

Mi Storia Italia – My Italian History

Growing up in a full-blooded Italian family, the significance of a family recipe is more than just good food - it is our history. Simple, high quality ingredients affectionately prepared are the foundations of my family's traditional Italian cooking. My central and southern Italian heritage has influenced my entire life and infused my style of entertaining and cooking. From holidays to everyday, keeping traditions alive and sharing straightforward, sensible food are what I find greatly satisfying. Mi Famiglia ("my family") has instilled a love of food and a deep understanding of the power it has to generate happiness. Our restaurant, Mi Famiglia, is a translation of my family's native cuisine and, at the heart of it, a respectful tribute to my beloved Italian heritage.

Humble Family Beginnings

New Castle, a steel town in the steep hills of western Pennsylvania, is where my family has called home for more than 100 years. The townships of Croton, Hillsville, and Mahoningtown are the homesteads of the Cook (Cuoco), Prioletti, Medure, and Carbone families. These four bloodlines originate in the central and southern Italian regions of Abruzzo, Molise, Sicily, and Campagna, respectfully. A common thread between all four families was some of the older children were born in Italy, then the family immigrated to America, and more children were born here. But no matter which side of the ocean the family was on, the kitchen and all its satisfying comforts made their house a home. As with most large families at the turn of the century they made due with little, but from the stories my grandparents told me of big meals and grand celebrations, you would have thought they were kings and queens. My grandparents remembered giant bowls of fresh pasta and sauce, homemade Italian sausage, loaves of crusty bread, fresh vegetables and fruit and, of course, homemade wine. It was their resourcefulness and creativity that brought forth the blessed food that defined their lives and the lives of four generations to come.

Food and Family

In Croton, and about a block from the house I grew up in, was the site of the Prioletti Family Market. My Grandma Mary (Cook) has told many stories of her dad, Donato Prioletti, and the family business. The store opened in 1901 and "Papa", as the kids called him, ran the market until his passing in 1947. One of grandma's older sisters, Clara, then took over and operated it until the 1980's. The Prioletti Market was located on a busy thoroughfare, Croton Ave, and the family homestead stood directly behind it. They sold dry goods, can goods, and other market wares, but the products that drew people to the market the most were the fresh meats and eggs. Grandma Mary said her Dad cut fresh meat at the store and, many times, it was the chickens and pigs they raised themselves right on the homestead. The Prioletti family even had their own chicken coop

for egg gathering. It doesn't come fresher than that! Papa had an excellent reputation for quality goods and for many years, the residents of Croton enjoyed his family run market. Owning and operating an Italian market seems to be a natural occupation in my family, and so, it's with great enthusiasm and pride that my wife, Jennifer, and I are opening our own authentic Italian grocery - Mi Famiglia Italian Market in downtown Saint Cloud. We won't have our own chicken coop, but we will offer many of the delicious wares you'd find in a traditional Italian market. I think my Great Papa would be proud.

From a very young age, food - its cultivation and preparation - centered our family life. Some of my first memories of cooking started with spontaneous trips into the garden where it was my job to pick fresh basil and leaf lettuces. Located behind the red brick house Grandpa Cook built himself in the 1940's, laid the rows of his dynamic garden. It started conservatively with three or four rows of lettuce greens, tomatoes and peppers, yet as time passed, grew to overtake the 1/4 acre yard behind his house. This fruitful earth became what the neighborhood would affectionately call, "Ray's garden." Grandpa always welcomed friends and neighbors to fill their baskets with the beautiful vegetables and herbs that flourished there. Our meal times were usually influenced by what was picked fresh that day. It was that garden that inspired so many good Italian meals on our tables and generated so many cherished childhood memories for me.

The largest source of my food memories originate from the "everyday energy" found in our Italian family kitchens. Because of the large families, many of which lived in the same neighborhood or even together in the same house, my mother, grandmothers, and aunts basically lived in their kitchens in order to feed them all. They cooked gallons of sauce, mixed and cut endless pounds of fresh pasta dough (we call "homemades"), rolled mountains of meatballs, and baked so many loaves of fresh bread they lined the countertops around the kitchen. These women never slowed down; their endurance never faltered. As I grew and expressed an interest in cooking, there was the rare occasion when I was allowed into the kitchen to help make the feast. You need to understand that an Italian woman's kitchen is "holy ground" and you must show a certain reverence while occupying it. They don't easily give up control of a kitchen, and to this day, my mother and I lovingly fight for domain rights - even in my OWN kitchen! The devoted women in my family deserve much praise for all their tireless days in the kitchen, yet they never viewed cooking our meals as "work", they genuinely enjoyed it. My mother says she loves to cook for us because she knows how much we thoroughly enjoy her food. She'll smile and say, "It's love from my heart."

