried butter beans, pepper, okra, and other garden products, while the walls would be hung with corn.”61 The handling of underutilized land by the Italians did not escape the watchful eye of the government. A Department of Labor bulletin from 1907 praised the Sicilians’ ability to grow small vegetables and berries in between trees and that they found a way to grow tomatoes, beans, and potatoes in orchards.62

In 1907, the Picayune interviewed J.B. Sullivan, owner of a plantation upriver from New Orleans, near Natchez in Concordia Parish. Two years earlier, thirty-five Sicilians, most from the Sicilian village of Poggio Reale, had arrived to work for him. By 1907, the colony had grown to one hundred fifty.63 Sullivan voiced his hopes for the Italian immigrant colony that had joined his plantation, and doted on their success as farmers. “The small farmer will enrich the country. He will diversify the crops. He will raise corn, sugar cane, oats, hay and fruits.” The article added, “The Italians cultivate their crops as to get a better yield, instead of being content to make things as they come. The immigrants go out in the field rain or shine…they are naturally farmers.”

So the land owners acknowledged that the Sicilians were broadening the inventory of crops grown in Louisiana and with their “better yield,” they were able to grow crops in excess of

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63 Times-Picayune, December 15, 1907.
what they were growing for the plantation owner. This practice led to the Sicilians’ first forays into the truck farming business.

Tending to the Crops

Traditionally, two forms of agriculture were found in Sicily. First, *coltura intensive*, which included small farms, vineyards, and smaller plantations that grew citrus, almonds, and sumac. Second, there was *coltura estensiva*, estates of grain fields and pasturelands. Even today, southern Italy’s economy is driven by medium to small family-owned farms. This latter style of agricultural business, which immigrants brought to southeastern Louisiana, still thrives in the state today.

According to historian James Dorman, it was every Louisiana immigrant peasant’s dream to own a small farm. They believed that whoever had land had everything, or, as it would be said in Italian, *chi ha prato ha tutto*. This dream of land ownership could become a reality more easily in the United States than in Italy, since land in Louisiana could be had for as little as five dollars an acre. As Professor Ann H. Hallock, former director of Italian Studies at Tulane and Newcomb University, explained in a 1976 *States-Item* article:

The Italian immigrants were people who had worked the land so it is natural that they would gravitate to the land here. New Orleans, not New York, was the largest port for Italians entering this country. They came to work on the sugar plantations and to save enough money to buy property themselves.

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64 Export.gov. [https://www.export.gov/article?id=Italy-Agricultural-Sector](https://www.export.gov/article?id=Italy-Agricultural-Sector)


Buying a small farm was ideal both financially and socially, since the investment was minimal. In addition, the farms were close to each other, and families could maintain connections to others in the community, much like they did in Sicily. This communal lifestyle would have been more difficult if they had lived on larger, isolated commercial farms, such as the plantations of the South.69 These small farms could also make profits easier in Louisiana. Back in Italy, even if they could get permission to plant on a plot of land for personal use, farmers would be taxed not only on the land, but also on what they grew on the land. In the United States, they could grow what they pleased on tiny, postage-stamp plots and do what they pleased with the excess.70

Until the Sicilians could own their own land, they usually worked as sharecroppers. Sharecropping was similar to Sicilian agricultural practices. For instance, at a Tangipahoa Parish strawberry farm, the landowner would supply the berry plants. The tenant would tend to the plants and pay half the cost of the crates, picking labor, and fertilizer. After the harvest, the tenant and owner would each receive half of the profit.71 This practice was not an ideal situation for the sharecropper, but it helped them make money to eventually buy property. So the sugar growers of Louisiana recruited men from Sicily to tend their sugar cane, and eventually, as the Sicilian population increased and they gained resources, they could fulfill the lifelong dream of many Sicilians—to own a farm and tend to their own crops.72

70 Diner, Hungering, 62.
Railroad companies, the largest landowners in the country, considered much of their land worthless. Often, they sold land cheaply to Sicilians. The former owners were later surprised when Sicilians successfully grew crops such as strawberries on land believed to be some of the poorest in the South. As the immigrant sharecroppers obtained access to land and profited from crop sales, they gradually gained the resources to evolve into successful truck farmers. Thanks to these truck farmers, strawberries became the number one crop in Tangipahoa Parish.73

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Besides growing crops that were already familiar to Louisianians, rural immigrants also introduced vegetables and fruits they had grown in Italy. They grew some of these for their own us as well as for fellow immigrants longing for the food of their homeland. Immigrant farmers commonly brought plants with them to Louisiana. In Louisiana, Sicilians grew a great variety of produce, just as they had in the Mediterranean. Among the new crops they introduced were ?? [give examples], and locals embraced these new foods almost immediately. In the book St. Charles Parish, Louisiana: A Pictorial History, the authors note that the truck farming industry grew because Italians had introduced new vegetables and fruits, and this variety of produce helped both the wholesale and retail business in the area.74

In fact, Sicily produced a greater variety of vegetables than other areas of Europe. As Susan Pinkard points out, thanks to Muslim irrigation techniques, Sicily “produced an array of vegetables that dwarfed what was known elsewhere in Europe, including artichokes, beets, cabbages, cardoons, carrots, cauliflowers, celery root, cucumbers, eggplants, fennel, leeks, melons, onions, radishes, and spinach.”75 It was in growing these vegetables that many Sicilians would find success. Italian-Americans have long claimed that they brought broccoli to the United States and that it was because of them that varieties of salad greens, zucchini, tomatoes, mushrooms, grew in popularity and availability.76 Their experience in Louisiana supports these claims.

