

Life in an Italian Community

By Connie J. Schlosberg

My alarm rings at six o'clock in the morning, but the smell of tomato sauce simmering on the stove is what really wakes me up. I'm visiting the old neighborhood I grew up in. It's funny what you miss when you've been gone so long. Dinner preparation in the early hours is nothing unusual in the Pennsylvanian Italian community that I grew up in. My mother, still in her bathrobe, is in the kitchen hustling to get coffee ready for my father. Frank Sinatra is singing softly on an old tape recorder sitting on a shelf.

Since it is summertime, the neighbors have their windows open to allow fresh air in - and the aromas of spices cooking - out. I can't escape the delicious smells; they're everywhere. Italians always prepare for things early, especially with cooking. I don't think I've ever seen jar sauce in my mother's cupboards. None of us eat Spaghetti O's or anything from Chef Boy-Ar-Dee - only homemade meals around here.

The community is already awake and getting a start on its day. It's not unusual to see white statues of the Virgin Mary standing proudly on the front lawns. The male household members are maintaining the yards while the sun is still rising. The ladies - my mother included - are already dressed and will be leaving shortly for the grocery store. After their weekly shopping adventure, they'll meet at someone's house for socializing and, of course, coffee and cake.

The older members of the community still speak Italian to one another. Most of us know elementary Italian. Every child learns "*Buongiorno, come sta?*" and how to count to ten in *Italiano*. I still think "*uno*" before "one." It's not unusual to hear bits of Italian mixed in with English. However, everyone is proud to be American. That is the one thing that parents stress to their children – American first. However, supporting your "own kind" is encouraged to anyone who is considered *paisano*. The kids don't refer to adults as Mr. and Mrs. We call them aunts and uncles. This isn't just a neighborhood but an extended family. What Italians call *goomadas* and *goompare*.

Two hours later, my mother returns from the store. "I picked up fresh bread from Wegman's." One of the few stores that carry specialty items from the "old country" as my Aunt Josie likes to say. "They just made black and whites and cannoli so I picked some up for dessert." Black and whites are cookies that have half chocolate and half vanilla icing on them - hence the name. An Italian family dinner wouldn't be complete without pastries.

Around noon, my nieces, nephews and the next-door neighbors kids are running through the living room - complete with plastic covered furniture - straight into the kitchen to help grandma cook. A few of the neighbors are coming by for dinner. My mother is making lasagna with an antipasto salad. My father has his sleeves rolled up with his hands fully emerged in a mixture of ground meat, wet white bread, eggs and oregano. The kids are eager to start rolling this fragrant mixture into meatballs for the lasagna. My sister and I get tasked with putting together the salad. Cooking is truly an Italian pastime and everyone in the family is expected to participate. Once the neighbors arrive, they'll pitch in with setting up the table and pouring the *vino*.

After revisiting with my Italian community, I realize what a close-knit community we are. How much I enjoy the camaraderie, the love and the sense of belonging.