

the italian – australian backyard: italian's sweetest little acre

by **DIANA CHESSELL** IS A VISITING FELLOW AT THE CENTRE FOR CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY WITH A STRONG RESEARCH EXPERIENCE IN EUROPEAN-AUSTRALIAN CROSS-CULTURAL LANDSCAPES. RECENT WORK IDENTIFIES AMBIENCE, CHARACTER AND SPIRIT OF PLACE AND TRACES THE ROLE OF ITALIAN TRADITIONS IN AUTHENTICATING A COSMOPOLITAN 'SENSE OF PLACE' IN AUSTRALIA'S THREE LITTLE ITALY'S - CARLTON, VICTORIA; LEICHHARDT, NSW AND NORWOOD, SOUTH AUSTRALIA. PERIODS OF LIVING IN ITALY HAVE ALSO ENABLED HER TO 'SAVOR THE LIFESTYLE AND THE MEDITERRANEO TOMATO'.

TODAY'S ITALIAN-AUSTRALIAN BACKYARDS

Vegetable patches, tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes. Runner beans, potatoes, green spinach, green cucumbers, red tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes. Above the riot of strong colour a pergola holds up the promise of next season's wine. Grottos and shrines which beam their lights from the corners. Stone altars to keep the faith strong. Seats and benches to enjoy the shade and a rest of virtue. Behind the trellises and wood the solid handcrafted equipment of winemaking and preserving. Drying racks, barrels, spades, hoes and a host of handles. And a workable set of scales to measure both yield and sales.

For though these sweetest 'little acres' of the Italian-Australian backyard, are no longer critical to the household's economy, yield and bounty are still important. Similarly the activities of home production from one's own 'little acre' are inextricably linked with the virtues of self-reliance, hard work and household independence. Keeping this sweetest of produce and the bounty of surplus goods going is a fundamental Italian-Australian activity. It is also a continuing source of joy and celebration for young and older generations of Italian and Italo-Australian men and women. A fundamental part of their identity. Why is this so? ¹

ITALIAN VILLAGE BASED TRADITIONS

Australia's Italian migrants during the mass migration of the 1950s and 1960s were mostly agricultural workers from the Southern regions, such as Campania, Abruzzo-Molise, Calabria and Sicily. Predominantly they came from inland hill towns and though they worked seasonally in agriculture, they were town dwellers. They rarely owned a home. The pattern was to rent or lease or share sections or apartments of two and three storied stone townhouses.

These southern Italian hilltop villages were established in their present landscape and layout during the middle ages and earlier. They had some balconies and paved streets and piazzas as gathering and meeting places, but they had no backyards.

Any ownership of arable land was a tiny share of a family plot, mostly for the eldest son. The plot was small and had been divided and divided over generations. More likely the family leased a small plot of land on the edge of the township, within walking distance of home. The land was generally leased in a perpetual, oral tradition. People told me that whether owned or leased there were generally no deeds or titles. As in most aspects of life, they relied on oral agreements such that they had 'always leased the land where the shrine at the crossroads stood' (Fieldwork visit 1992). Many town officials had no maps, relying on oral traditions and landscape features in decision making to the present day. An average family plot would be 10 to 20 olive trees outside the walls with vegetables and a few vines grown in small patches around the trees, and keeping a pig or goats. It is most significant that these plots were mainly near the city walls so people could walk to tend them.² They were city dwellers tending a garden plot at a distance from their rented home.

HARVEST OF THE GARDEN PLOTS

The 'sweet harvest' of olive oil, wine, masses of vegetables, primarily tomatoes for sauce, beans, goats cheese, wood and clippings and dried dung for fuel, provided approximately 40 - 60 per cent

¹ This paper developed from a question by Lorenzo Iozzi, Curator IHS to me as to why vegetable gardens and the whole backyard of the Australian 'quarter-acre' are so important to many Italian-Australians, women and men, young and older.

² This research connects with Dr Gerardo Papalia's article 'From terrone to wog; post-colonial perspectives on Italians', in *IHS Journal* Vol.11 no. 2. Particularly his reference to the fact that Italians had no backyards, but 'a vegetable garden located in the countryside adjacent to urban areas'. This underlies the significance of attaining a 'backyard' examined in this article.

of all domestic consumables.³ This was weighed and the yield checked. Then began the labour intensive preserving of tomatoes for pasta sauce as well as the drying, pickling, salting etc. of other fruit and vegetables. Remembering here that pasta with sauce was often the *'primi piatti'* and the only dish for southern people throughout the winter months. Meat was for Easter and other festivals. At this stage the scales came into use to weigh the important surplus produce to be bartered or sold at Saturday markets. Additional goods manufactured at home, often over the winter months included olive oil soap, hand woven baskets, hand-sewn clothing and linen, tanning and sewing of leather from animal skins, and specialist items such as iron ware and work implements. All these items were 'measured' and bartered or sold, mostly in the informal economy yielding a further 20 per cent of domestic consumables and domestic services coming from these garden plots. Of course there were significant seasonal variations on this figure and a late downpour of hail ruining many a crop.