76 Diner, Hungering, 63.
Truck farming

Once their families’ and neighbors’ needs were met, the Sicilian farmers brought surplus food to the city, thus becoming “truck farmers.”77 In their gardens, they grew food items not available at the local produce markets, and brought them into the city for sale. Praise for the contribution of these truck farmers even made a local paper. In 1902, the *New Orleans Item* reported that 544 Italian immigrants had arrived on the steamship *Neustra* and that “although many of them return to Italy after the crops are gathered, most of them remain and very soon become householders and landowners. They are expert gardeners and have become valuable as truck farmers.”78

While most immigrants used carts to transport their produce to New Orleans, the Portera family of St. Charles Parish had the novel idea to sell their produce off a skiff on the Mississippi River. Many Sicilians had taken over and expanded agricultural businesses in this area, known as the German Coast, where packinghouses sprouted up and served as a major supplier of food not only for New Orleans, but, thanks to rail shipping, for other major cities in the United States.79

St. Charles Parish lay in an area that the state had targeted for agricultural exploitation. By 1905, New Orleans’s produce needs had increased, and many saw opportunity for the new immigrants. As the *Picayune* reported:

> There is a vast territory within a circle drawn one hundred miles north and east of New Orleans, which could be made to contribute largely to the business of this city, and which only requires the settlement by thrifty and industrious tenantry to produce the result. Lands may be secured in prices ranging from $2 to $30 and $40 per acre, which will grow any of the prime crops of the State, and which have proven of decided advantage and value in the cultivation of early vegetable and the ordinary market garden crops. The natural increase in

77 Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 66.
78 Boneno, “From Migrant to Millionaire,” 87.
farming population of Louisiana cannot hope to put these lands into cultivation. We must depend entirely on immigration.\textsuperscript{80}

The agricultural zone mapped out in this plan of action did not include Orleans Parish.\textsuperscript{81}

Tangipahoa Parish, located northwest of Lake Pontchartrain and New Orleans, fit into the agricultural zone mentioned above. In this parish, Sicilians were renowned for their gardens filled with vegetables, adjacent to the famous strawberry patches of Ponchatoula, a town known even today as a center of strawberry production. The vegetables grown by the Sicilians included cabbage, corn, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, onions; the immigrants also raised chickens, eggs, and goats, which they milked.\textsuperscript{82}

Elsewhere, in St. Bernard Parish, just outside New Orleans, a large influx of Italians took unused lands and cultivated them. In 1909, the \textit{Daily Picayune} wrote of the booming truck farm businesses there.\textsuperscript{83} Most of the press reports about the new rural immigrants was largely positive, portraying the rural Sicilians as successful farmers and hard workers who could miraculously grow food where no one had tried or where others had failed.

Sometimes miracles were needed to save the crops. In Amite City, Louisiana, in May 1915, the newspaper reported that Italians were holding “prayer meetings for the purpose of invoking Providential help, and the rain of this afternoon made the sons of Little Italy feel that their supplications had been answered.” The headline of the story, “Rain Worth $125,000 To Truck Growers,” confirmed that Italians had turned truck farming into a lucrative business. The

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Times-Picayune}, September 1, 1905.
\textsuperscript{81} Bertrand, \textit{The Many Louisianas}, 19.
\textsuperscript{82} Baiamonte, “Community Life,” 371.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Daily Picayune}, January 25, 1909.
article also announced that local landowners were planning the construction of a canal near Amite City to convert hundreds of acres into desirable truck farms.84

Sicilian immigrants were not only changing the physical landscape of southeastern Louisiana, but changing the culinary landscape as well. The new variety of produce they were introducing had created a new market, and with more demand came larger profits. Sicilian immigrants and their families were moving up socially without abandoning their agricultural background. More and more families were becoming truck farmers, bringing produce to the general population in parts of Louisiana, including New Orleans and particularly the French Quarter.

From Farm to Table

Many truck farmers and farm laborers moving into the city transitioned into food-related businesses, such as peddling fruit or vegetable or operating grocery stores.85 Back on the plantations, their common roots had produced tight-knit communities. These links were sustained as some moved from wage labor to entrepreneurial pursuits,86 creating farm-to-market networks. Sicilian-grown produce reached the Sicilian-owned produce stalls and increasingly Sicilian-owned stores.

