

ANTIPASTO



*Abruzzese  
Soppresata,  
Mozzarella,  
and Olives*

*Exiles from  
Cockaigne*

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# ABRUZZESE SOPPRESSATA, MOZZARELLA, AND OLIVES

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*ANTIPASTO* LITERALLY MEANS “before the meal.” Accompanied by a glass of wine, these cold dishes welcome guests, stimulate the appetite, and ease conversation. Although some *antipasti* are as elaborate as French hors d’oeuvres and Spanish tapas, this traditional recipe is refreshingly simple.

Simplicity, however, requires quality. Use only the freshest *mozzarella* and, if possible, artisan *soppressata*. Commercial salami is riskier. Bismarck’s grim joke about sausages and democracy remains all too valid. The U.S. Department of Agriculture forbids the import of Italian *soppressata*, but the best domestic brand is Columbus. The company’s Farm to Fork program guarantees freshness.

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound Abruzzese *soppressata*, sliced into ¼ inch-thick coins
- 1 pound fresh *mozzarella* medallions
- 1 pound Sicilian green olives (stuffed with garlic)

## DIRECTIONS

1. Divide a large serving tray, like Gaul, into three sections.
2. Fill each section with *soppressata*, *mozzarella*, and olives, forming the Italian flag.
3. Salute and sing *Mameli’s Hymn* or a rabble-rousing chorus from Verdi.
4. Serve with fresh semolina bread.

Increase this recipe's portions for more formal occasions. It makes a perfect reception dish for either a wedding or funeral.

Not that these two events greatly differ.

## EXILES FROM COCKAIGNE

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SWADDLED IN CHEESECLOTH and wrapped in two layers of foil, three Italian sausages, which I hastily had forgotten at my parents' over Christmas, arrived by UPS at my snowbound bungalow in Syracuse, New York, on the last day of the year. Packed in a shoebox, they had traveled three hundred miles upstate—wearing as the Magi—attended by two pages, a pair of fur-lined slippers. As I tried the slippers, I heralded their arrival: “All hail the three kings!”

I hummed a fanfare and removed the sausages from their box. They were indeed royalty—Abruzzese *soppressata* from Fretta Brothers in Manhattan's Little Italy. Beating a tattoo on my thigh, I slipped two sausages under my arm like swagger sticks. Using the third as a baton, I marched around the living room, a bantam on parade, followed by my wife and a procession of cats. The brass chimes rang in jubilation as I bowed before our tiny crèche.

I knelt before the stable, a reverent giant, and presented the sausages to the Christ Child. If the sausages had been smaller, or if the crèche had been larger, I would have placed them directly at Jesus' feet. But the sausages were eighteen inches long. According to the scale of the crèche, that meant each sausage to the Christ Child measured forty-five feet. What baby could eat that? I thought of another Nativity—that of Pantagruel, the son of Gargantua. According to legend, before the baby giant was born, a caravan of deli products preceded him out of his mother's womb: sixty-eight mules carrying salt blocks and baskets of peppercorns; nine dromedaries loaded with sausages, hams, jerky, and smoked tongues; seven camels packed with anchovies, sardines, creamy herring, and salted eels; twenty-four cartloads of garlic, scallions, capers, onions, roasted red peppers, and pickled artichoke hearts.

But the little tin Jesus in the manger was no giant. He was a mass-produced Christ Child in an American crèche, his stunted

appetite fit only for Gerber's. It was a sin, but the only thing to do with those forty-five-foot sausages was to eat them myself.

Reverently, I unwrapped the largest sausage and cut myself a slice. It was hot and spicy, but that wasn't why tears ran down my face. Three years had passed since I had last tasted such joy. Three years. That was the last Christmas I had spent with my parents and sister. Since then, I had become practically a vegetarian, for reasons that will become clearer, but here I was, a shameless carnivore again, and I ate slice after slice after slice. My smacking lips formed the magic word of my childhood: *cuc-cag-na, cuc-cag-na*.

*Cuccagna* means plenty, abundance, bonanza. It also means Cockaigne, the peasant paradise of medieval and Renaissance Europe that later, during the Golden Door period, became the immigrant nickname for *L'America*. *Cuccagna* is the Brueghel inside your mouth: the land where mountains are ricotta, rivers are wine, and spaghetti grows on trees. It is ruled by King Bugalosa, an ogre who farts manna and spits marzipans. Fish, not lice, breed in his tangled hair. Bugalosa's palace is made of cold cuts. The banners on his battlements are gigantic sausages.

