

bridging two cultures: italian migrant food in australia

by
ZOË BOCCABELLA

ZOË BOCCABELLA IS A SECOND-GENERATION DESCENDANT OF ITALIAN MIGRANTS WHO IS PRESENTLY STUDYING FOR A MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND. HER DEEP INTEREST AND RESEARCH INTO ITALIAN MIGRANT HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA IS REFLECTED IN HER CURRENT ACCOUNT OF *THE OLIVE BRANCH*, A STORY THAT TRACES THE LIVES OF AN ITALIAN MIGRANT FAMILY AS THEY CARVE OUT A NEW LIFE IN AUSTRALIA.

I grew up in Brisbane before many things Italian became popular, fashionable, and above all, accepted. There were no chic, little coffee shops or Tuscan style houses. Instead, the period of my youth rode on the coat-tails of an era when racial hatred and suspicion of anything new or different was rife. This stemmed from the previous two decades when post-World War II migrants had received a desultory welcome into Australian consciousness. Who could have foreseen over the remainder of the twentieth century that many Australians would come to embrace and enjoy Italian culture asking for *cappuccini*, *tortellini* or *bruschetta*? These countless new words would enter the Australian language and become freely spoken from Anglo-Saxon lips.

As Italian culture and cuisine enjoys a renaissance of popularity in Australian society today, the insurmountable obstacles Italian migrants were forced to overcome to eke out their lives and establish a place for their culture in Australia are not often known. It was not so long ago that Italians were ridiculed, interned and bore the brunt of racist attacks. Yet at present many Australians are enamoured by all that is 'Tuscan' or topped with frothy milk. What made many Australians come to accept the Italian migrants they were first so opposed to? Most Italians are proud of their culture and many never fully assimilated, instead 'turning the tables', so to speak, on the Australians who have now come to accept and embrace Italian cuisine.

That food is a major part of Italian culture, is a well-known fact. Through my research, I have taken this one step further by examining why Italian migrant food was so potent and successful in bridging the gap between two cultures, specifically Italian

migrants and Anglo-Australians. Food has played an important role in enabling Italian migrants to retain their cultural identity as they forged a new life in Australia. Italian cuisine initially defined cultural differences for many Anglo-Australians during Italian migration from the 1920s to the 1950s, yet it was this same food that assisted in fostering the acceptance of multiculturalism in the second half of the twentieth century.

As part of my research into this concept of Italian migrant food in Australia, I am currently writing a novel titled, *The Olive Branch*. It depicts the life journey of a peasant family who were forced to leave their home in the Apennine Mountains in the Abruzzo region of Italy to emigrate to Australia where, after many hardships, they create a successful Italian restaurant in Brisbane. The impetus behind my undertaking this novel is the fact that as Brisbane, and indeed Australia's, Italian migrant communities are aging many of their extraordinary experiences and stories are being lost. 'By 1975 Italian migration to Australia had slowed almost to a stop, and there has been little further migration since that time...The future of an Italian community in Australia rests now not with the original migrants but with their descendants...It is only if future generations continue to be identified with their Italian heritage that the community can increase or even survive. The maintenance of traditions and the recording and preservation of Italian migrant history and heritage ultimately rests with second and third generations'.¹ As a second-generation descendant of Italian migrants, writing this novel is part of my contribution to recording and preserving this history.

Italian migrant stories are an integral part of recent Australian history and continue to shape our culture. Recognising and acknowledging the history of Italian immigration and assimilation in Australia through food promotes a better understanding of how these two cultures have been involved in shaping the multicultural society we function within today. 'Italo-Australians are the largest group of non-English speaking background in Australia. Together with over one hundred other immigrant groups of varied ethnic and cultural background, they have helped to change Australia's culture and national identity'.² This is reflected and

1 Pascoe, Robert, et al. *The Passeggiata of Exile: The Italian Story in Australia*. Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, 1998, p79.

2 Castles, Stephen, et al. *Australia's Italians Culture and Community in a Changing Society*. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p51.

chronicled in Australian literature, and I believe the incorporation of Italian migrant stories in my novel will help promote the spread of knowledge and acceptance.

Many younger generation Anglo-Australians that I spoke with in relation to my research did not know that Italians had been interned in Australia during World War II, 'when in total 4727 people of Italian background were interned. The largest number, 2107, in Queensland'.³ Australia interned more Italians during the war than any other country in the world and in my novel I am depicting such events to promote knowledge and understanding. I also want to convey that despite these rocky beginnings, 'the Italian community has played the major role in leading to the development of our multicultural society...It is by their integration in the wider society while still maintaining an identity of their own, that Italian-Australians have contributed to the creation of a climate of ethnic tolerance which is now proudly Australian and which is a model for the rest of the world'.⁴

In narrowing my focus to the hard won cultural acceptance Italian migrants achieved through retention of their traditional food in Australia, I am striving to ultimately produce a study in the future, which may contribute to an understanding of why certain migrant groups are not yet socially acceptable in Australia. Examining the indicators that lead to the acceptance of migrants in Australia in the past should lead to analysing if certain cultural foods, religions or politics are more acceptable than others, and whether food can pave the way for the acceptance of new cultures in Australia.

