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Bread Fresh from the Oven: Memories of Italian Breadbaking in the California Mother Lode

ABSTRACT

A chain-migration in the 1860s–1880s brought rural Italian villagers from near Genoa to the southern California Mother Lode. Among other traditions, that of baking bread in outdoor ovens persevered over generations until commercial bread became widely available in the 1930s. An archaeological study of these ovens, begun in 1979, included site excavation, data analysis, detailed measurements, and archival research. Occasional oral interviews also recorded the words, expressions, and feelings of those who remembered the ovens' use, stories that were not addressed by academic research. These stories told by informants may constitute, ultimately, the more valuable record of this historic oven tradition. Excerpts from five stories are presented as examples of this rich source of information.

Introduction

I have been reporting on the bread-baking ovens of the California Mother Lode (Figure 1),



FIGURE 1. Location of oven study, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

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FIGURE 2. Oven informants in 1995, left to right: Louise Cuneo Greenlaw, Carmen Cilenti Poore, Flossie Sabatini, and Fred Cuneo.

where I live, for nearly 20 years. Of nearly 100 ovens recorded to date, about half include oral histories. Usually, there are only notes from my conversations with informants. Occasionally, however, I taped an interview and later transcribed it. It was in transcribing that I began to appreciate other stories about the ovens, in addition to my questions about technologies, processes, and ethnic affiliations. And, I began to learn that the stories that informants want to tell about the ovens may constitute, ultimately, more valuable records of these historical features than the information I had been asking about. They reflect those aspects of breadbaking that were important to the people who used the ovens, exactly those aspects that anthropologists try to discover and understand.

Narrative

Dramatist Anna Deveare Smith has demonstrated that the words that informants use in telling their stories are perfect for conveying their message: they are not improved by being paraphrased, condensed, summarized, or cleaned up. The following script contains the words, and stories, of five descendants of Italian immigrants who remember their families' bread baking in Calaveras County (Figure 2).

Flossie Sabatini

Giovanni Garavanta came to the United States in 1867 at age nine; his parents were from near Genoa. At age 26, he married 12-year-old Mary Margaret whose parents were also from the Genoa area, although she had been born in New York. Giovanni and Margaret, along with Giovanni's brother, Louis, established a ranch on the Mokelumne River. As one of their daughters, Bertie Trelease, later related in a letter: "We raised our own fruit, vegetables, grapes, turkeys, made our own bread, butter, cheese, sausage, bacon, . . . sent to Jackson once a month for coffee, tea, salt, flour, crackers, chicken feed when we ran out. That's about all. We were just about self sustaining."

Margaret bore 17 children, of whom nine lived to adulthood. She once had three dead children in bed at the same time, from dyptheria. The bread oven on the ranch was built by Giovanni and Louis (Figure 3). Granddaughter Flossie Sabatini, born in 1914, remembers it being used: "When I was a youngster down on the ranch with my grandparents, we never paid any attention how it was made, or whatever, all we would [do was] eat it, fresh bread with home-made butter. Then as years went on, I got a little older, I used to take my aunt down, and my uncle used to build a fire in the oven, so I knew the process from then as an older person; and it was still good bread."

Costello: Who did you go down to the ranch with?

Flossie Sabatini: Annt Lena. Do you remember Lena Forni from Moke Hill? She was of the Garavanta family. We would start out in the morning and go down to the ranch from Moke Hill; back in the afternoon. It didn't take too long because he'd have the oven all ready for us when we got there.

Costello: What did he do to get it ready?

Flossie Sabatini: My uncle used to get up very, very early in the morning to build a fire there and pull the coals out. They used to have a big long stick with a rag or something tied to the



FIGURE 3. Louis Garavanta in front of the family oven, ca. 1945. The oven was built in 1882 by Louis and his brother, Giovanni, on the ranch near Middle Bar, Calaveras County (Courtesy of Flossie Sabatini.)

end. They didn't have a thermometer, at that time. He would dip his fingers in water and then flip it in there; and certain bubbles, then he would know the oven was ready.

Costello: And then you put the bread in and sealed the door tight.

Flossie Sabatini: A barley sack. We always had a barley sack in front and that was half wet. They kept it damp all the time because you know it would dry out because it was hot; it could catch on fire. I remember that barley sack and they would keep it damp. We didn't have doors. There was a piece of wood there and a wet barley sack and a pole here that held it.

Costello: What kind of bread did you make?

Flossie Sabatini: All I remember is just plain white bread, in the round loaves. And then after it came out from the oven she used to have a great big, like an ironing board, and they'd all be standing in a row. And it was just plain white bread. They didn't have a recipe 'cause they couldn't read or anything at that time. It was made by memory; by hand; the feel of it. And the crust part! We all fought for that first crust piece. Oh was that good!