Not only had Sicilian immigration created a demand for produce originally grown in Sicily, it also created a demand for a place to buy imported Italian products—the Italian grocery store.87 By 1920, the federal census reports that thirty-five percent of Louisiana’s foreign-born

84 Times-Picayune, May 29, 1915.
86 Scarpaci, “Immigration,” 331.
population were Sicilian immigrants\textsuperscript{88} and up until World War II, many rural Sicilian-Americans regularly visited New Orleans to shop, often buying items essential to the Italian diet such as olive oil, pasta, and sugar.\textsuperscript{89} This robust number of Sicilian immigrants in Louisiana set the scene for the emergence of boarding houses, banks, saloons, and restaurants with familiar food and language.\textsuperscript{90}

At the turn of the century, visitors to the city, most arriving at the port on the Mississippi River, entered a French Quarter that must have seemed entirely Italian. Its large “French” Market was populated predominantly with Italian sellers of produce and other goods, and its stores catered to Italian tastes. In 1905, an estimated 10,000 Italians would pass through New Orleans, according to the Louisiana Immigration Association\textsuperscript{91} and probably most spent at least a bit of time in the French Quarter. It was the first and largest housing and business area of Sicilian occupation, but by no means the only one. However, a look at the French Quarter and its market reveals much about the growing place of Sicilians in the economy of New Orleans.

\textsuperscript{88} US Census Bureau (1920).
\textsuperscript{89} John Cooke, ed. Perspectives on Ethnicity in New Orleans (New Orleans: Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans, 1979), 80.
A comparison of the French Market in 1825 with the market in the 1880s helps point out the changes in the market during these years. An 1885 article in the *Daily Picayune* described the French Market in the 1820s as a place where, at that time, “the vending of vegetables or farm truck . . . was carried on along the Levee, almost entirely by negro women, very generally slaves.” 92 There was no mention of Sicilians hawking their wares on the levee at that time but by the late 1800s, by most recollections, most produce vendors in the French Quarter were Sicilians. The predominance of Sicilians in the produce business was confirmed by an 1872

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92 *Daily Picayune*, May 31, 1885.
article in the *Daily Picayune* about a local vendetta fought by those “who reside in this city (New Orleans), and nearly all of whom follow the fruit and oyster retailing business.”93

Although the *Daily Picayune* identified oystermen as Sicilian, there was and is confusion about the nationality of Louisiana oystermen, since many came from the Istrian Peninsula, an area claimed over time by both Yugoslavia and Italy. Today, Croatia occupies most of the Peninsula, with Slovenia and Italy. Many of these Slavic people spoke Italian and some claimed to be Italian when they landed in New Orleans.94 In this port city, as in many others, people were often identified by their language and not their country of origin.

Some Sicilians were involved in the oyster business, but not as many as were in the business of selling fruits and vegetables; of the twenty-nine persons listed in the 1898 *Soard’s*

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93 *Daily Picayune*, April 21, 1872..
94 Magnaghi, “Louisiana’s Italian Immigrants,” 57.
New Orleans City Directory as owning wholesale fruit companies, twenty of these were Italians.\textsuperscript{95} Most in the oyster business were from what is now Croatia.

Despite the high visibility of Sicilians in the French Quarter, unlike other cities in the United States, there was not just one “Little Italy” in New Orleans. Although it is the area often attributed to being the main area of settlement for Sicilians, perhaps due to the visitors who only saw this area of the city, Sicilian enclaves existed across the city, clustered around the city’s many markets. Although the French Quarter is often cited as having been the sole residential and business site, the housing and business patterns of Sicilians in 19th century New Orleans are more complex. Sicilian immigrants were not residentially segregated. They quickly gained social acceptance and moved into neighborhoods where native New Orleanians and other immigrant groups lived.\textsuperscript{96} Sicilians’ mixed housing pattern might explain why the moniker “Little Italy” never stuck in New Orleans as it did in other cities like New York and Chicago. It might also explain how the Sicilians brought their culinary influences to the residents of the whole city, not just the French Quarter.

So although the French Quarter was often referred to as “piccolo Palermo,” evidence suggests that there may have been more than one “Little Italy” in New Orleans and the surrounding area, centered around the city’s many markets. For instance, articles in local papers sometimes referred to the area around the Pilie and Poydras markets as “Little Italy.”\textsuperscript{97} This area lies well outside the French Quarter, in the Central Business District. Chalmette, Louisiana, in the parish adjacent to Orleans Parish, even had its own “Little Italy.”\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{95} Boneno, “From Migrant,” 89.
\textsuperscript{97} Times-Picayune, June 12, 1902.
\textsuperscript{98} New Orleans Item, December 15, 1910.
By the 1930s, the Sicilian community’s presence across the city was profound, and its influence on the food of New Orleans considerable. By 1935, Sicilians and their offspring owned nearly one-third of the land in the city and supplied New Orleans with much of its produce. In the French Quarter, no longer were the names on French Market stalls French, but rather Italian. And not only in the French Market but in corner stores across the city, Sicilians were emerging as successful retailers of food popular with fellow immigrants and non-Italian locals alike.

