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Evviva San Giuseppe!

St. Joseph's Table Celebrations in Rural Western New York

BY KAREN P. CANNING AND CHRISTINE F. ZINNI

On March 19, the Roman Catholic Church honors St. Joseph, the head of the Holy Family, husband of the Virgin Mary, and stepfather to Jesus. For some Italian Americans, particularly those of Sicilian descent, they have marked the day with a true sacro-gastronomic feast in the preparation of a St. Joseph's Table to honor the saint. The origins of the table, as the story goes, began when Sicily experienced a severe drought for an extended period, sometime near the end of the 13th century. No crops could grow, and people were dying of famine and disease. The people prayed to God and asked St. Joseph, a patron saint, to intercede on their behalf and send rain. Miraculously, rains came, crops were planted, and grew. At harvest time the people prepared an outdoor feast from their bounty in thanksgiving for answered prayers, which gained the name *tavola di San Giuseppe*. The meal was open to all people, with a special welcome to travelers and strangers, to extend God's compassion that had been shown to the hosts of the *tavola* or *tavolata*.

The tradition took root and grew and, in addition to honoring the saint, the table became an individual offering of thanksgiving for answered prayers or "favors." In Sicily, the devotional votive offering was prepared by a matriarch who, usually working together with other women, assembled a temporary domestic altar/*tavola* for the



Altar and foodstuffs at the Saint Joseph *tavola* offered by Lucy Gullo, 1946, Batavia, New York. Photo by Brownie La Russa. Archival collection of Christine Zinni.

saint's intervention on her behalf. The "giving" of a finely decorated *tavola*, often set on handmade tablecloths and laden with

Sicilian culinary specialties, was accompanied by the distribution of food to family, friends, and the larger community, as part



Altar and display of foodstuffs at Josefina Ognibene's *tavola*, circa 1953. Photo courtesy of Kay Ognibene.

of the intimate vow of the devotee. The practice traveled with Italian immigrants to the United States, becoming established in communities with primarily Sicilian populations, and gradually being extended to include a generalized Italian American community and identity.

With Italian Americans comprising almost 15 percent of New York State's population and New York State listing the largest number of Italian Americans in the United States (Verso 2009), St. Joseph's Tables enjoy a rich history and ongoing tradition here. Although the most well-known and documented celebrations are in the greater New York City area, our smaller

cities and towns in New York State also possess this heritage, which remains important to their identity and local culture.¹ We came to know the St. Joseph's Table from our respective experiences growing up in or near Italian American communities in western New York and subsequently working together as folklorists, documenting traditions and foodways from the 1990s to the present.

Here, we offer a portrait of the Catholic Feast of Saint Joseph in semi-rural western New York State, demonstrating a common history and trajectory with other communities in the state and in the United States, while also noting localized adaptations that

have changed the way the feast is practiced and perceived. One of these is the sense of place in Italy and western New York that has played a central role in the migration stories of Italian Americans in the region and continues to anchor the feast in strong spiritual connections to, and gratitude for, the bounty of the land. We also trace a general movement from home-based, or domus-centered, celebrations tied to an individual's personal vow, to church halls, community centers, and restaurants, with an accompanying change from a Sicilian to pan-Italian celebration. Lastly, we look at changes to the celebration of St. Joseph's Tables in the first part of the 21st century,

in response to the closing of ethnic churches built by Italian Americans, the move of older parishioners to suburban neighborhoods, and the diffusion of younger generations to large urban centers. In this environment, efforts of Italian Americans to retain memories, identity, and solidarity can take on heightened importance amid changes beyond their control. At the same time, these changes can lead to recasting of the feast as not only pan-Italian but also as a pan-ethnic event in both religious and secular venues.

Essential Elements of a Table

The foods on a St. Joseph's Table carry layers of meaning and symbolism, which have evolved through time and across oceans. They primarily represent the common food of the peasants who prepared the first offering after the legendary harvest. By the 16th century, March 19 was established as the saint's feast day, anchoring it squarely in Lent. For traditional Catholics, this means no meat may be eaten; thus, fish, snails, and other seafood take their place along with hard-cooked eggs and fritatas for the protein dishes.

Vegetable selections combine traditional Italian *verdure* and American additions: chard, mustard greens, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, artichokes, asparagus, peppers, eggplant, and tomato sauce may all be used. Fennel is said to be one of the first crops that the drought-stricken people were able to eat after the rains came. It is cooked in many of the dishes but also appears on the table in its fresh form to remind one of the blessed rains. Similarly, a dried fava bean might be placed nearby as a remembrance of the legume's role in saving the people from starvation during the drought. Cardoon (*cardoni*, *cardune*), or burdock, is known in Europe and America; here, it is traditionally gathered in the wild in spring, before the stalks get too tough and large.

Pasta, rice, bean, and lentil dishes again reflect foods available in everyday life. A white spaghetti dish with fennel and onions may not be sprinkled with cheese, but

instead with breadcrumbs, signifying the sawdust that would be ever present in St. Joseph's life as a carpenter. Perhaps the easiest symbols to recognize are in the breads, which are formed into shapes relating to the saint. They include his staff, his beard, a crown, sandals, a hammer, the baby Jesus, a cross, a heart, St. Lucy's eyes, and whatever other form might pertain to a particular favor being asked. Unlike simple breads, these are made with more eggs, sugar, and anise flavoring, all which help sustain travelers on their way. They might be broken apart to give away, or smaller loaves or rolls may be made especially for this purpose, to be given, along with an orange, to each guest.