Life Lessons

The statements "don't be afraid to get your hands dirty" and "work hard" were commonly said on all sides of my family. By the age of 14 and into my senior year of high school, Grandpa Ray (Cook) introduced me to the masonry trade. My younger years of leisurely walking in his garden turned into sweaty, long days stepping up and

down ladders and scooting across scaffolding. Grandpa hired me as a “gopher” laborer and during those summers, I really labored . On my back, I hauled 80 pound buckets of brick mortar and 40 pound cement blocks to him as he completed rows and rows of perfectly spaced bricks and stones. It was a tiring pursuit and by the end of the day, I was exhausted. The job was back breaking, repetitious, and at times, it tested my patience, but I never viewed it as “work”. I looked at it as a way to spend time with my Grandpa Ray, learn skills from an accomplished masonry craftsman, develop patience, and gain the understanding of how good it feels to build something permanent and beautiful with your hands. These feelings didn’t come easy, but they were worth it. Self-confidence, self-respect, and self-accomplishment; three qualities that helped build my character. My grandfather of 91 years is proud in knowing his gentle words and strong hands had a solid, steady influence in shaping my juvenile years.

My education in a restaurant career started early, too. As soon as the oldest cousins, Petey, Jimmy, Matty and I, were tall enough to reach the dirty dish counter, we were all put to work. Many weekends were invested in a hot, soapy sink at my Uncle Jimmy’s restaurant (Medure’s) or scraping leftovers off plates at my Uncle Matty’s catering business. By the ripe age of 12, we four boys were veterans of the dishwashing and pot scrubbing wars, and so expressed to our uncles that we were ready for bigger (and more glamorous) action in foodservice. We helped Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Matty wherever we could. None of us had a designated position, we just pitched in and got the job done together. As we matured, we worked ourselves into positions as restaurant and catering managers. Teamwork, stick-to-it-ness and a desire to deliver superior food and service were the most important lessons we learned. Even though we all had our moments when we wanted to run away from the demanding restaurant business, most of us remained. Some of us stayed close to home to take over the family business and others ventured off to culinary school and/or opened our own restaurants. Wherever we are across the country, we all agree that the endless days in our “uncle’s trenches” gave us a solid skills set in foodservice and a good dose of confidence to branch out and make respectable names for ourselves.

Over the years, I’ve sharpened my food product knowledge and operational skills by working for a casino management company first as a manager, then to director of food service operations and finally, to Vice President of Food and Beverage. After 6 years with the casino management group, I slowed the pace, moved to St. Cloud and began working for two well-respected food distribution companies over the next nine years. Most recently, I co-owned a casual dining restaurant in the central MN area until May 2006. Over the last 15 years, I’ve always had a deep desire to get back to my roots and back to the food that defines me. Being in the restaurant business is in my blood and the significant food of my Italian family is my heart. It’s the truth when I say that the act of cooking gives me just as much pleasure as eating it. I believe opening Mi Famiglia will allow the best elements of my foodservice education and Italian food heritage to shine through.

My Cooking and Food Heritage

Everyone asks me, “Who taught you how to cook?” Truth is, one person cannot be singled out - the influences come from all sides of my family. In my family, we are all good cooks, and thankfully, this family trait is dominant. Two uncles, who are very dear to me and have had a large influence in my life, are my mother’s two brothers - Uncle Matty (Matthew) and Uncle Jimmy (James) Medure. As I mentioned earlier, both brothers own(ed) a catering store and restaurant in my hometown (New Castle, PA) and it’s under their wings where I started my career in foodservice. The classic Italian sausage Uncle Matty serves on his catering menu is a very old family recipe. It’s a protected and loved family recipe passed down from our Great Uncle Vic. It’s been on my family’s table for many, many years and, naturally, it will take it’s rightful place on our Mi Famiglia menu as well. Uncle Jimmy’s restaurant, Medure’s, served fresh lake smelts from the day his original restaurant opened in town. New Castle ate these tasty fish - by the boat load - for more than 40 years and we are pleased to be including them on our menu, too. It’s our goal to have these delicious and sentimental foods take a new place as favorites among our Mi Famiglia restaurant guests.