Restaurants

Sicilians became a dominant force in the production, distribution, and consumption of food in New Orleans -- initially as truck farmers, and later in the wholesale, retail, import/export of food, and eventually into bars and restaurants. Sicilian food and drink businesses flourished across the city. Saloons served as meeting places where friends played popular Italian card games and drank wine, while boarding houses selling familiar fare often morphed into restaurants that served Italian food.

Early on, Sicilians immigrants—mostly men without women—had found Sicilians across New Orleans willing to house and feed them. Often these business owners worked in the padrone system, recruiting laborers from their own villages back in Sicily and helping them with money and board once they arrived. In these establishments -- the coffee houses, the bars, the boarding houses -- food was often served.

100 Margavio and Salomone, Bread and Respect, 160.
Eating outside the home was nothing new to Sicilians. The authors of a 1905 travel book claimed that they “never saw a Sicilian cook anything of importance over the said stove. They buy their food already cooked from the cookshop or the cook-pedlar (sic).” So street food and cook shops were common in the towns of Sicily if you could afford them.103

Restaurants appeared early in New Orleans, and they were plentiful. Although restaurants were an anomaly in most of the United States in the early 19th century, in New Orleans, restaurants flourished. David S. Shields pointed out that “the first decades of the nineteenth century saw the culinary world of the city [New Orleans] concentrated near the riverfront on Levee and Chartres”104 close to the French Market, an area in the French Quarter where many Sicilians lived. As early as 1844, advertisements in the New Orleans newspapers announced the opening of a restaurant “where gentlemen can be accommodated with American, Spanish, French, and Italian dishes, of the best that the market will afford; especially the Italian Maccaroni will be served up in the most approved style.”105 This points out that as early as 1844, dishes served in New Orleans already showed influences from a variety of cultures, including Italian. This fusion of flavors was by this time transforming New Orleans food and contradicts the popular belief that New Orleans cuisine was not influenced by Italian culture until the late 19th century.

As early as 1850, the Soard’s City Directory of the French Quarter listed another Italian, Louie Bassetti, affiliated with a restaurant, possibly as the owner. Insurance maps of 1885 show two Italian restaurants located on St. Philip Street in the French Quarter and a “fancy bakery and Italian paste factory”106 located in the lower Quarter. In 1891, during the infamous trial over the

103 Salden and Lorimer. *Queer Things*, 83.
105 *Daily Picayune*, December 6, 1844.
assassination of the police chief of New Orleans, during questioning about whether the mafia existed in Louisiana, testimony referred to a “respectable Italian” who owned a restaurant across Lake Pontchartrain in Covington, Louisiana.107 This argues that even Italians living outside the city were already enjoying success in food-oriented businesses, perhaps even serving Italian food.

Like many places in the American South, Louisiana laws prohibited liquor sales on Sunday even before Prohibition. On November 17, 1888, the New Orleans newspaper Mascot published a cartoon revealing that “fruit stands” were doing a thriving business on Sundays serving liquor under the guise of pineapple, orange, and other fruit juices. Considering how many Sicilians were in the fruit stand business, it is not too far of a reach to assume that they might have been involved. An 1894 article claimed that not one of the 14,425 people awaiting trials for breaking the various Sunday laws had been to court or had been prosecuted.108 This inability or unwillingness of the city of New Orleans to enforce the Sunday laws probably helped Italian restaurants flourish and become an integral part of the city’s culinary landscape.

Bars

Italian saloon owners noticed this historic lack of liquor law enforcement in New Orleans, and this may have led them to ignore Prohibition laws a few decades later. In a 1969 interview, Sydney J. Block, a third-generation wine salesman who had begun his career in 1908, said that no one stopped drinking in New Orleans during Prohibition. He claimed that liquor still arrived in New Orleans from the Bahamas, and Italians made and sold wine made out of

107 New Orleans Item, March 19, 1981. Is this supposed to be 1891? See text above.
raisins.\textsuperscript{109} That raisin wine might have had a hand in the increase in popularity of Italian restaurants during the Prohibition era, as customers looking for liquor began to patronize Italian establishments for the banned beverage and stayed to have a meal.