[The families] were humongous. What could you do with those wood stoves? Their ovens weren't that big so you couldn't cook that many loaves of bread in them.

And then people always came to visit so you always served . . . you never stepped into anyone's house unless you [were given] a piece of bread and salami. Sundays there was always people coming to visit. So there was the bread.

All the different kinds of bread now. You go to the grocery store there are 6 jillion different kinds of bread. We only thought there was one kind of bread.

Costello: When did your family stop making bread?

Flossie Sabatini: When they started making bread and selling it in the stores is when they quit making bread. Well that's the only bread you could get is what you made. You couldn't buy any bread, you couldn't buy any bread.

Sydney (Babe) Airola

Mauuello Airola and Carolina Figura emigrated separately from near Genoa, Italy. In Calaveras County they met, married, and Carolina bore four boys before her husband and youngest child succumbed to a contagious illness. She remarried a German-born fiddler and the two went into cattle ranching. Her second son, Antone, married Louisa De Martini and they had four children. The youngest, known all his life as "Babe," was



FIGURE 4 The oven built by Antone Airola and Louise de Martini Airola, ca 1902, on their ranch above Melones, Calaveras County; photographed in 1984.



FIGURE 5. The oven built by Tony and Maria Cilenti in 1941, in the upper Jesus Maria drainage, Calaveras County; photographed in 1984

born in 1902. He remembers the family oven (Figure 4).

Babe Airola: I made bread out of it. My mother made it and I helped cook it. You make a fire in there and heat it, it heats the oven. . . . You had to have good wood to warm it and to heat it. It would take about an hour or an hour and a half to make a big fire in there to heat it. After it heated you took an iron hook and took all the coals out. Then you took and wet a big rag or sack and, on a stick, wiped all the ashes out of the bottom.

Costello: And then you put the bread in?

Babe Airola: When it was clean, then you put the bread in. It takes about an hour to bake the bread Mother used it maybe a couple of times a week. Once a week anyway. There was a door on it. You had to put wet sacks around

the door to seal it tight. And there was an opening in the back end you had to seal tight when you put the bread in.

Carmen Cilenti Poore

Miguel Antonio (Tony) and Maria Cilenti came to Sacramento from Benevento, Italy (near Naples), about the turn of the century. They bought a ranch in Calaveras County in the 1920s. A fire swept over the ranch in the 1930s, and they rebuilt the main house and bread-oven outbuilding, in back of the main house, in 1941 (Figure 5). Their daughter, Carmen, born in 1914, remembers growing up on the ranch and her family's bread making.

Costello: Carmen, who built your oven?

Carmen Poore: My dad built it. That's the way it worked; your own family built it. What else. We lived 18 miles from San Andreas, so there wasn't any oven-maker out there. Every family had to have an oven. If they're going to bake bread; if you have a large family.

Costello: So after the fire died down you cleaned the coals out, before you put the bread in?

Carmen Poore: The way they would clean it out: my mom would take the garden hoe and scrape those coals out real good, then she took a household broom and dipped it in a bucket of water, I still remember the bucket of water. Then you dip it there and then take out all those ashes, and then you put your bread; when the temperature is just right, you put the bread in.

Costello: How did you make the bread?

Carmen Poore: We had a great big—about three feet long—a big trough?, a bread trough?; and my mom and my older sister would knead and knead and knead that thing in there. And then, when I got big enough, I'd help my sister. Theirs was a big round loaf like that; big. And it was plain white bread and she put the corn meal under like I do. My mom would put this huge loaf under her arm, I still remember with that darn knife, that big kitchen knife, and she'd



FIGURE 6. The oven built by George and Carmen Cilenti Poore in 1973, in San Andreas, Calaveras County, photographed in 1979

slice off the pieces for all of us. It was all crusty clear around. More crusty than mine. It was harder.

In my folks' village in Fiano, Italy, the individual families did not have their own oven. They used the fireplace for cooking meat and so forth, and for heat. But they had a town oven, I suppose it was very big. Everyone would bring their dough, all shaped, with their mark for their particular family. It had to have a mark so that the woman that baked the bread would know to whose family that particular loaf went. And I suppose that they did big batches too, because they were all big families, same as here. Anyway, that's how they did it there, they didn't have individual ovens. But when people came out here, of course there were individual families here and there, and they all had to have their own ovens.

Costello: Carmen married a local man and, in 1973, had her husband build an oven behind their home (Figure 6). She cooked bread on holidays for her children and grandchildren. She is the last traditional Italian bread-baker in Calaveras County.