Sweets include fig or seed cookies, pastries, cannoli, and sweet fried dough in different shapes and sizes, such as *pignolata* (honey balls), *sfingi*, and *scocchi* (tied in a bow and dusted with powdered sugar). Cakes decorated with religious images or prayers are also common.

A table is completed with a devotional altar to the saint, either combined with the food offerings or as a separate installation. Fresh fruits and vegetables, lilies (referring to the Virgin Mary) or other flowers, candles, samples of all the foods, and the special breads surround a statue or portrait of St. Joseph. Family photographs or keepsakes may appear, in reference to the particular petitions that have been answered. The altar and foods are blessed by a priest, who will offer a litany, or set of prayers, in honor of St. Joseph. "Light of patriarchs," "Foster father of the son of God," "Model of workers," "Guardian of virgins," and "Patron of the dying" are several of the descriptors, to which people respond, "Pray for us." Attendees will often share a glass of wine following the prayers. The finest white linens and tablecloths decorate the altar and *tavolata*, often fashioned by the matriarchs' own hands or neighboring seamstresses and needleworkers.



Detail of *pignolata* (honey balls), Sacred Heart/Ascension Parish, 2014. Photo by Christine Zinni.



Air Force Captain Nicholas Zinni, 1941, in the Batavia family's Southside garden with dog Boots, prior to serving in the Pacific Theater, Second World War. Photo from family archive.

The tradition includes persons representing the Holy Family and other important figures. These are Joseph, Mary, and Jesus—hopefully, one could find children or *virginetti* who could be volunteered for the role of angels as well. Numerous adults in Catholic parishes in our area remember fulfilling this duty as a child. It could be somewhat of a double-edged sword: the “actors” received a place of honor in the celebration, dressing the part and proceeding into the hall to be seated and served first. However, since the food was blessed, the children had to at least taste all that was offered, tolerating the less palatable fishes and vegetables to get to the coveted sweets. The ritual recalls the famines that plagued Sicilian peasants of centuries ago, how people were forced to wander from village to village looking for food, like the Holy Family in their Biblical search for compassion and shelter.

A Sense of Place: Relationship to the Land

We document the region midway between Buffalo and Rochester, stretching from Lake Ontario southward 60 miles, and east to west 50 miles. The city of Batavia (population 15,300) is the largest municipality. It has been a significant crossroads at various times—first as a meeting place for Native Americans, then as the site of the Holland Land Office from 1801, which was the primary agency for land redistribution to white settlers. It then became a major railroad hub in the late 19th century. Industrial opportunities in this period included work in railroading, farm machinery, machine tools, canning, and the garment industry. The region's agricultural and natural resources assets were equally attractive, supporting generalized farming, as well as subclimates conducive to fruit orchards and vegetables growing in the black, fertile “mucklands” and Genesee River floodplain. Gypsum and salt mining, and stone quarrying were other sources of employment. In the surge of immigration between 1880 and 1920, Italian arrivals to western New York found work in all of these areas, with a particular attachment to the land being present early on and persisting through the present day. Throughout the region, gardening and foraging provided needed sustenance to families, and supplied familiar and specialty ingredients for ethnic and celebratory foods.

Charles Ruffino of Batavia, a second-generation Sicilian American, remembers the extensive gardens in the small urban neighborhood known as the “Southside”:

We all had gardens; we had very intricate growing processes, potatoes, tomatoes, corn, like that... The property between the Mancuso's family on Hutchins, that was all garden, the Fricanos, LaRussas, and the Federicos even had a vineyard that was across from the church; that was all gardens. (Ruffino 2012)

Daniel Sanfratello, a retired school teacher and descendent of Sicilian immigrants who lived across the street from the

Ruffino family, recalls that ties to the land carried over in his family:

Dad had three gardens on the Southside. He gave away a lot of the produce he grew. When we left home in his car, often times there was produce in the vehicle for dispersal. He and his tomato-growing friends competed to see who could grow the tallest plant.” (Sanfratello 2017)

These recollections illustrate how Sicilian immigrant families were connected to one another through owned and/or shared adjacent gardens and neighborhood space, much as it had been in their homeland. These naturally porous borders also mediated relationships with neighboring Abruzzese, Calabrese, and Poles.