A local example of the evolution of the Sicilian business from grocery to bar to restaurant, the Napoleon House still stands today as a prime destination for tourists and locals alike. Owner Sal Impastato often tells how his Sicilian immigrant family opened a grocery store that evolved into a bar and finally into a restaurant. During Prohibition, they served alcohol, probably in coffee cups. A 1933 photograph in the restaurant’s dining room shows Sal’s uncle Joe pouring a cask of whiskey into smaller bottles. This picture, taken during Prohibition, shows that alcohol was available to the Impastatos despite the national ban.\textsuperscript{110} The availability of alcoholic beverages in Italian restaurants abetted their growth of Italian in cities across America. As author Andrew Barr concludes, “The customers came for the wine and began to develop a taste for the food.”\textsuperscript{111}

**Corner Grocery Stores**

All over the United States, selling foods that Italians missed created an opportunity to accumulate wealth. These stores provided immigrants the foodstuffs they had not been able to afford in their homeland. Such establishments became common wherever a large population of Italian immigrants settled.\textsuperscript{112}

Within all of the Sicilian enclaves across New Orleans, grocery stores catered to both the Sicilian community and the general public and not just in the French Quarter. These corner

\textsuperscript{109} Repetto, Victor. *Interview of Sydney J. Block*, August 11, 1969.
\textsuperscript{110} Personal interview with Sal Impastato.
\textsuperscript{112} Diner, *Hungering*, 65.
stores sold items that helped Sicilian immigrants preserve ethnic foodways. Because they also served as community gathering spots, they also helped Sicilians retain their language and offered shelter from the prejudices of the Anglo-American population. From the early 19th century, newspaper advertisements show that Italian food items, such as olive oil and pasta, were regularly available in New Orleans. The items shipped from Sicily and sold in markets and grocery stores preserved Italian foodways while helping to solidify an Italian-American economy in the United States. At the same time, by consuming Italian-made products, these immigrants were transnational consumers playing a major role in the creation of an Italian-American identity in the United States.

In 1880, only seven percent of grocers in New Orleans were of Sicilian descent, but by 1920, Italians owned an estimated forty-nine percent of grocery stores in the city. As Joseph N. Macaluso, Jr., pointed out in the foreword of his father’s book, small grocery stores were “perhaps the most visible manifestations of old world adaption to the new culture.” He argues that in opening these new stores, they were taking their first steps towards assimilation.

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Sicilians were using the production and consumption of food as a vehicle to show that they had prospered by hard work and determination in the United States, and later they would use food to establish their ethnicity in the New World. No longer were they dependent on hard bread for survival: their daily diet in America would include meat, cheese, and pasta, ingredients that they could now afford to purchase.

**Distribution Business/Emergence of Italian American Cuisine**

With its Sicilian farms, markets, bars, restaurants, and grocery stores, New Orleans was perhaps one of the earliest American cities to develop what is now thought of as Italian-
American cuisine, in 2013, food historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach wrote that New Orleans possesses a “unique, sophisticated, and multicultural cuisine” rather than the “simple, unadorned, republican cuisine” of much of the rest of the country, so the incorporation of this new cuisine could have been quicker and easier than in other cities. One of the first significant ingredients to enter Louisiana from Sicily was pasta.

The Ingredients

Pasta

Although not a local agricultural product, pasta became an important manufactured product in New Orleans, thanks to the influx of Sicilian immigrants. Pasta factories sprang up in neighborhoods all over the United States where Italians were prevalent, and New Orleans was no exception. Food historian John Dickie has suggested that the immigrants preferred “maccheroni made in the United States because it was cheaper” than that produced in Italy, likely encouraging locally produced items such as pasta to emerge in the French Quarter.

Pasta, the food that American probably most associated with Italians, had been an expensive food item primarily consumed by the wealthy in southern Italy and Sicily, but it was transformed into a symbol of Italian culture in the United States. The utopian idea of cucagna, discussed earlier, was also tied to the idea of being able to eat “endless amounts of pasta.” Once they could afford it, the immigrants included pasta in some form in almost every meal. On September 6, 1899, the Daily Picayune declared that “New Orleans is considered the

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117 Wallach, How America Eats, 60.
118 Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 68.
121 Diner, Hungering, 55.
heaviest consumer of macaroni of any city of its size in the union.” As one New Orleanian of Sicilian descent told a local newspaper with a smile, “Spaghetti was not an Italian dish. It became popular here because it was cheap and nourishing—the Italian red beans and rice.”

Pasta sales predate the mass migration of the late 1800s. It was sold in New Orleans as far back as 1843. Advertisements in the local paper announced that the “cheap” store on the corner of St. Joseph and Tchoupitoulas was selling vermicelli and “new Italian macaroni” alongside other groceries. In 1853, the bark ship, Rover, landed in New Orleans and claimed to have 200 boxes of “Maccaroni, real Sicilian,” to be sold by R. F. Nichols & Company on Camp Street.