THE RELIANCE ON THE DOMESTIC AND INFORMAL ECONOMY

Principally these peasant workers, or *paesani* of town or village, received wages for summer harvesting work from the owners of large farms, some nearby and others a truck ride and a weeks stay away. There was some further work in road making and transport services for men, tomato canning and infrastructure work for women, mostly in the snow free months and on a casual basis. Overall then, work in the formal economy was limited to the summer season and a surrounding few weeks or months. The cash component or formal economy was important, but the greatest dependence overall was on the domestic and informal economy, the home and bartering system of the village economy.⁴ For example, 'Four ceramic pots could equal half a goat' (Fieldwork visit, 1997). Where townhouse rents were defrayed against summer harvesting work by wealthy landholders, many workers had little access or experience of the formal economy, living in an almost feudal style. For them bartering and markets had increased importance as the only place for them to make cash transactions.



TOP View of multi-level stone dwellings forming the walls of Southern Italian hill-towns. Photograph courtesy Diana Chessel.



MIDDLE Townscape of San Marco dei Cavotti, Campania showing dense housing, piazzas and proximity of agricultural land. Photograph courtesy Diana Chessel.



BOTTOM A plot of land on the walls at Altavilla Irpina, Campania. Photograph courtesy Diana Chessel.

3 Chessel, Diana *The Italian Influence on The Parade*, Wakefield Press in conjunction with the City of Norwood, Payneham and St. Peters, 1999, p.27 and Chessel, Diana 'Italian influence on The Parade - Norwood's main street', *Historic Environment, Cultural Diversity Edition*, ICOMOS Australia, Vol.3, no. 2, 1997

4 Chessel, Diana *Italian influence on the transformation of Norwood, South Australia 1880s - 1990s* Leabrook, SA, 1999.

THE MEANING OF THE SWEETNESS OF THE ITALIAN'S LITTLE ACRE: THE ITALIAN-AUSTRALIAN BACKYARD

The sweetness of the Italian's little acre, the Italian Australian backyard, is revealed in looking at these Italian village based traditions and the importance of the garden plot in Italian village life. The garden plot meant success in living for the family. All were involved, all worked hard to survive and all lived close to the vagaries of the powerful seasons. All household members had real connection with the central importance of the yield and the meaning of a good harvest and a bounty crop. The Italian tradition was a deep experience of urban life integrated with nature.

So, most significantly, the Italian-Australian backyard now yields the important produce previously depended upon for survival. Survival that was at base an economic and physical relationship. Yet the daily ritual of working with nature developed ethical almost spiritual dimensions and became traditions about the moral way to live. Notably with faith in the continuity of the seasons, the God given bounty of nature and the virtues of hard work. Often in the Italian-Australian backyard, 'grottos and shrines beam their lights from the corners. Stone altars to keep the faith strong. Seats and benches to enjoy the shade and a rest of virtue' mark the connection of garden work and spiritual blessings.

In Australia today, in contrast, work in the sweetest little-acre, achieves an excess yield. Thereby enjoyed, eaten and distributed like the harvest of a bounteous year. Australia's mainly cash economy in a country of good, year long wages, a mild climate and available 'home and quarter acre' ownership has replaced the Italian based traditions of centuries, the village economy, the daily rituals, the constant work.

And yet traditions change and reappear transformed, as hybrid forms of the old and the new. The virtues of hard work, thrift, closeness to nature and the physical harvesting of nature's power are still held and celebrated in the ongoing, traditions and continuity of the phenomenon of the Italian's 'sweetest little acre', the Italian-Australian backyard. There are also hidden

cultural transformations and new rituals and festivals which emerge into the visible or invisible spaces of people's lives.

A HIDDEN 'TRANSFORMATION': EVERYBODY ACHIEVES THE 'SWEETEST LITTLE ACRE'

Because cultures change when we migrate there are other quiet but significant transformations hidden here in the hidden 'back space' of the backyard. Many times it was the eldest son who was sent, after the Second World War, to Australia to attain the success associated with land ownership in Italy. An impossible dream in overpopulated Southern Italy at that time, even for the eldest son. So the young leaders of family clans were sent on precious fare money to the new land of Australia. They then sent fare money and remittances to 'hold open the door to the new land' for younger brothers, fathers, wives, mothers, sisters, then cousins and then other *paesani*, friends from the village of origin, in that order.⁵ Through this cultural effort each migrant has attained the ownership of land, the promised dream. This includes both an individually fenced bungalow and adjacent land on the quarter acre. A typical Australian 'quarter acre backyard'. Yet for the landless and poor arrivals, success indeed and a dream fulfilled.