My chewing slowed, and the wave of joy which had buoyed me washed out to sea. I would never taste *cuccagna* again. After nearly a century, Fretta Brothers had closed its doors forever. Four years before, exorbitant rent had forced third-generation owners Ralph and Joe Fretta to abandon their shop on the corner of Hester and Mott streets and move to Brooklyn, but on St. Anthony's Day, 1997, Fretta's announced it was going out of business. Papa raided the store and bought as many sausages as he could. These three were the last of the horde.

"*Enjoy it, Totò,*" read Papa's card. "*No more after this.*" I chewed and chewed, and it was like chewing my own heart. In that moment of full-bodied satisfaction, of reconciliation, I had tasted my death, and the death of everything I love. It wasn't a subjective reaction so much as an archeology of tastes. Time and history are literally a matter of sausages to me. They have marked the milestones of my life—not just of my individual life but my collective life as a member of a vanishing culture. Whenever I read a scholarly book that presumes to explain "the Italian American experience" through charts and statistics, I feel like I'm eating straw.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I huff, “but have you tasted Abruzzese sausage lately?”

Italian Americans can learn more about the heartbreak and horror of assimilation from *soppressata* than from any book. This particular sausage has gone from being a staple, to a treat, to a delicacy, to a swindle in less than thirty years. The phenomenon is a minor tragedy in our history—a minor tragedy, but a telling one.

DURING MY CHILDHOOD, all the *salumerias*, the Italian delis in the Metropolitan area, carried Abruzzese sausages. We could find them everywhere: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Long Island, Hoboken, Neptune, Camden, Philadelphia. They were part of the pride and pageantry of the neighborhood delis. During religious holidays, the display windows resembled a Roman triumph: black and green olives arranged like foot soldiers; oil and wine flasks decorated like generals; cavalries of canned goods on Sicilian donkey carts; chariots of Parmesan cheese wheels; galleons of *mozzarella* in canals of milk; trumpets of *zamponi*, *cacciavalli* and *provoloni*; triumphal arches of *prosciutti* and *mortadelle*; and finally, our standard bearers: the Abruzzese sausages. They were as proud as the statues on Easter Island, monoliths convinced of their own immortality. They never heard the admonitory fly buzzing in their ears that all glory is fleeting.

Neither did I. For me, those sausages were the food of the gods. Not a week passed without Papa bringing home a dozen batons. I ate them with Italian bread, with eggs and peas, with rappi and garlic, with cheese and olives. For special reasons, however, my favorite snack was sliced Abruzzese *soppressata* served on medallions of fresh Molisana *mozzarella*. Until 1963, Abruzzo and Molise formed a single region, a huge antipasto platter cooled by mountain breezes. Molisani neighbors supplied imported *mozzarella* from Isernia and Campobasso, while Abruzzese relatives provided homemade *soppressata* from the Chieti province. Dodging the health inspectors stalking trichinosis, Papa smuggled this forbidden sausage from the post office or the airport.

“Taste where you’re from!” he crowed. “You’ll learn why the Romans never beat us!”

*Soppessata* literally means compressed, so Papa's boast packs four thousand years of history into one bite. Even when Abruzzo was called Samnium, after the untamable Samnites whom Rome was forced to make citizens, the region near the Majella Mountains was fabled for its *salumen*, a mix of salted pork. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder praises this primitive form of *salami* and attributes its taste to the quality of the local pigs. "No other animal furnishes more variety to the tongue," he claims. "Its meat provides nearly fifty flavors, other animals' only one." A cross between wild boars and domesticated hogs, Samnite pigs foraged in the mountain woods. They munched acorns, drank from streams, and sweetened their breath on marjoram and thyme. But besides being a prized source of pork, these free-ranging swine were a political symbol. They reminded the Caesars that Rome could not housebreak Samnium. When the Samnites became Christianized, pork retained its talismanic power. During the Middle Ages, the Abruzzesi venerated Saint Anthony of Egypt, the patron of swineherds. On his feast day, villagers shinned the *Albero della Cuccagna*, the Cockaigne Tree, a maypole festooned with salami.