As for culinary influences from my grandparents, they start with many loving stories of my mom’s mother, Grandma Adeline (Carbone) Medure. Sadly, my personal memories of her are few as she passed away when I was young. But I did grow up knowing baking was her particular forte and everyone in my family remembers how exceptionally delicious her pies and traditional Italian cookies and pastries were; she really had a special touch for the delicate, sweet side of Italian cooking. Whenever her name graces our conversations, compliments about her beautiful smile and hearty, good natured laugh are never far behind. My grandma’s sweet tooth came through the generations to me, but unfortunately the ability to make them did not. I’ve tried, but baking is too fussy for me. My mother, Patti, rightfully claims the baking talents and she has been teaching my eager-to-learn-wife, Jennifer, how to make the family favorites. Whenever my sweet tooth for fresh fruit pies and chocolate gelato kicks in, I think of Grandma Adeline and warmly remember how much she loved sweets, too.

When I think of Grandma Mary (Prioletti) Cook, I think sauce. To this day, she still uses the same 3 gallon sauce pot I remember as a kid. There have been so many gallons of sauce cooked in that pot, I’m genuinely surprised there isn’t a hole in the bottom by now. It has been a family tradition to have sauce on Sunday and it’s still true today. My favorite way to eat sauce is simply having it ladled over Grandma’s “homemades”. (Translation: homemade long spaghetti pasta.) These days, when I bring my young family back to New Castle, it’s my own daughters who get excited to eat her sauce. Grandma Mary (87 years) and her “spring chicken” sister Aunt Alice (Prioletti) Biordi (85 years), still cook gallons of sauce and roll meatballs for a friend’s local restaurant and catering business.

The grandpa's - Peter Medure and Raymond Cook - were more responsible for the growing of the food and not so much the cooking of it. Both grandpa's liked to raise tomatoes and other Italian food staples (herbs, lettuces/greens, peppers, eggplants, etc.) but their desire to step into the kitchen ended at the doorway. Like their fathers before them, they worked outside the home. My Sicilian connection, Grandpa Pete, didn't "don" the chef hat much, but he certainly loved to eat. Sicily is known for perfect tomatoes, outstanding olive oil, and spicy peppers, so naturally, a rustic Italian dish Grandpa adored was chicken cacciatore. Even though Grandpa's positions as a union representative and president for Universal Rundle (a pottery factory in New Castle, PA) and later as a representative for the International Potters Union took up most of his time, he kept a small vegetable garden behind his house. I'll never forget the giant tomato plants he raised there - the vines climbed about 5 feet high and bore fruit as large as softballs. Grandpa claimed gardening as his contribution to the meal and was quick to admit he didn't belong in the kitchen. (Ironically, he was even faster to point out if something about the meal was substandard to him!) We still laugh about his brutal honesty. Grandpa Pete was a colorful character who had great negotiation and people skills - some of which, I like to think, passed on to me. My mother reminds me that I also get my opinionated, hardheaded personality traits from her dad, too. I guess I can't argue with that. Thankfully, I was able to spend some time with Grandpa Pete before he passed away in July of 2006, but a special spot in my heart is lost. We spent a lot of time in each others company and I deeply miss our high-spirited conversations, the cool, foggy mornings on the golf course together, and all the laughs we shared. No one can ever replace 'ole Peter J. Medure.

Lastly, for the due credit given to all the family members I've mentioned, I feel the real culinary and good-service education happened right in my parent's home. My parents hosted parties in their basement and an invitation to "Ronnie and Patti's party" was the most coveted ticket in town. Their hospitality was second to none and never did anyone leave without full bellies and great memories of the evening. My father, Ron, is the entertainer extraordinaire. He's known for his extensive food and wine knowledge, expertly prepared cocktails, his "dry dock cruises", playful and interesting songs and poetry, and the uncanny ability to remember what everyone ate on a night out in Pittsburgh in 1985 (or any date or place for that matter). When questioned about his superhuman recall, he'll reply in a coy tone of voice, "It's a gift". Dad is no slouch in the kitchen, either - when he's allowed in there. The messes he's so famous for are quickly forgiven by the flavorful food he delivers. Every Fourth of July picnic, when he takes his place at the grill podium, our mouths start to water. His masterpiece, lamb on a rod with hot banana pepper sauce, is a dish we all look forward to every summer. Because the July celebration is so large and food preparation space becomes an issue, Dad usually makes his way to the fully functional, basement kitchen of his parent's home (Ray and Mary Cook). Yes, that's right, I said the basement kitchen. Every well-respected Italian family has one! This back-up kitchen was built out of sheer necessity because most

Italian families were too big and the houses too small for all the food to be made out of one little kitchen. Also, it was impossible for everyone to sit at the same dinner table, especially during the holidays. It wasn't uncommon to have card tables setup all over the house to accommodate family and friends who were there to celebrate. Even after visiting my family many times, my wife is still amazed at the extensive flexibility of our multipurpose basements. She says, "No where else in this world can you simultaneously wash clothes, make a pot of sauce, take a shower, iron shirts, cut meat, store groceries, get a haircut, watch TV, and still serve a full meal to 25 people than in an Italian family's basement. WOW". We never thought it to be strange, every Italian family we knew did it all the time.

Finally, the biggest credit has to go to my mother, Patti (Medure) Cook, for being an excellent example on how to cook unsurpassed Italian food. My mother set the gentle standard by which everyone else's cooking was (and still is) measured.

I can remember cousins commenting that they weren't going to bring a certain food to a party, picnic, or holiday because it wouldn't even compare to how good my mom's dish would be. Compliments about my mother's cooking are commonplace and rest assured, when she is in the kitchen, you are in for a real treat. She goes the extra mile every time to make the meal just right. The real secret, though, to my mom's exceptional Italian cooking is that she doesn't just cook food, her love is in the food. That may sound cliché, but her sincere efforts over the years have helped her attain a "food icon" status in our family and she's genuinely earned it. My mother made time everyday to cook or bake something from scratch, and if my friends and I were having a get together, there was no chance of us eating takeout food! Our refrigerator was always stocked with something delectable. A visit to my house meant Patti's homemade pizza, leftover sauce and meatballs, beef soup or wedding soup, fresh lemon pie - you name it. My friends knew they didn't need to ask permission to go into our fridge, my Mom encouraged us to help ourselves. Everyone always felt welcome (and full) at our house.

In recent years, my mother has become the driving force in keeping our family food traditions going. We can always count on her to make the Easter bread, sausage pie and rice pie at Easter, the cappalettis and stuffed artichokes at Christmas, the wedding soup at Thanksgiving, and a million delicious cookies for the infamous "cookie table" at the next family wedding. No matter how busy she is, she always makes time to cook and keep the tradition of family and food connected. She is the consummate cook and hostess and you always feel welcome at her table. She's taught me to be a good listener, to have your door always open for a friend and be ready to help anyone at the drop of a hat. Her personality is like her food - spirited, delicious, comforting and meaningful. When you are in my mother's company, your belly and your soul will never be hungry.

My parents are excited to be part of Mi Famiglia Restaurant, Bar & Lounge, Italian Market and 912 Catering, and we can't wait for them to be our guest chef and guest bartender/entertainer extraordinaire. Their appearances at Mi Famiglia are truly not to be

missed. Your belly will be pleasantly full and you'll be singing Italian songs by the end of the night! Salute!

My Turn –
Mi Famiglia Restaurant, Bar & Lounge, Italian Market, and 912 Catering

At this stage in my life, I've gained a true appreciation of the efforts my parents and family made to raise me in an active Italian household. I am very proud to be an Italian American, and now that I have my own young family, the responsibility of teaching our girls true Italian family values and traditions lies with me. My wife and I believe Mi Famiglia is an interesting and quality teaching environment for our daughters to grow in and secure their own knowledge and appreciation for keeping our Italian food traditions alive.

I highly respect my family's traditional Italian cooking and there are recipes I wouldn't change for the world. Yet, I believe some evolution is acceptable. I have occasionally taken liberties with old recipes creating some new family favorites. It has helped me create my own culinary identity. Italian cooking is spontaneous and spirited and it owes its vitality, its constantly fresh appeal, to culinary experimentation by the next generation. Therefore, it is my ambition at Mi Famiglia to present family favorites and respectful interpretations of Cuoco, Prioletti, Medure, and Carbone Italian family cooking.

My wife, Jennifer, and I along with our two daughters, Camille and Natalie, are honored to bring you Mi Famiglia Ristorante, Bar & Lounge, Italian Market and 912 Catering. It is our sincere hope that you will enjoy our hospitality, food and stories as much as I did growing up with "Mi Famiglia".