Sister Mary Agnes Zinni, a former prioress of a Benedictine monastery in Texas, whose immigrant parents Grazia and Francesco came from the Abruzzo region of Italy, also grew up on the Southside. She recalls how she, her brother Nicholas, and two other siblings would play in the garden as children and how people in the neighborhood exchanged foodstuffs and home-made wine:

*The center of my universe was my home, church, and school. There was usually a fence that stood between the gardens, but people shared whatever they grew. If a neighbor raised corn and they didn't need it for themselves, they would share some with neighbors. We might give them some tomatoes. We would cultivate them and also buy them by the bushel from people that came around in a truck. That is what people *did*. We didn't have to buy much or go shopping for many foods. You either had to have money in the bank or in your hands! (Zinni 2017)*

Similarly, in the region's smaller towns like Mt. Morris, Cuylerville, and Retsof, Italian immigrants' extensive gardens and vineyards, and the foodstuffs they produced, were an early cultural signifier that persists to the present day. A 1926 poster advertises the Sterling Salt Mine's annual

vegetable and flower garden competition, listing several Italian and other immigrant contenders. Families in nearby Leicester and York cultivated a local pepper known as the Retsof pepper, and said to have been carried to this country in seed form with Italian immigrants. It is still available today from their descendants through an informal, word-of-mouth network.

Another distinctive set of narratives centers on Italian immigrants' knowledge of local indigenous plants from working in agricultural production, and how that

knowledge continues to be employed. Many community members recall that their parents and grandparents knew where to forage for burdock, dandelions, wild fennel, and Jerusalem artichokes for the St. Joseph's Table. Kay Martino Ognibene, born on the Southside of Batavia, noted that her immigrant parents, Concetta and Paul, hailed from the Abruzzo region. They had a plot of muckland—affectionately known as “black gold” to local people—and were intensely engaged in subsistence farming:

My family (the Martinos) had their mucklands on a side road in Elba. My mother, Concetta, she was the one who used to go out and pick the greens. She ran my father's muckland farm for about four years after he died. She had to run it! My parents did not make a salary or anything from the land. It was just for home.

I married into a Sicilian family (the Ognibenes). They had 12 acres down the road from our plot of land in Elba and later purchased my family's land. The Ognibene family kept buying land in Elba and Bryon on the Main Road.



Lucy Gullo's Saint Joseph's *tavola*, 1946. Participants include first-generation descendants of immigrants from Vallelunga, Sicily, living on Batavia's Southside. *From left to right*: Lucy Frederico, Frances Marchese, Mary Riso, Pauline Riso, Anne Gullo, Rosemary Maile, Junior Frederico, Gaetano Gullo (husband), Vincent Jim Gullo (son), Thomas Gullo (son). Roger Burnett, Lawrence Ognibene, Joseph Sanfratello, Mike Marino, Tony Fricano, and Angelo Fiorrino. Photo by Brownie LaRussa. Archival collection of Christine Zinni.



David Minor, Batavia, N. Y.

Altar and display of foodstuffs at Josefina Ognibene's *tavola*, circa 1953, made in fulfillment of vow to St. Joseph for bringing her son Lawrence (*far center right*, to the left of the young boy in back, below altar and mirror) home from the war. Participants include: members of the Pirro, Gullo, Ficarella, Gauteri, Del Plato, Cecere, and Irrera families, a network of descendants of immigrants from Vallelunga, Sicily, living in close proximity on Batavia's Southside. Photo courtesy of Kay Ognibene.

By the 1970s, they had purchased over 600 acres of land for commercial purposes and became one of the largest muckland farm operations in the area. (Ognibene 2013)

Kay's neighbor Carol Lombardo Mruczek recalls how her mother and aunts would collect wild fennel early in the spring and that the plant is still gathered by cousins in her family. Bernice Falsone Hotchkiss of Mt. Morris collects wild burdock in May and freezes it for the following year. In addition, Bernice is very particular about where she gets her supplies for her table, a