My mountain relatives were almost as festive. Riotous *contadini* with thick thighs and coarse laughs, they sent me sausages wrapped in graphic but playful letters celebrating the slaughter that made their gift possible. Homer in his mock-heroic poem sings of the battle between crabs and mice. Poets in their own right, my aunts and uncles sang of the battle between peasants and pigs. It was a close battle, one in which the pigs had a fighting chance. That fact alone made their flesh wholesome. It's one thing to eat a boon companion with whom you've played and wrestled, quite another to eat a stranger whose life has been a series of degradations. Most American pigs are convicts in a mechanized gulag, but the pigs in my father's village were as colorful and flamboyant as Ariosto's knight. Don Peppe, the village doctor, whose library contained a flyspecked copy of *Orlando Furioso*, once improvised a pig epic in *ottava rima*:

Of sows and boars, of shoats and runts, and wine-  
Soaked sucklings, I sing! This poem, San Anton',  
O patron of swineherds, is yours. Let mine  
Be the labor—and the taste!



A leathery old man with tobacco-stained teeth, a paintbrush moustache, and mocking blue eyes, Don Peppe named his own pigs Astolfo, Zerbino, Dudone, and Iroldo. Lavishing them with praise from their infancy, he honored their last days by awarding them colorful neckerchiefs. After butchering and curing his pigs, Don Peppe would pick up his Ariosto, his hands still stained with gore, and improvise more verses. Such rustic chivalry suits a province whose flag is emblazoned with a heraldic boar.

SADLY, THESE GLORY DAYS belong to a mythic past, when Anthony the Swineherd used a sow's whisker to steal fire from Hell and lit my grandmother's hearth. Now I live in a Godless present, a time of shame and famine, and my appetite is more shrunken than the Christ Child's in the toy crèche. Too late, I finally understand the meaning of that New Year's omen. On the night I received my parents' care package, I dreamt I saw fifty Abruzzese sausages, fat and huge, hanging in a *salumeria* window. Along came fifty lean sausages—no bigger than my thumb, so pathetically shriveled I mistook them for dried peppers—and gobbled up the fat ones.

Okay, so I plagiarized, but the USDA still prohibits the import of Abruzzese salami, despite protests from Italian American lobbyists. If you crave quality *soppressata* from Columbus, Di Bruno, or Ticino, you must resort to Williams Sonoma and Zingerman's. Catering to the elite, these click-and-order yuppie boutiques have trounced brick-and-mortar Italian delis, whose dwindling customer base has lowered quality and raised prices. The homemade sausages are too dry, too fatty, or too moldy, and are always too expensive. Even drek that could not have bribed the dregs of society fifty years ago now costs five, ten times what it used to.

Nevertheless, displaced Abruzzesi from New York's Five Boroughs still order *soppressata* from their old neighborhood stores—sometimes from as far away as Seattle, Washington—out of loyalty and nostalgia, if nothing else. It's a form of protest. The most miserable sausage in the shabbiest *salumeria* still beats a Big Mac. Memories and principles, however, cannot satisfy the belly, and the more desperate and resourceful strive to recapture the joy of *cuccagna*, that rapturous sense of abundance that is the true and only Eden. In this pursuit, even sedentary retirees display the foolhardy courage of Renaissance explorers.

My father's quest for *cuccagna* brought him to the wilds of northern New Jersey. By the Delaware Water Gap, an Abruzzese pig farmer makes *soppressata* the old-fashioned way. Strictly speaking, this *paisan* is not an entrepreneur. Solitary and self-sufficient, he refuses to advertise. But through word of mouth, hundreds of Abruzzesi—particularly during Christmas and Easter—knock on his door and ask for his sausages. They are indeed spectacular: lean but filling, piquant but not too hot.

"I don't cut corners," he told Papa.

Trimming the heads and necks of twenty hogs, he chops, grinds, and mixes the meat with belly and back fat. Salted and doused with red wine, the ground pork is seasoned with garlic, celery root, cloves, nutmeg, peppercorns, paprika, and a pinch of cayenne; then stuffed into a jute bag and pressed with a weight (hence the name *soppressata*). Once flattened, the salami is knotted, formed into bricks, and air-dried in a cool, dark place for forty days. Short curing makes *soppressata* softer and tastier than *capicola*, which has the advantage of being made from shoulder pork. Finally, the sausage is cut to length and carefully packed in olive-oil-filled drums. Each drum costs \$200. Unflinchingly, my father paid it. So would have I.