Henry Clay’s wife, Lucretia Hart Clay, loved “good, fresh Macaroni” and claimed that the best came from a place in New Orleans, so she would have her sister-in-law, New Orleanian Julie Duralde Clay, send it to her. Since Julie Clay died in 1861, her deliveries of pasta predate the Civil War. In 1879, imported Sicilian macaroni and spaghetti were available, according to a newspaper advertisement, “at the importer’s store, Nos. 67 and 69 Decatur street.” By 1901, macaroni had become popular enough for an entire chapter to be dedicated to it in The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book, the iconic New Orleans cookbook written by a group of women commissioned to archive old recipes for posterity:

Macaroni is a general article of food in New Orleans among the rich and the poor. It is Very cheap, and is a most excellent dish. We have in New Orleans large Macaroni factories, where not only Macaroni is made by the Italians themselves, but the twin sisters of Macaroni, Spaghetti and Vermicelli, are also manufactured fresh daily. While there is no city in the United States in which Macaroni is cooked in real Italian style but in New Orleans, which has long been a favored point of migration for the sons of sunny

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123 Daily Picayune, January 11, 1843.
124 Daily Picayune, January 19, 1853.
126 Times-Picayune, July 12, 1879.
Italy, the Creole cooks have modified and improved upon the Italian methods, so that Macaroni à la Creole is just as famous a dish as Macaroni à l’Italienne, and by many considered far superior. Macaroni is used extensively in New Orleans in making soups.\(^{127}\)

Although the authors reinforced the notion of the incorporation of Sicilian foodways into New Orleans traditional dishes, by the time the book was reprinted in 1987, the promotional copy ignored these contributions, instead emphasizing that “the names of these formidable women are long forgotten but the secrets of the spicy Spanish-, French-, and African- influenced delicacies they divulged have lived on.”\(^{128}\) Mary Douglas has suggested that food has an ability to expose inclusion and exclusion as well as transactions and boundaries.\(^{129}\) Despite the exclusion of the Sicilians by name, the recipes and the food itself declares their profound influence. These sometimes subtle but essential differences in the local cuisine became particularly evident after the time of the massive migration from Sicily to New Orleans.

It wasn’t just that Italian dishes were being accepted by New Orleanians: Sicilian foodways in Louisiana were profoundly changing local dishes as well. Some of New Orleans’s best-loved and best-known dishes, enjoyed by locals and tourists alike, were fundamentally altered by the Sicilian population of Louisiana. Vegetables that the Sicilians grew and sold found their way into Creole New Orleans cooking both in the homes of the working class and wealthier white people, where many African-Americans were employed as cooks. Sicilian food thus entered the kitchens, dinner tables, and palates of all New Orleanians. Chef Leah Chase of Dooky Chase’s Restaurant in New Orleans remembered that the Sicilians lived in predominately black areas of town entertained and interacted with their neighbors and exchanged recipes and foodways with them.

**Onions and Garlic**

Two elemental ingredients in classic New Orleans dishes – onions and garlic -- were used sparsely in early Creole recipes. Onions and garlic were often associated with foods of the lower classes and even though used sparingly on occasion in recipes, it was not until the Sicilians arrived that onions and garlic began to be used liberally in the cuisine of New Orleans. The history of using garlic is easily summed up in the pejorative phrase “Garlic is the peasant’s spice cupboard,” as the lower-class agricultural workers tended to use aromatics that they could grow themselves, like garlic, and not the expensive imported spices from the East. As John Dickie writes,

> Spices were essential to sophisticated cuisine from the Middle Ages until at least the 17th century and were largely unaffordable for the rural masses. Garlic, leeks, and onions, by contrast, stank of poverty. This is not to imply that the well-to-do refused to eat these pungent vegetables, just that they looked down on anyone who had no alternative when it came to giving flavor to food.”

Ione Morris, a New Orleans resident, remembered that a movie theater frequented by Sicilians in the French Quarter was referred to as “the garlic palace,” a slur based on the ingredient supposedly overused in Sicilian cooking. There were food prejudices against the aromatics used by Italians in the United States, and these foods became markers of ethnicity and associated with not being an American.

However, in New Orleans, perhaps because of the plethora of Italian markets, stores, and restaurants, and the huge number of Italians in the city, onions and garlic gradually increased in popularity and usage in local cooking as well as in local Italian restaurants. A June 4, 1914,

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131 Personal Recollection with Ione Morris.
The Times-Picayune article confirmed that the Sicilian farmers transplanted to Louisiana were influencing the choice of crops grown in the region and these crops were yielding profit:

> The banks of the Mississippi as high up as Baton Rouge seem especially favorable to the cultivation of garlic and onions. The discovery may be attributed to the large influx of Italians, many of whom graduated from the ranks of sugar field laborers into thrifty truckers. Last year they sold their surplus at prices which did not yield more than ordinary profit. This year, Italy itself and other growing and consuming countries are short of their favorite relish, and the onion yield on the other side also fell far short.

The same article describes the success of the most recent garlic crop and calls for more:

> Last year the truckers were satisfied with from 40 to 60 cents a string for their garlic. This season they had no trouble in obtaining from 70 cents to $1.25 for all the strings they could muster. The culture will continue, although the result may not always be as gratifying. They will be more uniformly successful when co-operation is pursued to its highest development.133

**Celery**

Along with onions and garlic, celery was long associated with Italians. In the Twelfth century, Peter of Blois, a French cleric, used celery to illustrate the paltry diet of the Sicilians:

> They live on so much celery and fennel that it constitutes almost all their subsistence, and this generates a humour which putrefies the body and brings it to the extremes of sickness and even death.”134

Unlike onions and garlic, celery was a luxury item in the United States when the Sicilians arrived. In wealthy Victorian homes, celery stalks were displayed in ornate, decorative glassware. Even in New Orleans, celery was initially a food of the elite. In a recent interview, Chef Leah Chase recounted memories of raw celery being served at parties, displayed in cut-crystal celery vases.