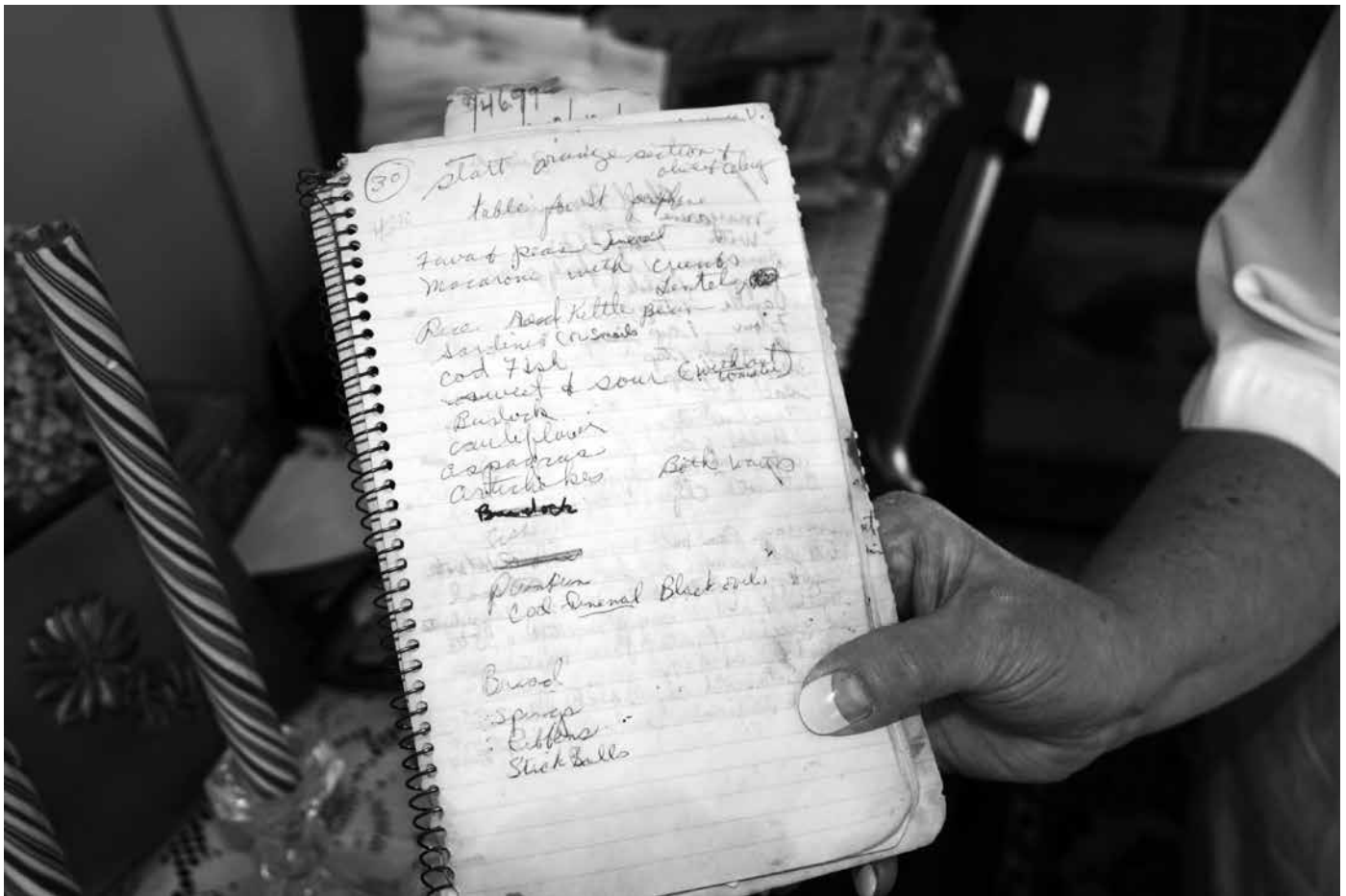
process that stretches over the entire year. Asparagus and cauliflower are bought from specific farmers up to 60 miles distant; the eggplant is secured from a cousin's farm 200 miles away.

In a predominantly farming region, where security and wealth are closely connected to the bounty of the land, the immigrants' knowledge and effective use of the land aided their progress to citizen status. From all accounts, gratitude for the land that provided sustenance was one of the main elements of the traditional Saint Joseph's feast celebrated in Sicily and was

maintained in the rural Italian American experience.

"St. Joseph, Bring My Son Home from War"

Oral histories that we collected recall the practice from the 1940s to the present day, confirming the gifting of the altar as a primarily women-centered event, often performed as a vow made in response to specific prayer being answered.² Many of those interviewed remember that their mothers and grandmothers would plan weeks in advance for their tables. A



Notebook of St. Joseph's Table recipe lists, Bernice Hotchkiss, 2012. Photo by Karen Canning.

significant number of tables were given for protection and safe return of sons that had gone to the Second World War and continued for decades afterward. Thomas Gullo's immigrant parents came from Vallelunga, Sicily, like a number of his neighbors and relatives on Batavia's Southside. His mother Lucy, a skilled seamstress and member of St. Anthony's Altar and Rosary Society, who together with Grazia Zinni, a needleworker, made altar cloths for the large side altars of Saint Joseph and Mary at the church, vowed to the saint that she would make a domestic altar and a table in his honor if he helped bring her son Tommy and a relative Jim home from the war. A relative, neighbor, and professional photographer captured the celebration of their return at Lucy's Saint Joseph's *tavola* in 1946.

Kay Ognibene recalls how her mother-in-law's vow benefitted the local community, but also extended back to the ancestral home in Italy:

I remember my brother-in-law Lawrence was in World War II, and she promised she would make a table. She would spend all her money, whatever she had, as much as it cost her on this table, to bring him home safe, for her son Lawrence to come home.... I remember my mother-in-law sending money to Italy for the poor girls...who were in the orphanage. She sent money there for as long as I knew her...that was part of her vow. (Ognibene 2013)

Gerald Scorsone of Mt. Morris recalls the tradition there from the 1940s to 1960s, where Italian American families would know to look for open doors on certain streets in town, as a sign that a table was being offered. Gerald recounts his boyhood memory, along with a bit of strategy involved in visiting the homes:

We used to go home to home, just like they did when the travelers would

come.... the women were all home, and they would start cooking and baking months ahead of time.... you'd put a little of this on your plate, a little of that, then you go out the kitchen door. You either took it home with you or you ate standing up.... I remember Mr. Inguaggiato's *pignolata* was always excellent; I think he used real honey. It was really good. So I'd make sure I'd go down there and get some *pignolata*.... So you started to learn: "Oh, Mr. Macarella, his fish is excellent," so you go to Mr. Macarella's and you get some of his fish. That's what I remember when it was at different homes. (Scorsone 2012)

St. Joseph Leaves Home

Beginning in the 1970s with the increasing age and death of many women of the immigrant generation, as well as the emergence of Italian (and other) ethnic revivalism in the United States, there was a movement toward parish-sponsored tables, presented at public venues such as

their own social halls and parochial schools, community halls, and fire halls. While still retaining strong Sicilian roots, the tables became more generally identified as pan-Italian celebrations and a focal point for the church community as a whole.³ In the predominantly Italian parish of St. Anthony's Church in Batavia in 1978, places were set for 200 people; 375 attended and there was still a surplus of food, even though there was "no soliciting, no advertising, and no charge for the meal..." (Saint Joseph Cookbook Committee 1985, iii-ix). The following year, in 1979, the number of attendees jumped to 575, peaking at 700 guests in 1981.