You can't find that kind of quality in Syracuse, New York. God knows I've tried. Lombardi's on Lodi Street is one of the few vital businesses on the North Side, Salt City's Little Italy, a forlorn and desperate community violated by a brutal economy and haunted by dead dreams. There's little *cuccagna* here, God help us, but what little there is is shelved at Lombardi's. It's a family business, just treading water against Wegmans and other supermarket chains circling it like sharks, and so they are forced to cut corners, particularly when they can't move the goods. And they can't, thanks to the recession. The goods their customers crave are the very goods they can no longer afford. I know this. They know this. Everybody knows this. If Fretta's threw in the towel, what chance is there for a place like Lombardi's? Significantly, the store's interior—cozy, immaculate, well-lit—appears in the Erie Canal Museum's elegiac slideshow. ("*Time . . .*," intones E. G. Marshall, as if performing a voice-over for General Electric. "*Every moment of time makes you a part of history.*") The coroner's verdict is already in: "Death by Neglect."

These are facts. But when seeking *cuccagna*, facts are of no avail. There is only the bottomless hunger for happiness, and you become caught in self-defeating, repetitive routines. For six years, I always would ask for imported Abruzzese sausage, I always would be told they don't carry it anymore, I always would settle for the domesticated kind, and I always would choke on disappointment. It was a *bidone*, a swindle, goddamnit. A *bidone* is literally an empty oil drum used to falsify a quota or hoodwink customs. Domesticated sausages are *bidoni*. They taste like those hollow plastic sausages which now hang in the display windows of *salumerias*. The first time it happened I confronted one of the young Lombardi brothers. I can never keep them straight. They're practically twins: same hooded eyes, same Roman nose, same dark moustache.

"What the hellja sell me?" I demanded.

With infinite patience and resignation, Lombardi shrugged and spread his hands. He agreed, but what could you do? "How 'bout a free jar of olives?" he offered.

I muttered something about prostitution. To my surprise, Lombardi laughed.

"You got it, buddy," Lombardi said. "Every sausage has its pimp."

How can Italians pimp sausages? I can understand their selling innocents into slavery during the Children's Crusade, but pimping sausages? That's vile. But I've seen this prostitution with my own eyes. On Route 690 in Syracuse—just before the abandoned train station, where plaster statues commemorating past commuters resemble the human casts from Pompeii—a giant sow in a fluffy tutu leers and dances a can-can. As she entices speeding drivers to taste her proffered thigh, a billboard proclaims: "PUT A GIANELLI IN YOUR BELLY!"

When my wife first saw this sign, she muttered, "Jesus Christ, why don't they just say 'Come Pork Our Pig'?" I laughed and shook my head, a habitual reaction to America, and wondered what Don Peppe would have thought. A classicist and a devout Catholic, who knew Virgil's *Aeneid* by heart and attended daily Mass, the old man would have attributed such Neronean gaucheness to bad taste or original sin. But I'm afraid the explanation is more subtle and complicated. Sausage pimping has more to do

with the processes of history and the dynamics of making it in America. It is a tale of digestion and consumption.

LIKE FOOD, history goes down the gullet of time one way. (Except, of course, when time throws up. Eternal recurrence is just another name for *agita*.) Time gobbles customs and nations more greedily than Neapolitan urchins gobble sausages. The displacements of history—wars, mass migrations, technological revolutions—are powerful digestives. Saturn devours all his children, even *salumeria* dynasties. Recipes are lost, standards warped, even in the process of trying to preserve them. The grandchildren and great grandchildren of the mighty *salumieri* of the past are not the same as their forebears. They may have the same features, use the same gestures, sell the same wares; but they are not the same people. Their eyes, though shrewd, lack the depth of experience informed by tradition. Their voices fail to resonate when they take your order. Their aprons are as white and sterile as a nurse's uniform. Their establishments are more like stage sets than butcher shops. No sweat, no sawdust, no blood, no flies.