'Just half a century ago, assimilation was based on the idea that only Anglo-Australian culture was legitimate, and that other cultures would have to disappear'.⁵ Post-war political and social attitudes in Australia, which elicited much pressure

on migrants to assimilate, illustrate the achievement of Italian migrants in retaining their cultural identity.

'The food industry is one in which Italians have increasingly participated in Australia. Into this industry Italians have brought long traditions of skills that have changed and enriched Australian tastes and style'.⁶ Documentation of the substantial presence of Italian migrants in small business in Australia indicates their concentration in specific food-related niches. 'The Italian delicatessen, fruit shop, café and restaurant have changed the culinary habits of Australians'.⁷ The provision of services, particularly in the food industry, introduced ideal conditions for the gradual bridging of Italian and Anglo-Australian cultures. 'These Italians contributed to the process and change of Australian society from a predominately monocultural, Anglo-Celtic society to a multicultural one. They became the public face of the Italian community in the minds of Australians. They simultaneously created and helped break down stereotypes of Italian migrants'.⁸

This leads me to question whether the heavy involvement of Italian migrants in culinary activities and the food industry is integral to, or a reflection of, the promotion or breakdown of Italian migrant stereotypes in Australia. 'Fear of 'foreigners' increasingly gave way to appreciation of their impact upon Australian society'.⁹ I would argue that while Australians came to enjoy Italian cuisine and culture as an alternative, it did not inherently change the firmly established allegiance to British cuisine and culture first and foremost. 'Other cultures enriched Australia but the British flavour of its basic institutions remained strong'.¹⁰ 'The pizza has not dislodged the system of British law nor the Chinese sweet-and-sour undermined that of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy'.¹¹

3 Martinuzzi O'Brien, Ilma. *Australia's Italians 1788-1988* The Italian Historical Society and The State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, 1989, p61.

4 Pascoe, Robert, op.cit. p85.

5 Castles et al. op.cit. p52.

6 Martinuzzi O'Brien, op.cit. p51.

7 Collins, Jock. 'Cappuccino Capitalism: Italian immigrants and Australian business', *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society*. Stephen Castles, et al, ed. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p84.

8 ibid

9 Dugan, Michael and Josef Szwarc. *There Goes the Neighbourhood! Australia's Migrant Experience* Macmillan, Melbourne, 1984, p140.

10 ibid

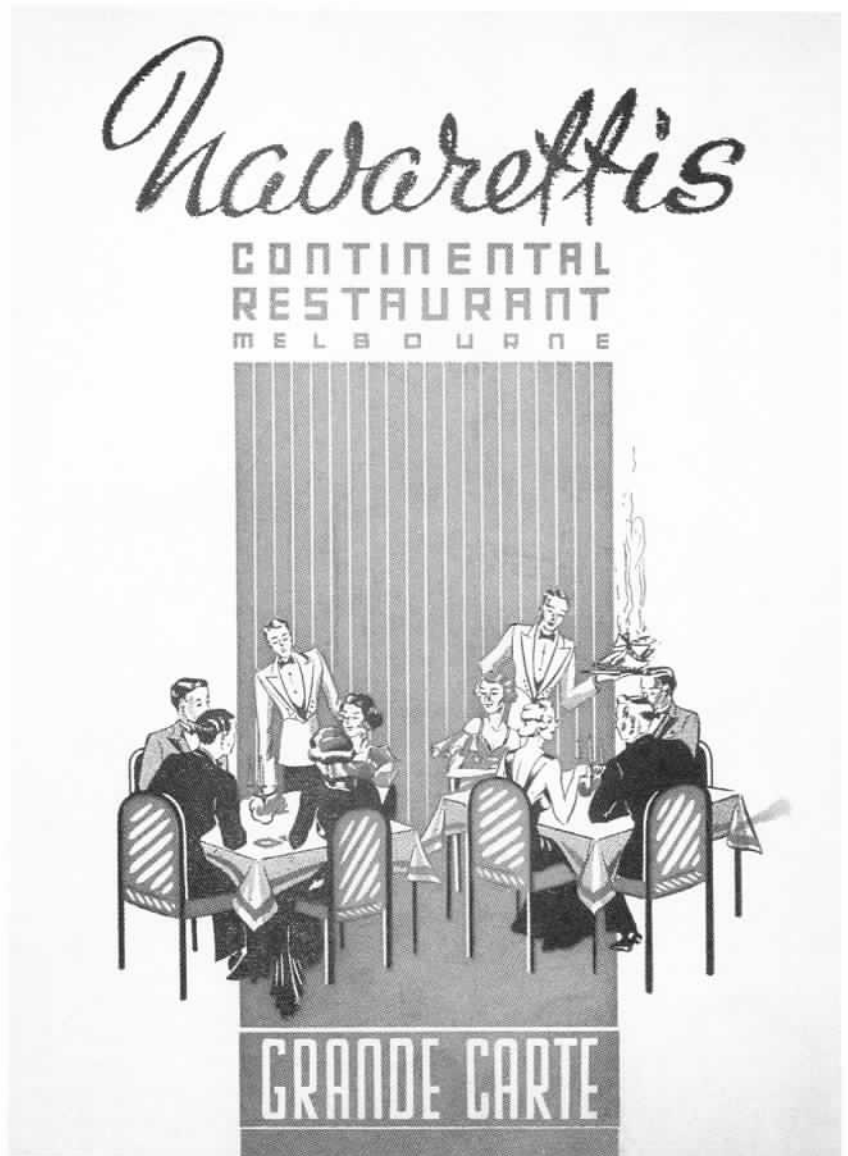
11 Barnard, Michael. 'Flagging Down History'. *The Age*, 13 July, 1982.

