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Gastronomic Purism: Immigrant Erasure in the Italian-American Potluck

Abstract: The concept of Italian-American cuisine is oft attributed to the erroneous claim of American bastardization. The perpetuated falsity of its origination has, since its birth in the late 1800s, engendered a type of gastronomic purism that simultaneously demanded nationalistic purity in its dishes whilst denationalizing them in ignorance. As a corollary, the landmark role Italian immigrants played in the conception and design of Italian-American cuisine has been relegated to esoteric knowledge. Through the double lens of modernity and the Italian immigration epoch colloquially known as "The Great Arrival," this paper explores two chief topics. First, the evolution of Italian-American food is explicated, beginning from post-Risorgimento turmoil in Italy, which thereby engendered mass waves of migration, through the acclimation of largely southern Italian immigrants to American culture (which foremost includes newly available produce and spices); the economically-dictated palates of both north and south Italy are considered in conjunction with this cultural adaptation. And second, the myth that Italian-American cuisine spawned from the American appropriation of Italian culture is dismantled through the acknowledgement of immigrant erasure, and the subsequent identification and celebration of late 19th- and early 20th-century Italian expatriates as the true founders of the unique Italian-American potluck.