I have been told that it is useless to complain about these things. Only the old complain, and the old are reproachful ghosts. I'm a writer and a historian, so I suppose I'm a reproachful ghost, too. But the fact is, the surest way to measure dramatic change is to notice how few people actually recognize it. Third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans relish the domestic sausages in these artificial *salumerias*. Disheartening, but unsurprising. When the last witness of *cuccagna* is silenced, when the last residue of imported sausages becomes so much slop in a nursing home bedpan, the new sausages, the fake ones, will then taste delicious. No one will be around to refute them. Meanwhile, shopping at a *salumeria* has become a painful and alienating experience. It's like watching a Palladian villa being converted into a Holiday Inn.

For my parents and grandparents, the names Sbarro and Fretta were as meaningful and inspiring as the names Medici and Visconti—more meaningful, more inspiring, because their greatness derived from feeding, not murdering people. Unlike art and politics, food is a shared power. The names of those *salumieri* were the coat of arms of three generations of immigrants. But they

aren't names anymore, and they aren't ours. They are logos belonging to Madison Avenue. You see them in supermarkets and malls, on billboards dotting the highways. It is the fate of many Italian names, high and low, in the marketplace of history. A descendant of Lorenzo de Medici writes upscale cookbooks. You can buy them at Williams-Sonoma in the Syracuse Carousel Mall. Sbarro is now a fast-food franchise like McDonald's. You can eat there, if you like, at the mall food court. The way of all flesh is through the meat grinder of history. Patrician or plebeian, Italians are so many sausages to be sold.

Unfortunately, we cannot cry foul. We have brought this degradation upon ourselves. Turning sausages into tubes, names into labels were our way of assimilating into America. I can think of few ethnic groups during the great wave of immigration who were more materialistic, more aware of, obsessed by, the economic dimension of life than we Italians. It is an ancient trait. Those tough-minded Romans had a proverb: *Ubi panis, ibi patria*. Wherever there is bread, there is your country. They could just have easily have said, wherever there are sausages. Economic necessity, not political idealism, drove the majority of our grandparents and great-grandparents to these shores—a raw, blind, animal hunger born of centuries of poverty and disillusionment.

Our ancestors had no stomach for politics. Politics for them was a gigantic hollow sausage. The Risorgimento, Italy's War of Unification, that operatic fiasco of the mid-nineteenth century, had depleted and demoralized the rural South.

Sicilians still tell the story of Signor O. O., an old peasant from Messina. One day, Garibaldi and his Red Shirts were passing through the area and found Signor O. O. resting in the shade of a carob tree, chewing dry sausage like cud. The general, resplendent in his uniform, reined in his horse and exhorted the old man. "Rouse yourself, grandfather!" he cried. "How can you nod and chew pork in the shade when your country needs you?!" The old peasant slowly raised his stubbly chin, a gesture of Olympian indifference, and continued chewing sausage. Garibaldi, the champion of democracy, spurred his horse and trotted on. If Garibaldi had asked Signor O. O. to fight for sausages instead of democracy, the old man gladly would have presented arms. The same was true of almost an entire generation of immigrants. They

came here because they wanted better sausages, not a better democracy.

*L'America* was the New Cockaigne. The Statue of Liberty was not a symbol of freedom but a figure on a giant wedding cake. Grub first, then rights. Those foolish enough to entertain political illusions quickly learned otherwise when they were stacked in tenements like salami. Still, more often than not, there was steady work, and that was really what these immigrants craved. A full pocket meant a full pantry, a full pantry meant a full heart. That was *cuccagna*. No wonder so many Italians based their self-esteem on food.

Food was currency, food was clout, food was stocks and bonds. The pantry was the family safe, and sausages and cold cuts were the family jewels. Good meat has always been scarce in Southern Italy, but the immigrants from that region a century ago hoarded sausages like bullion. "Money in the bank," my Abruzzese grandfather Carlo used to say. This fetish for meat was literally money in the bank for the *salumieri*. From the turn of the century to the dawn of the sixties, they prospered like lords. And why not? Didn't they deserve it? They were the heroes of the neighborhood, the ambassadors of Cockaigne.

But let's not be sentimental. They were also tough businessmen and shrewd operators. Their butcher ancestors perished in the flames of Pompeii because they were too greedy to close shop after Vesuvius exploded. ("Ya never know, honey. Someone might wanna fry bacon over that volcano.") Nevertheless, they respected their customers and were true connoisseurs of sausage. As long as the *salumieri* were rich, but not too rich; as long as their mostly Italian clientele could hold them to the highest standards, everyone, including the sausages, profited from the arrangement. Custom and tradition were partly responsible for this happy symbiosis, this delicate system of checks and balances. They also resulted from a localized economy, which continually replenished the community. We never realized that. Nothing stays localized for long in America, least of all Italian sausages. Not when there are millions of dollars in profits to be made.