There are political, linguistic, social and religious factors that have all impacted upon or contributed to the rise of multiculturalism in Australia. My research purports that food was one of the main instigators for Italian migrant acceptance due to it reaching everyday Anglo-Australians at 'ground-level'. By 'ground-level' I mean everyday interactions involving food between Anglo-Australians and Italians through being neighbours or going to cafés and restaurants. This is demonstrated by Morag Loh's compilation of the experiences of Italian migrants in Australia through F.I.L.E.F. (Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their Families) in Melbourne. Many of these recollections epitomize the role of food in breaking down opposition to cultural diversity through the simple interaction of neighbours or patronage at Italian restaurants and food shops. 'The southern European migrants viewed the preparation and consumption of food as an opportunity for strengthening kin and village ties. Anglo-Australians who were invited to attend learned that eating was not only a means of sustaining life but of bringing and keeping together family, enjoying the company of friends and relishing life's simple pleasures'.¹²

Food is such an integral part of Italian culture and way of life that I suggest it is a vital part of 'being Italian' and an important expression of ethnicity for Italian migrants. 'Through their foods, and the communal enjoyment of foods, the Italians not only asserted their ethnic heritage but won the approval of Anglo-Australians'.¹³

Italian migrants continued to preserve their traditional eating habits due to pride, homesickness, financial insecurity, cultural or language barriers or a combination of these. The fact that they retained their culinary traditions despite expected and forced assimilation demonstrates the need for all migrants to retain some cultural facets of their birth country. Indeed Italian migrants may have helped promote multiculturalism in Australia through retaining their traditional cuisine but by no means did they aim to change the culinary habits of Australians.

Although pre-war Italian migrants retained their cuisine they 'did not seriously threaten



ABOVE Menu for Navaretti's Restaurant, which was situated in the basement in the Causeway, 259 Collins Street Melbourne, c1935

LEFT Staff behind the counter of the Re family grocery and delicatessen shop with its array of local and imported Italian products, Leederville, Western Australia, c1960.

¹² Loh, Morag, ed. *With Courage in Their Cases: The Experiences of Thirty-Five Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families in Australia*. F.I.L.E.F. Italian Federation of Immigrant Workers and their Families, Melbourne, 1980, p93.

¹³ Carlson, Bridget. 'Parallel lives in northern Italy and Central Victoria.' *The Passeggiata of Exile: The Italian Story in Australia*. Pascoe, Robert, ed et al. Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, 1998, p85.

The staff of Café Florentino, 80 Bourke Street Melbourne, pictured in the main dining room. The owner of the restaurant Rinaldo Massoni is seated at right, c1938.



traditional Anglo-Australian cuisine: the change in eating practices was a post-war phenomenon'.¹⁴ Italian restaurants had begun operating in Australia from the 1920s onwards instigating a social process of cultural pluralism that would continue after World War II. 'The staff of Italian restaurants in interwar Melbourne were very proud of their social role and such restaurants lent a cosmopolitan air to a city which was still staunchly British in values and outlook...Food is central to any culture, but Italian cuisine is tied by region and ritual to motherhood and every part of their social life...Disagreements over food are the most punishing of any Italian marital discord...Conversely, the shared meal is one of the most powerful ways in which Italian people come together...Most of all, like all Mediterranean cuisines, Italian cultivation fortifies the individual'.¹⁵

In their unpretentious loyalty to their food Italian migrants have brought about a

profound change in Australia that has paved the way for the multiculturalism that we can benefit from today. By maintaining their cultural identity and traditional food, Italian migrants contributed another way of life for Australians to enjoy. It was a hard, tedious path to stick to their own ways and very gradually break into the traditions and change Australian eating habits and pattern of life. But through these efforts, cultural barriers have been broken down and through hard work Italian migrants have become recognised as part of Australian culture. In Brisbane now there is no need to covet a time when Italian food will be accepted. *Al fresco* dining, espresso bars, restaurants and Italian food shops blend in with the sultry lifestyle reminiscent of Italy's south. Thanks to the foresight and perseverance of first generation Italian migrants Australia now enjoys a multicultural society and cuisine that is richer for it.

¹⁴ Pascoe, *op.cit.* p153.

¹⁵ *ibid*