The gifting of an altar and celebration of St. Joseph's Day at communal sites provided encounters with others outside the boundaries of kinship and neighborhood ties. As such, its openness made it a site for

the expression of ethnic pride as well as the negotiation of cultural difference. Testimonies of parishioners reflect the community's active engagement in its own representation, emphasizing hospitality, *caritas*, and memories of ancestral roots. Sam Pirro of Batavia reports:

No one left the table without taking home a small loaf of bread and a good feeling about carrying on this satisfying tradition of thanksgiving and sharing. Outstanding hospitality is a tradition of ours. It is wonderful that people of the parish are interested in preserving this ancient tradition. (Saint Joseph Cookbook Committee 1985, iv)

St. Anthony's communal church setting also opened itself to the increased participation of Polish neighbors that had married into Italian American families in

Batavia. Marsha Palmer, one of the head organizers of the feast there from the mid-1980's, recounts:

Funny, I am of Polish descent. My maiden name is Ostrowski, but my husband got me involved in Saint Anthony's. Rose Ruffino took me under her wing and taught me the tradition. Everybody on the committee for the communal church table pitched in. Men like Chuck Ruffino would help by running the dough-mixing machine, and women would braid the dough into different shapes and bake it in the communal oven. As things dwindled down over the years, there were five or six on the committee, and I became the chairperson and another woman of Polish descent, Joan Kozel, was my co-chair. Joan and I kind of filled the generation gap between the older Italian ladies who knew the tradition and



Home devotional altar by Bernice Hotchkiss, 2012. Photo by Karen Canning.



St. Joseph's bread, in the form of his beard, by Gerald Scorsone, 2012. Photo by Karen

Bernice Hotchkiss, mentioned earlier, who has been offering a table for more than 40 years. An integral part of her life from childhood, Bernice prepared her first table as a young mother in 1968, when her aunt asked for help with her own offering:

I said, "Sure." At the time I wanted another baby, and I told Aunt Minnie. She said, "Make a prayer to St. Joseph." I did, and then I had twin girls! So I kept doing the table.... I learned my version of it from the first generation of ladies that came over from Sicily. (Hotchkiss 2012)

Bernice prepares a collection of dishes using only the brief, handwritten list in a small notebook kept by her mother and aunts; the recipes are committed to memory. These include three macaroni dishes (with lentils, red beans, or fennel), caponata (sweet/sour eggplant salad), peas and fava beans, codfish salad with black olives, assorted fried vegetables and fish, and sweet fried dough. She also prepares a smaller adjacent table with several more plates and devotional items. In the middle stands a painted plaster statue of St. Joseph, the baby Jesus in his arms. The statue belonged to Bernice's grandfather, and it has presided over this meal for several generations.

Gerald Scorsone baked the shaped breads for Bernice's table each year and represents another variation of the tradition. He operated a restaurant and banquet center in the area for many years and hosted three tables there between 1996 and 2000. These events, though not officially public, were not entirely private as the word spread among the Italian American community and beyond. While Gerald was responding to a personal desire to host a table, he was finely attuned to its essential nature as a community effort:

You never tell anybody they can't help you... I had a reason why I did a St. Joseph's Table. And then I let it be known to some of the older ladies of the community that I was going to do one. And they volunteered to come and help, and you don't turn them away,

younger ones who wanted to learn but couldn't come all the time. I made some changes with the *virginettis*—the young children who represented angels in the feast. We had buffet style and the young children went up to the buffet, rather than have them served. It seemed to work out better because a lot didn't like the vegetables, and this way they could get what they liked. [Back in the 1980s] we were the only citywide table held in a church, and we had 700 people in our community center. I helped the churches in LeRoy, Oakfield, and Elba

get started, so that is why our tables lost people over the years. The communal church tables are still going strong in those places. (Palmer 2018)

Twenty-five miles to the south in Mt. Morris, the town-wide festival atmosphere of the holiday had waned by the 1970s, as fewer tables were given. The tradition did not, however, move into church sponsorship, but continued in semi-private settings with the remaining hosts. One of these is

because they have a reason, their own reason for coming... So, I had myself, and maybe a little over 12 ladies. (Scorsone 2012)

Gerald continued to explain the somewhat delicate balance he had to strike as the principal, male chef in a traditionally female domain, adapting the individual Italian women's recipes and practices to an industrial kitchen setting. He was also incorporating volunteers outside of the Italian American community who did not have deep knowledge of the preparation and presentation of the foods. His account of making *sfinzi* or ribbons, a strip of dough that is twisted into a bow, fried, and dusted with powdered sugar, illustrates the process of negotiation to achieve the best result in this setting:

Now, how thin should the dough be? How wide is the strip? How long do you fry it? You get 12 ladies together, and you've got a problem! ... I had my wife there. And she goes along and she says, "Okay, everybody make one... Now we're going to take them over to the fryer." Now, at Peter's Party Complex, we had industrial fryers... It wasn't a kettle at home. So it cooks faster, the temperature stays even, it's a whole different ball game. And they wouldn't believe me 'cause I'm just a "young kid"—"what do you know? My mother did it this way!" So my wife, in her infinite wisdom, took everybody's [strips] and put them in the fryer. And then when they came out, she said, "Now, do you think that looks good? Which one looks the best?" "Oh, well that one over there looks really good." "Okay, this one here is Angie's. Angie, you tell them how thick you made it, etc." And, that solved that problem. And that continued for everything we did. (Scorsone 2012)

For women volunteers outside of the tradition, whom Gerald described as "well dressed—they didn't come with their aprons," he chose a task that he perceived as easier and didn't require specialized expertise: forming the hundreds of small dough balls for *pignolata*, then frying them.



Detail of St. Joseph's Table display, St. Cecilia Church, 2011. Photo by Karen Canning.

This tactic was successful; the food was prepared to his standards as a tradition bearer, and the newcomers experienced a sincere participatory role in the event:

They were just so thrilled. And that's the whole idea of St. Joseph's. You don't say, "well, look it, this is going to be very professional, and it's going to be done exactly this way." That's not the issue. The issue is, from their heart, they wanted to do something... People would come up and stop at the

place, and they would bring me five pounds of sugar...or they'd give me two pounds of flour or whatever, a five-pound bag of flour. And that's all within their heart; that's what they feel they can afford and that's what they can do. (Scorsone 2012)

Gerald's tables included participants acting the roles of the Holy Family and the saints entering in procession; blessings, prayers, and a response in Italian; and a list of shut-ins who received a meal delivered



St. Joseph's Table altar display, arranged by Frances and Diane Matla, St. Cecelia Church, 2011. Photo by Karen Canning.

by attendees. The events reintroduced the tradition into public awareness and provided an ad hoc reunion of people who had grown up with tables given throughout the town. The first of the tables hosted 300 guests; by the last, 500 people attended.

The inclusion of non-Italians in the regional celebrations likely began with the first tables. By the late 20th century, intermarriage between ethnic communities had become commonplace, notably with the neighboring Polish community in Batavia, and with the Anglo population throughout the region. Parish- and community-sponsored tables reflect a more mixed ethnicity in featured foods and other items, as well as in the attendee list. We can see these elements in the table at St. Cecelia Church in Oakfield, New York, 10 miles north of Batavia. It began as an individual vow by

the Cardinale family in the 1940s, then continued in the church by Frances Matla and her daughter Diane. In 2011, the altar featured Sicilian staples of a statue of St. Francis, specialty breads, fruits, and flowers, but also incorporated family photographs and personal items as a tribute to the Cardinales. Likewise, the homemade foods included traditional dishes (pasta, oranges, olives, fish), as well as Polish pierogi, and a proximity to Easter in the form of a lamb cake.

A Moveable Feast: Where Is St. Joseph Today?

Individual families in some towns continue to present tables, primarily for use by the families and their close friends. In Mt. Morris, Bernice Hotchkiss' table is the predominant expression of the tradition, with a unique twist. By 1990, as participants had

aged and could not always travel to her home, she had transformed her table into a take-out affair, delivering the meals to shut-ins, friends, and family. Bernice, her sister, and several women work for two to three weeks to prepare all the dishes. They gather in the morning on March 19 with about a dozen family and friends: we watched on that day in 2012, as the table was completed and Fr. Ed Dillon came to offer the blessing. After a ceremonial sip of wine, the group swung into action. The women circled the table, filling Styrofoam boxes with a portion of each dish, and passed them over the back of the sofa to grandson, Tim. From there, the boxes went to the men in the group, who wrapped them in plastic and loaded them into waiting cars. Bernice and one or two others drove about a 25-mile radius for the rest of the day, delivering

meals. She hit a high point that year of just over 200 meals.

Sunny's Restaurant and Lounge in Batavia, a longtime Italian-owned and operated business, sponsors a yearly St. Joseph's Table dinner, in collaboration with the Paolo Busti Italian American Cultural Foundation. Profits go to the Foundation's high school senior scholarship fund. The dinner was well attended for several years, with a small statue of St. Joseph and several specialty breads positioned near the bar. Michele Fuller, from the nearby town of LeRoy, is the president of the Foundation and along with Annette Cicero LaBarbera, one of the primary organizers of this event. Sunny's uses Michele's grandmother's recipes to prepare the dishes, and she sees her efforts as part of continuing the vow originally made by her Calabrese grandmother, Maria Rose Mitisi, in the 1940s, in exchange for the saint's intervention in helping Michele's mother, Francesca, overcome tuberculosis, as well as bringing Michele's Uncle Vito home from the war. Michele notes:

I remember the feast being bigger than Christmas in some ways. My grandmother had a table for 40 years. We came from an immigrant neighborhood in LeRoy where people did not have much money. My grandmother liked to hear the Italian American children in the nearby school sing about how Saint Joseph was a carpenter. My grandmother's generosity was remembered by everyone in the town. The table was open to everyone in the community. She gave everyone a bag with homemade cookies when they left. It was a communal thing. People in the community would bake bread and cookies. The bread and cookies would come from all over. People in the Italian section, on Mill Street and Baker Street in LeRoy, would light their ovens at the same time.... My grandmother had an altar with candles and when the table was finished, she would take everything off but leave the candles on. They were lit for 40 years, and she never had a fire! (Fuller 2018)

Saint Joseph's Day celebrations and communal bread-making activities are still carried



Fr. Edward Dillon (center) blesses Bernice Hotchkiss' table and altar, 2012. Note the smaller, devotional altar in the background, *right*. Photo by Karen Canning.

on in LeRoy by Michele's relatives and friends like Pepe Palmer. Michele now spends the winter months in Florida where she continues the tradition by setting a "smaller" table for the hundred or so family members and snowbirds from Batavia and Leroy. She says:

We don't have the altar now, but we keep the tradition and cook the meatless food. The table is dedicated to people with cancer and health problems. The priest comes and blesses the table. I've had people come and say, "Can you



Bernice (*right*) and friends assemble the St. Joseph's takeout meals, 2012. Photo by Karen Canning.



Marsha Ostrowski Palmer, organizer of Saint Joseph's Celebration, serving meatless spaghetti sauce in the Community Center at Ascension Parish, Batavia, New York, 2014. Photo by Christine Zinni.

ask for a favor for me; can you make a promise for me?" (Fuller 2018)

As in many Roman Catholic dioceses in our country, the last 15–20 years have seen increasing consolidation, closings, and sales of church buildings in response to a flat or declining population and church membership. In Batavia, this resulted in the closure in 2011–2012 of St. Anthony's Church (Italian heritage) and the merging with Sacred Heart Church (Polish) a few blocks away, into Ascension Parish. Of the four different feasts—St. Joseph and Our Lady of Loretto of the Sicilians,

Saint Nicholas of the Abruzzese, and St. Michael of the Calabrese—held to honor diverse patron saints of ancestral villages in Italy, which were previously celebrated by Saint Anthony's parishioners, only Saint Joseph's has remained. Through 2014, the events committee was led by Marsha Palmer, of Polish descent, who had been organizing the St. Joseph's feast at St. Anthony's since the 1970s, and offered a buffet-style arrangement with foods cooked by parishioners. Marsha continued to organize the feast at Ascension Church for two or three years after Saint Anthony's closed, but beginning in 2015, the table has been a ticketed event, catered by an Italian restaurant from Buffalo, with proceeds (50/50 cash and basket raffles) benefitting local charities, veterans, and food pantries. Marsha continues to make the Saint Joseph bread for the event. In 2015, the parish advertised, "The Altar and Rosary Society of the parish will teach the younger generation



Our Lady of Fatima Church, Elba, New York, 2014. Members of the "Holy Family" helping themselves to pasta and egg dishes. Photo by Christine Zinni.

to bake the traditional St. Joseph bread. Loaves of bread will be provided to the sick and the homebound of the parish...” Although the event demonstrates how the parish is working to unite the former congregations, the closing of St. Anthony’s has been difficult for its members, many who have decided not to attend the formerly Polish church and are looking outside the neighborhood for a spiritual home. While the catered events has been well attended, a number feel that they would rather attend a function that follows in the tradition of having it open and free to the public and strangers.

One parish that is attracting them is Our Lady of Fatima, six miles north in Elba, the site of original mucklands that provided sustenance to many of their immigrant Italian ancestors. This church was built in the 1940s by a congregation of mixed ethnicity (mainly Italians and Poles) and has maintained a table since the 1990s. The Elba parish is now combined with St. Cecelia’s, mentioned earlier, located another six miles to the west, and holds the single St. Joseph’s celebration between them (St. Cecelia’s last table was in 2012). The celebration includes a Mass with children representing the Holy Family in the procession and subsequent feast; several are the children of the Zambito family, who are lead organizers. Traditional foods grace the altar, along with onions (a significant muckland crop) and general produce and fruits. Polish Easter items also feature prominently: a butter lamb, lamb cake, and pussy willows. Italian dishes mingle with a variety of meatless contributions from parishioners, and the event now includes basket raffle fundraisers.

Near the end of this celebration in 2014, we noticed Hispanic farmworker families, arriving for Spanish-language Mass—families who are supported by the same mucklands that sustained Italian immigrants. They were not excluded from the event, but neither were they expressly invited to participate and had not become involved in the tradition, as has happened in some metropolitan areas. However, a parish bulletin, from March 2018, reports that proceeds



Our Lady of Fatima Church, Elba, New York, 2014. Devotional altar to St. Joseph. Photo by Christine Zinni.

from this year’s table will support a new outreach center established in the former rectory, stating that “...the Hispanic Ministry has been given dedicated office space” there. The newsletter further notes the new ministry is in response to Pope Francis’ campaign to, “‘Share the Journey’ of migrants and refugees, encouraging a ‘culture of encounter’ to warmly welcome immigrants and refugees, promote awareness and action on their behalf and help build connections within our community.” It appears that the celebration of St. Joseph, patron of migrants and wanderers, may be

evolving yet again to cultivate understanding and unity between these newer Hispanic Catholics and their fellow parishioners.