BLAME ETTORE BOIARDI, better known as Chef Boy-Ar-Dee. Yes, Virginia, there really was a Chef Boy-Ar-Dee. He called him-

self that because even his own salesmen couldn't pronounce his name. "Everyone is proud of his family name," he later explained, "but sacrifices are necessary for progress."

Boiardi was all for progress, and he certainly was willing to sacrifice. He was head chef at Cleveland's Hotel Winton during the early twenties. Before that he had been a renowned caterer. He had even done Woodrow Wilson's wedding reception at the Hotel Greenbrier in West Virginia. I wonder if Boiardi would have cooked so well if he had known how much the future president despised Italians, how he had written a paper—while he was chancellor of Princeton—arguing that Italians were subhuman, and would later snub Orlando at the Paris Peace Conference. Perhaps Boiardi knew and didn't care. He was an ambitious young man who wanted to work for himself. A Northerner from Piacenza, perhaps he was a born capitalist.

In 1924 Boiardi opened *Il Giardino d'Italia*, one of Cleveland's first Italian restaurants. Actually, it was more a research lab than a restaurant. Boiardi was fascinated and disgusted by the way most of his American customers ate. He studied them. God, they were impatient. Even the wealthiest of them swilled down his food, indifferent to the time and effort that had gone into each dish. Boiardi seethed for years, but he kept right on observing. It must have been a struggle. There were probably times he contemplated poisoning the lot of them. If only he had. It would have been more forgivable. Slowly, stealthily, fantasies of revenge became dreams of avarice. Why not create Italian food that can be eaten quickly and conveniently? There must be plenty of money in that.

He broke ground in the late thirties. In a tiny loft near the restaurant, Boiardi experimented with a three-gallon vat of tomato sauce and different kinds of spaghetti, meatballs, and sausages. When he had perfected a formula, he expanded. He went through four different processing plants but wanted a location closer to local tomato growers. He found an abandoned silk mill in the farmland near Milton, Pennsylvania. Boiardi transformed the mill into a factory and gave contracts to local farmers for one thousand acres of tomatoes. That was the birth of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee.

Boiardi was not the first Italian American to mass produce ethnic food. The Ghirardellis of Frisco were turning out assembly-line Milanese chocolates, and the Fontanas of Del Monte were

canning fruits and vegetables by the tons in Napa Valley. Nor was Boiardi's smug, avuncular face the first Italian icon of American junk food. Amedeo Obici in 1917 had created Mr. Peanut, who was supposed to be a Milanese man-about-town, and the Pollio family had transformed their name into Polly-O the Ricotta Parrot. But it was Boiardi, more than anyone else, who made Italian food acceptable to mainstream white America, who prostituted *cuccagna* for the sake of profit and mass appeal. Boiardi did the impossible: he turned Cockaigne into Disneyland. The guy was Faust—diabolically lucky. At first his products were only popular in the Cleveland area, but a fluke catapulted him into national prominence.

Boiardi's brother Paolo maitre d'ed at New York's Plaza Hotel. Two of his regulars, Mr. and Mrs. John Hartford, owned the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company: the A&P supermarket chain. One afternoon the Hartfords arrived at the Plaza for lunch. They were in the mood for Italian food, but they had only ten minutes. Could Paolo prepare something for them? Paolo had some of Ettore's canned goods in the back. In five minutes the Hartfords were feasting on spaghetti and sausages—at least, it seemed like spaghetti and sausages to them. They were so impressed that they enshrined Ettore Boiardi's face in supermarket shelves across the country.

The sausages had done it. Didn't I tell you history is a matter of sausages? Boiardi became so famous that when World War II broke out, the government buttonholed him to create better army rations. Trainloads of supplies pulled into his plant in Milton, and Boiardi converted car after car of ham and eggs into mess for the troops. He also found a new market for his products. Apparently, the War Department could live with that. On June 14, 1943, on a national broadcast, the Army Quartermaster Corp awarded Boiardi the coveted E Pennant for his achievements. He went on to become a multimillionaire. Ironically, the war created the national market for Italian convenience food. The boys couldn't get enough of it. According to the neighborhood cynics, the GIs slaughtered like pigs at Anzio had given their lives for Chef Boy-Ar-Dee.