Growing celery was considered difficult, perhaps explaining its role as a delicacy. In an 1887 Harper’s Weekly, celery is called “a luxury requiring too much skill and labor for the

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133 Times-Picayune, June 3, 1914.
ordinary gardener.” However, as early as 1836, home gardeners in Louisiana had successfully grown celery as demonstrated by the November 6 entry in The Garden Diary of Martha Turnbull. Turnbull reported growing celery with some success in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana.135

In the 1840s and 1850s, celery was available as a specialty dish offered at restaurants in New Orleans. In 1849, one restaurant offered celery on its “Splendid Lunch” menu alongside various game meats, roasts, fish, soups, and oysters.136 In 1851, celery is included in an advertisement listing “Northern Luxuries” from the steamer Winfield Scott that had left New York only seven days earlier. The Holbrook Saloon served “fine Celery” with other items that are still delicacies today such as lobster.137

In 1904, an immigrant Italian physician who lived in Boston claimed everyone should feel grateful that the Italians had brought many greens to the American kitchen including celery and fennel,138 supporting the Italian connection to celery and its increased use not only in New Orleans but in other parts of the United States.

By 1907, with a growing commercial demand and a growing supply from Sicilian farmers in Louisiana, celery was no longer an expensive luxury locally. On September 1, 1910, The Daily Picayune reported that “Celery is being grown in limited qualities all over the state, but to a greater extent on the reclaimed marsh lands, which seem specifically adapted to its cultivation, where it is being produced with a large stalk of perfection and right flavor and crispness.”139

136 Daily Picayune, February 11, 1849.
137 Daily Picayune, September 26, 1851.
138 Diner, Hungering, 82.
139 Daily Picayune, September 1, 1910.
Celery was celebrated in Italian cuisine so much so that they had a pasta which resembled it and was available in New Orleans by 1883. An illustrated catalogue of cookies and pastas from the New Orleans bakery, Justin J. Langlés and Company, contained a drawing of a short, ridged pasta with the name “celery” beneath it. There was a type of rigaton, that was a “perennial favorite of southern Italy, especially in Sicily” and that the “popular imagination has given rigatoni the name scorzasellari, ‘celery peelers,’ because the ridging makes them look like ribs of celery.”

Gumbo

One way to map the emergence of celery, garlic, and onions as staples of New Orleans cooking is by tracing the evolution of a dish that is essentially New Orleans—gumbo. The recipe for gumbo, one of the most iconic New Orleans dishes, has evolved over the years, especially in the vegetables used. In New Orleans today, gumbo demands a roux and what is referred to locally as the “trinity,” celery, onions, and bell peppers, the New Orleans version of the French mirepoix. However, earlier recipes for gumbo varied from this formula. A survey of early recipes reveals that many earlier versions did not use a roux and had a rather short ingredient list. For instance, in 1881, Mrs. Fisher, a woman of color living in San Francisco but originally from the Gulf South, published her famous cookbook, which included three gumbo recipes. None of the recipes included celery and two of them used a small amount of onions. In one of the latter, she added parsley, and in the other she added the suggestion “chili pepper chopped fine if added is nice when liked.” In 1885, writer and journalist Lafcadio Hearn, reporting on New Orleans

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culture and foodways, explained that “okra alone is vegetable enough for a *gumbo*, unless onion is liked with it.” In the gumbo recipes that he offered, he did suggest that readers were free to add anything they wished, including tomatoes and green corn, and suggested adding a red pepper pod – not a bell pepper but probably a hot pepper. However, garlic and celery were not mentioned in any of his eight gumbo recipes. He also suggested that the reader should buy filet (filé, ground sassafras leaves adopted from the local Native Americans as a soup thickener) from Solari’s, the Italian specialty food store on Chartres Street in the French Quarter.

In 1900, one of the earliest cookbooks, published by Begue’s, the famed New Orleans restaurant in the French Quarter, included Creole gumbo, using pieces of chicken fried in lard with ham. Flour was added to create a roux, onions were added, then shrimp, oysters, stock, parsley, salt, pepper, and filé, all cooked down and served over rice. There was no mention of bell peppers or celery. In 1901, none of the ten gumbo recipes published in *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book* use bell pepper or celery. Escoffier’s 1903 groundbreaking cookbook *Le Guide Culinaire* included a recipe for *potage aux gombos* that does not include celery; however, it did include onion, butter, bacon, chicken, bouillon, okra, tomato, Worcestershire sauce, and rice. That same year, *Cooking in Old Creole Days* was released and it contained three gumbo recipes without the addition of celery. All three included onions and one had a bit of red pepper that was probably a hot pepper since later in the book, the author, Celestine Eustis, claimed

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that “sweet [bell] peppers are too little known, although they are gaining in popularity with Americans.”

In 1932, Mary Moore Bremer explained in her book, *New Orleans Creole Recipes*, that cooking in New Orleans “is grandchild to France, descendant to Spain, cousin to Italy, and also it is full-fledged Southern.” And with that, her gumbo recipes all use onions and each recipe called for a single red pepper pod, a dash of cayenne, or a drop of Tabasco. There was no celery, but interestingly, the crab gumbo featured a clove of garlic.

By the late 1930s, celery was making its way into pots of gumbo in Louisiana. In 1938, the *New Orleans City Guide*’s recipe for gumbo included not only onions and garlic but celery and a green pepper. Mary Land’s legendary cookbook released in 1954 included a recipe for gumbo that closely resembled gumbo of today. She started with a roux and adds onions, bell pepper, celery, and garlic. This recipe mirrors modern-day gumbo from such Louisiana culinary stars as Paul Prudhomme and Leah Chase. In 1984, Prudhomme’s recipes were compiled into his *Louisiana Kitchen*, and all of his gumbo recipes begin with what he called the “trinity” of onions, celery, and green bell peppers. Garlic was used but later and in smaller quantities than the other aromatics. Finally, in 1990, in *The Dooky Chase Cookbook*, Leah Chase, the most famous Creole chef in New Orleans, revealed that in her classic New Orleans style okra gumbo, she, too, used onions, celery, green bell pepper and garlic.

The evolution of gumbo and other classic New Orleans recipes suggest the contribution of Sicilians to the staples of New Orleans cuisine. Today, alongside typical Italian fare, most Italian

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149 Eustis, *Cooking*, 90.
restaurants in New Orleans and the surrounding areas serve gumbo and other local favorites, many of them made with ingredients introduced, however silently, by the Sicilians of Louisiana.
Conclusion

Food not only gave the Sicilian immigrants work and purpose, but food was also central to all things Sicilian: Being able to eat to excess and eat the highest quality foodstuff was to reach the ultimate success. Although as Jean-François Revel has written, “the only real cuisines are regional,” in Louisiana, the Sicilians of New Orleans expanded the repertoire of the regional and therefore expanded the components used in Louisiana cuisine, thus arguing that global movement can produce local culinary traditions.

At first, Sicilians produced food that was exotic, food of the “other,” but in time, their food became entwined with the local cuisine, as they became entwined with the culture of New Orleans. With the help of their presence in the field (literally and figuratively) of food production, their food enhanced and enriched the already fragrant cultural mix of New Orleans cuisine.

Although many of the vegetables grown by Sicilians in Louisiana were the same as those grown in Sicily, other foods that Sicilians were enjoying in Louisiana had been unavailable to them before immigrating. Italian cuisine in New Orleans was the creation of poor immigrants taking what their new home offered and eating as they imagined the rich ate back home. These dishes included an abundance of meat, pasta, and cheese -- foodstuffs only available to the wealthy in Italy. The immigrants created a cuisine built on memories of what the wealthy ate, what was eaten on holidays, and the plenty that was available in their new home. As Diner wrote, what we now recognize as Italian food found its beginnings in the “exporting of hungry peasants.”

For Sicilians in Louisiana, their restaurants and the familiar food shared there served to facilitate bonds forged within their own community that extended outside of the comfort zone of familial ties. A new, distinct identity was taking root, an ethnicity created not necessarily from where they came but shaped by where they landed. Their mobility, as is so often the case, changed their food behavior. While these immigrants added foods to their diet that were not available to them in Sicily, they also did not adopt what was considered American cuisine. Instead, they created a distinctive cuisine that represented the Italians as they were in America. They were creating a distinctly Sicilian-American cuisine and in the process, creating a distinctly Sicilian-American identity.

156 Diner, Hungering, 49-50.
158 Diner, Hungering, 80-1.
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Vita

Laura Guccione was born in New Orleans and raised in the suburbs, leaving the city to attend the University of Georgia in 1987, and then after graduation she spent a few years in Los Angeles returning to New Orleans in 1993. She worked as a bartender at several restaurants and bars in the French Quarter and owned a mask shop with her sister. After Hurricane Katrina, she and her sister shuttered their shop and she returned to tending bar on Frenchmen Street. She decided to go to culinary school and graduated from Delgado Culinary School in 2010 but she realized that as much as she loved to cook, she was more interested in the origins of plants and food used in various cuisines, especially Italian food in Louisiana. After years of explaining to tourists and transplants that she was from New Orleans and that there was a large group of Sicilian-Americans who lived in Louisiana, she realized the extent of neglect in the history of the city and state so she set out to expose the history of the Sicilians in southeastern Louisiana. She lives in the Bywater in an old storefront from the early 1800s.