Concluding Thoughts

Inherent in the idea of a living tradition is the reality of change and adaptation over time. St. Joseph’s Table celebrations in our region have retained an Italian (but not necessarily Sicilian) identity, while increasingly responding to changing demographics through integration of “outside” elements into the altar displays, foods, and spiritual rituals. In church- or civic-sponsored tables, the primacy



1990 St. Joseph's Table, Our Lady of Fatima Church, Elba. Photo by Kathy Kimiecik, courtesy of Arts Council for Wyoming County.

of the personal vow gives way to a “memory site,” which honors the ancestors’ devotion and seeks to educate and enculturate the next generation. Even in such communal efforts, a table depends on key individuals and their sense of spiritual devotion, ethnicity, duty, pride, charity, or other motivation to continue to make it happen. Perhaps one of its core elements, that of welcoming the stranger into the feast, will prove one of its strongest assets in sustaining the tradition. ▼

Notes

¹ In general, the existing scholarship on the tradition in America tends to focus on

denser populations in metropolitan areas. Noted research, publications, and documentaries have been completed by Lydia Fish (1975, 1991) in Buffalo, New York; Joseph Sciorra (2008, 2012, 2015) in Brooklyn, New York, and Gloucester, Massachusetts; Luisa Del Giudice (2009 a, b) in Los Angeles, California; Ethelyn Orso and Peggy Kaveski (1975), David Estes (1987), Orso (1990), Carolyn Ware (1992), and Leslie Wade (2000) in Louisiana; and Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff (1987); and Circe Strum and Randolph Lewis (2007) in urban and rural locations in Texas.

² Men certainly have roles and tasks in the celebration, often in the arena of building or assisting with altar assembly and other logistics. See more on these different responsibilities: needlework on altar cloths by women from Batavia’s Altar and Rosary Society and Tommy Gullo’s recollection of men building altars in C. Zinni’s essay (2014): “Stitches in Air: Spirituality and Service in Batavia, NY” in *Embroidered Stories*, edited by Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra; as well as her essay (Zinni 2009a) on the work of Italian American stonecutters in the region in “The Maintenance of a Commons” in *Uncertainty and Insecurity and in a New Age*, edited by Vincent Parillo; and Joseph Sciorra’s “Private Devotions in Public Places: The Sacred Spaces of Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Affairs” in *Built with Faith* (Sciorra 2015, Ch.1, 1–60). Numerous accounts also designate the makers of pasta sauces as the men in families and communities.

³ This pattern is found in many communities across the country.

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Karen Canning is the Founding Director of GLOW Traditions, a regional traditional arts and folklife program for Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties in western New York. The program was established in 1997, as a shared program by the counties' arts councils. She frequently collaborates with community, educational, business, and civic entities to document and present diverse folk arts of our region, such as Hispanic holiday traditions, American folk music, world dance traditions, Native American arts, and occupational folklore. Canning is actively involved in statewide initiatives to support New York's traditional cultures. Recent projects include serving on the advisory panel for the Upstate Regional Folklore Survey (New York Folklore Society and folklorists from Buffalo and Corning); participation in a folklore archives digitization and accessibility project with City Lore (NYC); and presentations of dance, music, and occupational folklore with artists from across the state (with Brooklyn Arts Council; Traditional Arts of Upstate New York; Erie Canal Museum). Canning holds a Master's Degree in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University, with a specialty in indigenous Mexican popular music. She is a cellist, strings instructor, and a member of Panloco Steel Band. Photo courtesy of author.



Christine Zinni is a descendent of Italian and Polish immigrants. She grew up on Batavia's Southside and was a participant in Saint Joseph's Day Tables held in the homes of her Sicilian neighbors. Years later, she returned to the area and started documenting some of the practices she recalled in written and visual form. Through these efforts, she met Karen Park Canning, from whom she has simultaneously learned and collaborated with on folk art projects. On a regular basis, Zinni's work as an educator, folklorist, and videographer takes her to places within a hundred-mile radius—in all four directions—of Batavia's Southside. Her research and involvement in teaching a Food and Culture Course in the Mediterranean and Aegean program has also brought her back to the ancestral village of her grandparents in Italy. Zinni holds a PhD in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo and teaches courses through the Anthropology Department at the College of Brockport. Her publications on the Italian American life in the area include articles and five book chapters. She was an invited participant in the Folklife in a Multicultural World Workshop, held at the 2015 American Folklore Conference and is currently involved in completing a book project for University of Illinois Press. Photo: Taken in Athens, Greece, 2018, prior to teaching Food and Culture of the Aegean Program, by Yannis Zervos, Director of the Athens Centre, and courtesy of the author.



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