But Italian sausages are even easier to mass produce than pre-cooked pasta dishes. The *salumerias* discovered this in the postwar



years, when they went corporate. The Italian American exodus to the suburbs, which had begun in the mid-fifties, had created a radical demographic shift. Needing new subjects, the sausage kings created a game plan: *Remarket, repackage. Eliminate the middle man. Cut your losses. Turn liabilities into assets.* The most successful *salumieri* invested in agribusiness. What they did, and still do, to their pigs would have made their grandfathers weep.

Here's how you make Abruzzese sausage today: Herd millions of pigs into stifling, filthy warehouses. Cram thirty or forty of them into twenty foot square pens. Force them to breathe ammoniated air and to eat their own shit. Snip off their tails to prevent cannibalism. When a sow farrows, incapacitate it in a metal crate. Imprison her young in wire battery cages, or better, to save space, flat pans stacked three tiers high. Never allow the piglets to nestle directly against their mother. Instead, let them strain to suckle her teats through iron bars. Deprive them of sunlight. Gorge them with trash. Stuff them with steroids. Humiliate them in death. Dismantle their bodies like old jalopies. Then, when you've ground their rubberized flesh into pulp, boast that you only use the best spices to give your sausages that "authentic" taste.

MY NEIGHBORS, the Onondaga Indians, believe a hunter must honor his prey and kill it cleanly and swiftly. If not, he will feed its fear and suffering to his family. Don Peppe, my relatives, and their Abruzzese neighbors also understood this principle and treated their pigs with respect. It was a way of respecting themselves—and their ancestors. After all, Don Peppe claimed, Father Aeneas founded Alba Longa, the mother city of Rome, on a site where an enormous white sow had farrowed and nursed thirty piglets. By contrast, American pigs die a prolonged death in the *salumeria* factories. Confinement and immobility, stress and poor diet create the most horrible diseases: arthritis, lameness, tics, seizures, diabetes, kidney failure, hernia, cardiovascular problems. Working-class Italians, who never made their million in America and who perish in dead-end neighborhoods like Syracuse's Northside, share the same symptoms. We literally are what we eat.

But commercial hype and misplaced pride prevent us from seeing that. We are prisoners of Madison Avenue. Through nostalgia and misdirection, advertisers convince us that horror is

*cuccagna*, that plastic tubes are actually sausages. They cannibalize Italian art and history to promote Americanized *salumerias*. Surreal portraits, like those of Arcimboldo (human heads composed entirely of meats), hang on shop walls. Magazine ads for cold cuts resemble the still lifes of Bergamo, the Renaissance city whose artists specialized in painting food. Replicas of Porcellino, the bronze boar who is one of the mascots of Florence, adorn salami displays in supermarkets. Marc Anthony Foods of Syracuse, New York—*Et tu, paisan?*—uses the chaplet of the Caesars to promote *soppresata*. (“Friends, Romans, countrymen,” reads an ad, “lend me your sausages!”) It is a postmodern Saturnalia, the Roman Festival of Saturn, where time devours its tail and tragedy degenerates into farce in a great end-of-the-year blow-out.

I discuss these matters with my Abruzzese father, a perceptive and articulate man whose retirement from Seventh Avenue has made him philosophical about the immigrant experience. He agrees that America has become a nightmare but argues that, until recently, Italians had been able to sustain their own culture. It had remained *Cosa Nostra*, our thing. I shake my head and tell him about the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.

To celebrate the quadricentennial of Columbus’s voyage to America, Italian immigrants cleared six hundred acres of prairie muck in Jackson Park and constructed exhibits reflecting a glorious heritage: Roman colonnades, Florentine cupolas, Baroque fountains of tritons and mermaids, Venetian canals with actual gondolas, Neapolitan coffee houses, Sicilian donkey carts. They even built a replica of St. Peter’s, reduced to one sixteenth its size. Filthy, sweaty, backbreaking work, and even in the subzero January and February weather, the Italians went shirtless and often became dehydrated. But they were proud of those exhibits, and they were relieved to escape the stink and squalor of the stockyards. It was a hell for pigs. The din alone haunted them. Thirteen years later, in *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair called this sound “the hog squeal of the universe.”