And not just the older brothers. The younger brothers, the parents, the cousins. Each has become a landholder and for this each is indebted to the chain of '*paesani*' that assisted their migration. For each, most symbolically the attainment has been of land, the symbolic crown, the reason for migration, and has been won for nearly 100% who migrated. The transformation of the landless Italian migrants into a community with the highest rate of home-and-land ownership of any non-English-speaking-migrant group in Australia is a phenomenon of outstanding success. The continued ownership and clustering of Italian-Australians around the three major Australian Little Italys of Leichhardt, Sydney, Carlton, Melbourne and Norwood, Adelaide, reflects the significance of these places.⁶ They are significant places of both first settlement and the important first attainment of land from the 1950s, 1960s

5 Chessell, Diana 'The Italian Influence on Australian Mainstreets: The Parade (ëorwood, South Australia) and Lygon Street, Carlton, Victoria'. In *search of the Italian Australian into the New Millennium*. Proceedings of the First Italian-Australian Conference, Melbourne, Australia, May 2000.

6 Hugo, Graeme 'Patterns and processes of Italian Settlement in South Australia' in O'Connor, Desmond & Comin, Antonio (eds) *The first Conference on the Impact of Italians in South Australia*, Flinders University Press, 1993.

and 1970s. The places where many Italian migrants 'first put their foot down'.⁷

The personal achievement is one of greatly expanded material power for most older Italian-Australian migrants, and the base of much of their children's power and success, especially in small business. Interestingly also, this generation have moved house less than their Australian born neighbours with a strong attachment and network surrounding their place of first settlement in Australia.⁸

The paradox of this Italian material and cultural accomplishment is that the success of land ownership is not so needed or depended upon economically in Australia. The domestic and informal economy overall is not so important and this is both celebrated and missed as a lost tradition. The economic dependence, the fight with harsh winter months is absent. The loss of the strength as well as the intimacy of a domestic and informally based economy; the lost camaraderie with other *paesani*, leaves a social vacuum. Yet the Italians have maintained their 'garden plot' style backyards in the abundant tradition of their Italian villages, against mainstream Australian traditions. Since the 1950s the mainstream Australian culture have been reducing their functional 'chook and veges' backyards to a solely recreational and decorative use.

Within the continuity of the Italian 'garden plot' tradition and the sense of cultural continuity, changes are occurring however. A good example of the transformation of an Italian tradition is the emergence of a new festive ritual of tomato sauce making.

TOMATO SAUCE MAKING: THE NEW FESTIVE RITUAL IN AUSTRALIA

In Italy the end of summer harvesting and preserving of lusciously ripe tomatoes was predominantly a functional, economic activity. A strenuous job in the summer sun to make the sauce depended upon as the basis of the pasta based '*primi piatti*' to ensure solid meals for survival through the winter.

In Australia old or young join in this production in the backyard continuing established traditions such as the sharing of equipment, several families working together and communal meals for the

harvesters, all over the several days of harvesting and preserving.

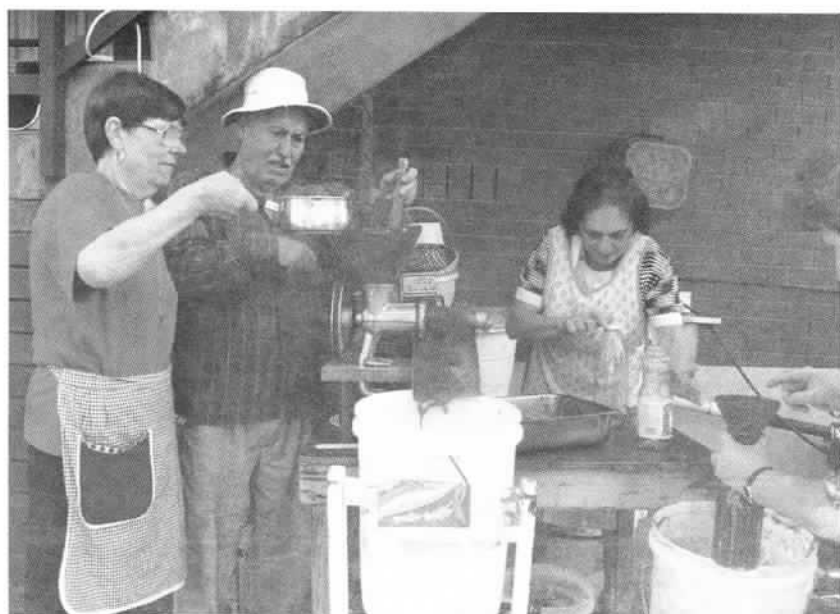
The notable difference is that the harvest is on land directly adjacent to the home with both home and land being owned by the Italians. Also the harvest is not so dependent on the weather. There is a refrigerator, a freezer and space for drying racks, all as needed depending on the suitability of the tomato crop for different preserving methods. The Italian people involved are therefore powerful in having ownership of the garden under harvest plus both access and ownership of modern and traditional equipment for the task. They own the means of production.

Two further factors are significant in the transformation of this event. Firstly and most significantly, the lack of financial dependence on the outcome of the crop enormously reduces the economic and social strain on the families involved. Secondly, the home base of this precious crop reduces anxiety over the physical security of the crop. As these functional factors are reduced the balance of the energy attached to the sauce making ritual swings over to emphasizing its communal and celebratory nature.

The sauce making ritual has therefore become more of a symbolic ritual of celebrating Harvest time than an economic event. A balance of communal play rather than work, but serious just the same. While the 'ripe tomato' would have been enjoyed for its aesthetic as well as functional qualities in a traditional village economy, the affective nature of the activity is emphasized as it becomes less functional. As a symbolic, festive event, affective appreciation of the sheer weight, gloss, roundness, fruitfulness, sheen and savor of the plump, ripe, Italian tomato crop is heightened. In the 'Festival of tomato sauce making' sheer delight, pride and sensuous tasting of the prodigious crop is uttermost. Delight in a prodigious crop of course celebrates the yield and the effort of the grower. In Italy and Australia this shared experience emphasizes the continuity and connection with memories of the past. The common celebration of the beauty and sensuous nature and culinary utility of tomatoes also strengthens the communality of the harvest event between Italian-Australians and other local people.

⁷ Chessell, Diana *Italian influence on the transformation of Norwood, South Australia 1880s - 1990s*, Leabrook, SA, 1999.

⁸ Hugo, Graeme, op.cit.



ABOVE Anna Latorre and her husband Silio Latorre (both at left) and neighbours making tomato sauce at the La Torre family home in Bulleen, c1990. Photograph by Frank Coffa.

Yet in Australia the cultural catalyst for this new ritual has been a loss. The loss of the Italians' economic dependence on the tomato crop. This has created a cultural space in which a new, yet authentic Italian-Australian tradition could emerge and one which can also be shared with young and older Australian conservationists, food lovers and wider audiences of differing cultural backgrounds.⁹ The virtues and ethics of hard work, conserving materials, using organic methods and pure frugality are now shared in this new ritual.

Another aspect of this transformation is that the organic base and overall authenticity of the Italian sauce making has traditionally reflected a spiritual connection with the land. In the new ritual the connection is now being made with environmental sensitivity to the land, especially organic food production. This new cultural space has therefore allowed urbanites mourning the lost parish based neighborhoods and lost organic backyards to re-annex and identify with suburban land. These organic gardeners and foodies become followers of the Italian style. They act in or appropriate a Mediterranean, market style, functional and productive role, and practice the ethics of frugality etc. In fact a striking aspect of some mainstream organic food festivals is the fervor of interest in natural food and the almost religious conviction of the moral rightness of eating organic. Most significantly though, mainstream society is valuing the Italian garden activity. It fills the void of losses modern urbanites express.

Their secular search is for meaning in a locality and a lifestyle.

Meanwhile garden produce has become a highly meaningful symbolic activity for Italian-Australian family members. As parts of chains of *paesani* they repay one another over and over again in the produce of bounty. Hard work continues to be essential. Vigilance of the crop is still needed, and though the garden plot being closer makes this easier, fences are popular with some. Part of the old village is right there everyday, and the succulent, ripe Italian tomato is the glowing heart of this crop.

SUMMARY: THE ITALIANS' SUCCESS

Overall and outstandingly the story of Italian migration to Australia is one of success. One outcome of migration, your own 'little acre', has developed into an important place for continuing the traditions of the Italian villages of origin, and of a domestic and informal, bartering village economy. The outcome, the Italian-Australian backyard, is now the Italian-Australian's 'sweetest little acre'. People like to visit, receive bouquets of greens and tomatoes, and most importantly, share a glass of *vino* and to stay there. It is a place of important production. A place of belonging. A place for the enactment of rituals of survival, of success and of bounty.

The emerging festival style of the tomato sauce making ritual is one example of the Italian backyard organic style being transformed. Italian produce, cuisine and organic food provide a cultural bridge to transform mainstream Australian urban culture.

'Bouquets of tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes. Green runner beans, green spinach, green cucumbers and red, ripe, succulent red tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes. These are the red and green bouquets of my Italian-Australian sweetest little acre. Smell them, hold them, savor them. They are what I have gained. They are what I have lost. They are what I offer this country'.

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⁹ Chessell, Diana 'Australia's Little Italy's: are they authentic or facades for urban multiculturalism?' Centre for Cross Cultural Research: Australian National University: Ethnoscapes Seminar Series, March 2002 Australian National University.