Carmen Poore: For a treat for lunch mom would make one what she called a pizza, like

this. We tear this, we don't cut that. And we got that with cheese or salami and so forth. That was our snack: the Party Bread. So that's what I do today. Once in a while, I make a big round loaf. Now the kids have a popsicle or something when they come home from school, but when we came home, that's what we had was bread.

Fred Cuneo and Louise Cuneo Greenlaw

Louis Costa was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1829, and arrived in Calaveritas in 1852. Twenty-four-year-old Carlotta Sanguiette, also from Genoa, arrived in 1867, and the two were married the same year (Figure 7). Carlotta and Louis had seven children. Their neighbor, Frank Cuneo, also arrived from Genoa in 1853. He and Irish Maggie Gillan married and had four children. The youngest Cuneo, Victor, married the youngest Costa, Rose, and two of their grandchildren still live in Calaveritas: Fred was born in 1906 and Louise three years later. They remember the bread baking.

Costello: Fred, what was Calaveritas like in 1917?

Fred Cuneo: You know, around here in this little village there was at least five or six ovens. Each family had one and they were all outside. Except one up here of Trinque, who was French;



FIGURE 7 The Costa home in Calaveritas, Calaveras County, ca. 1890. (Courtesy of Louise Greenlaw)

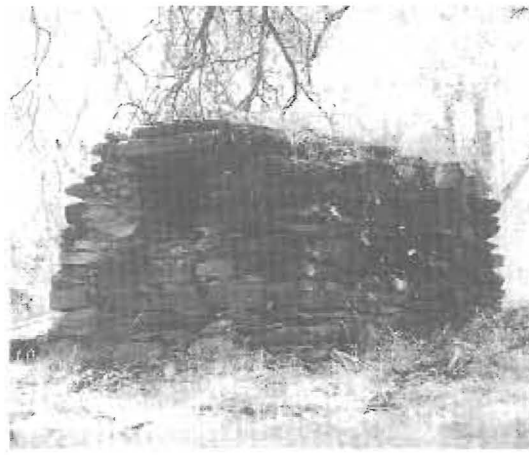


FIGURE 8. The stone oven of John and Victoria Ratto, built ca. 1882 near Calaveritas, Calaveras County; photographed in 1994.

he had his inside of kind of an enclosure.

What I'm talking about is, I'm talking about what my grandparents—my grandmother and my grandfather—when they used the oven to bake their bread. They always made enough to make about 9 or 10 loaves. And they were huge loaves too; they were big round ones. Hopefully there was always one little one that we had there, so as soon as it was cooked he would hand it out—that was old Micholing, you recall that—would give it to the kids to break up and eat; very delicious that I recall.

Costello: How did your family clean out the oven?

Fred Cuneo: To take the ashes out, you know what they had here, they had just a pole with a part of a barrel hoop. The iron, they had strapped it to the end of the pole and was kind of a curved hook from the barrel hoop. And they used that to scrape out the ashes. And of course and then for the cleaning, they would have a sack, wet sack, tied to the end of the pole.

Costello: Louise, what do you remember about the bread making?

Louise Cuneo Greenlaw: I don't remember the baking at all, I just remember the eating of it. When we would come home from school, a half

mile up the road we could smell the bread and know we were going to have hot bread when we got home. Hot bread and jelly, I can remember that. Apple jelly that mother used to make.

Costello: Why did bread baking die out?

Fred Cuneo: Here, I guess they ran out of any people who had any experience in it. They just died out. Well, the time I talk about is Michilini. He was meticulous. He would come down the hill and help make the bread and cook it. But when he passed away my uncle Louie, he had the experience and he would supervise the cooking of it. And then my aunt Fran, she who lived here, she got married and she moved away and that ended everything, do you see.

Ratto Oven

John and Victoria Ratto emigrated to the United States in 1881 with their two young sons, settling on land near Calaveritas where they mined and ranched. Three more children were born. Victoria's oven was built just behind the house. Well-built, it stood intact into modern times (Figure 8). The children attended Willow Creek School, the youngest were Rosa and Maria. Rosa died at 19 of typhoid. Maria married into the local Italian Joses family, and raised one daughter, Mary Louise. Following local patterns, Mary Louise married into another Italian family, the Matteolis.

In 1994, Mary Louise's son, Bob Matteoli, donated his great-grandmother Victoria Ratto's oven to the Calaveras County Historical Society. We decided to move it to the museum yard and restore it for bread baking. As the dismantling proceeded, a button was found wedged between the massive stones on one side of the doorway, while on the other side a small perfume bottle was entombed. Bob Matteoli recalled his grandmother's story of how her mother, when building the oven, had placed a button from her husband's shirt in the wall for luck. The perfume bottle was her own talisman.

When we rebuilt Victoria's oven (Figure 9), the two family charms were placed back in their



FIGURE 9. The reconstructed Ratto oven, behind the Calaveras County Historical Society Museum in San Andreas; photographed in 1995.

original positions. And they seem to be working. Traditional Italian bread baking is seeing something of a revival in the county (Figure 10). We are learning, again, how to fire up the ovens, clean out the ashes, arrange the bread, seal the door with a wet burlap sack and wedged pole, judge cooking time, and, finally, enjoy the bread fresh from the oven with our friends and family. This is perhaps the most important story that the ovens have to tell.

Discussion

Freestanding, domed, bread-baking ovens have ancient roots, traced over 3,000 years to the Upper Neolithic in Mesopotamia. Adopted throughout the Mediterranean during the following millennia, outdoor baking ovens are common to Arabian, Turkish, Slavic, Greek, Italian, Swiss, Spanish, French, German, and North African cultures. The ovens were first introduced into California by the Spanish, who began colonizing the coast in 1769. When the tidal wave of gold-seekers flooded California after the 1848 discovery of gold, other oven traditions also arrived.

During the second half of the 19th century, there was a distinctive chain migration of Italians from the area around Genoa to three counties of the Mother Lode: Amador, Calaveras, and

Tuolumne. In 1870, 27 percent (4,660 persons) of the Italian population of the United States lived in California (Palmer 1965:360). While most settled in the San Francisco Bay area, an extraordinary 25 percent lived in the three counties of the Sierra Nevada foothills (Giovinco 1980). Tuolumne County historian Carlo DeFerrari has confirmed that most of these Mother Lode Italians came from the same small province of Liguria, near Genoa. By a process of chain migration, emigrants followed a relative or fellow villager to this new land. Those established helped newcomers, and the growing community attracted additional folks from the same region (Cinel 1982:27–28).

Since 1978 I have recorded 96 ovens in Amador, Calaveras, and Tuolumne counties (Costello 1981). Detailed recording forms and photographs document the physical remains while archival research and, where possible, oral interviews fill out each site's history. Nearly half of the ovens were undocumented ruins near mining sites; the majority of the others were on ranches and homesteads. In these rural counties, descendants of pioneering immigrants frequently still live on, or near, these early sites and can often provide important historical information. For those ovens where family identification was pos-



FIGURE 10. A Calaveras County Historical Society social event at the restored Ratto oven, San Andreas; photographed in 1995.

TABLE 1
BAKING OVENS RECORDED IN THREE
CALIFORNIA COUNTIES

Nationality	No. of Ovens
Italian	42
French	5
Corsican	1
Chilean	4
Mexican	2
German	1
Unknown	41
Total	96

sible, the vast majority were built by Italians (Table 1).

Pioneering male miners built simple stone ovens in their tent camps. When families followed, Italian ranches and commercial gardens always contained, in addition to grapevines and wine cellars, a *forno* (baking oven) in the back yard. Weekly home baking persisted in this rural community until store-bought bread was generally available in the 1930s.

Prior to 1900, ovens were built of common field stone mortared with mud. When other materials became available during the early 20th century, brick, cinderblock, and concrete were more common. The ovens were round "bee-hive," oblong, or "D" shaped, ranging from 1 to 3 m (3.3–10 ft.) in maximum dimension and standing 1–1.3 m (3.3–4 ft.) tall. A single door opened into the low-vaulted oven chamber, which most frequently had a floor of baked earth; later, fire-brick would be common. All of the ovens were covered with simple gabled, shed, or ramada roofs for shelter from the elements.

The operation of the ovens is based on radiant heat. A fire is built inside and, after several hours, allowed to burn down to coals which are then distributed over the floor to insure even heating. When the temperature is satisfactory, the coals are removed and the floor swept clean with a wet broom. Corn meal or flour is commonly sprinkled on the floor before raw loaves are placed inside. If a flue hole (not required) is present in the upper rear of the chamber it would

then be closed along with the oven door. These doors were initially of wood, covered with bur-lap which was kept damp, and wedged in place with a pole. Baking takes 15–20 minutes with the temperature at about 450°F. The oven retains its heat for several hours, and other dishes were sometimes placed in the chamber following the bread baking for long, slow cooking.

Two excellent studies on bread-baking ovens have been produced. Lise Boily and Jean-François Blanchette's (1979) *The Bread Ovens of Quebec*, detailing French traditions of oven construction and use, is unsurpassed. Priscilla Wegars' (1991) study of stone ovens on railroad-related sites includes a valuable overview of recent archaeological research on these features. Important histories of the Italian immigration are provided by Andrew F. Rolle's (1968) *The Immigrant Upraised*, which addresses the unique experience of the western migration, and Dino Cinel's (1982) *From Italy to San Francisco*, documenting the attraction of this city for Italian immigrants.

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