On Columbus Day the Italian workmen brought their families to the Fair. Most chose to take the steamer from downtown because it was a way of coming to American again—but this time

on their own terms. When the White City loomed in the distance, with its turrets and gazebos and Ferris wheel, the children clapped and shouted. “*Cuccagna!*” they squealed. Cockaigne, Cockaigne! The men squeezed their wives’ waists and pointed. You see? We brought *Italia* to these shores. Carrying small Italian flags and wearing red, white, and green ribbons, the families disembarked onto a mechanical sidewalk and purchased maps. They toured the exhibitions and marveled at a ten-ton block of Wisconsin cheese; a thirty-five-foot high display of Napa Valley oranges, topped with a bronze eagle; an eighteen- by twenty-four-foot map of the United States made entirely of pickles, vinegar, and spices.

In their grandparents’ day, such spectacles of abundance had been organized for the aristocracy’s amusement. Staged during Corpus Christi, these festivals were called *Cuccagnas*. In Naples and Palermo, the Bourbons stockpiled produce and livestock in the cathedral square, invited the poor to grab as much as they could, set fire to the pyramid of goods, and laughed at the burnt and the maimed. *L’America*, however, was the true *Cuccagna*. Its abundance belonged to all who worked hard.

With renewed faith and whetted appetites, the Italians visited the Midway and gorged themselves on sausages, courtesy of the Wellington Catering Company, which had butchered fifty hogs that morning to honor Columbus. And such wonderful sausages! Sweet sausages, hot sausages, dry sausages, smoked sausages, sausages packed with fennel or caraway, liver sausages stuffed with orange zest. There was even Abruzzese *soppressata*, almost as good as the Old Country. The families were so busy devouring pork, so busy basking in ethnic pride, so busy riding the Ferris wheel or humming along as the band played the *Gazza Ladra Overture* that they failed to notice things. They never realized they were barred from the classier exhibits; never knew Italy had been blackballed from the fair; never eavesdropped as Senator Thomas Wetherell Palmer, Commissioner of the World’s Columbian Exposition, told the U.S. ambassador to Italy: “Our exhibits are better than the real thing. Know why? No wops!”

To honor the workers, South Side contractors and Pullman porters composed a song:

*After the Fair is over,  
What will the Dagos do?*

But the fair continues every time we Italians open our wallets and purses. As Ricky Roma, the hustling realtor in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, observes: “It’s a carnival out there, my friend!” A staged carnival, in which we are tourists, not natives. For souvenirs, we buy Sbarro T-shirts. We read packaging like guide books (“*Contains pork, salt, spices, dextrose, sodium erythorbate, lactic acid, sodium nitrate, sodium nitrite, and*”—how’s this for symbolism?—“*starter culture*”) because we can’t find our way around our guts. Sirens bewitch us. Television, the electronic Cockaigne, beckons, beckons. “*Abbondanza!*” blurt the announcers. Claymation sausages cavort to Rossini. In San Giorgio commercials, spaghetti grows on trees—just like in the old folk tales.

I KNOW THIS GAME from the inside. I’ve worked in television. I’ve worked in advertising. I’ve pimped a sausage or two in my time. I wrote copy for butchers, caterers, restaurateurs, franchisers. So many were Italian Americans, who expected special treatment from me. After all, a goombah knows what sells. One radio spot I produced for a Newark deli still appalls me.

At the time, Hormel had appropriated Lewis Hines’ classic photo study of Ellis Island for a television campaign. A montage of bearded men and shawled women, followed by a shimmering landscape of amber waves of grain, promoted the purity of Homeland Hard Salami. Besotted, the deli owner wanted me to create “something exactly the same, only different.” I tried my damndest to dissuade him, even quoting the Hormel motto: “*Innovate, don’t imitate.*” But the client insisted. He wanted me to compare the immigrant experience to his cold cuts.

I didn’t miss a thing: the swelling music, the sound effects of gulls and waves. The bland copy lumped together all Italian immigrants, reducing their regional differences to ground pork. (Forgive me, Don Peppe.) The announcer was perfect. He sounded like a well-meaning health inspector at Ellis Island. When I emerged from the recording studio, I swiped a paperweight from a secretary’s desk and demolished my typewriter—but not before pecking out and posting the following pasquinade: