



## **Walla Walla Sweets: Onions and Ethnic Identity in a Pacific Northwest Italian Community**

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**By Jens Lund**

Un gruppo di pionieri si insediò in una colonia agricola, ancor piú a nord della California, in una cittadina del mitico West con un name attraente, Walla Walla, nello stato americana di Washington. [A group of pioneers settled in an agricultural colony even farther north than California, in a village in the mythical West with an attracting name, Walla Walla, in Washington State.]

So reads the town history of the Lombardian village of Lonate Pozzolo, Italy, now a suburb of Milan. More than a century later there are still many Italians in that valley "north of California." A recent ethnic revival has put red, white and green-clad marchers and dancers in the streets during Columbus Day week. But it is in family life that people have sustained their ethnic identity, expressed through the church, food customs and ties to specialized horticulture, especially to a local variety of onion with the name "Walla Walla Sweet."

### History and Horticulture

The Walla Walla Sweet onion has been part of the Walla Walla Valley's Italian-American life for seven decades. Historian Ernesto Milani called it "the emblematic vegetable among the American-Lonatese."

Italian settlers came to the Walla Walla Valley in the 19th century. The first, Frank Orselli, arrived in 1857. But the community truly began with the later arrival, in 1876, of Pasquale Saturno, from Ischia near Naples. Joe Tachi (1880), Tony Locati (1886) and John Arbini (1890) came from Lonate Pozzolo, and Louis Rizzuti (1886) arrived from Calabria. As these men sent home for friends and neighbors for labor or marriage partners, the population increased. Immigration continued into the 1920s.

By 1900 two groups of Italians lived in the valley, the Milanese, or Northern Colony (most of whom were from Lonate Pozzolo and the Ticino Valley), and the Southern Colony of Calabrese and other points south of Rome.

Saturno, Tachi and Rizzuti, the first Italian gardeners to prosper, often employed the more recent arrivals, later renting them land until they were able to purchase their own property. The poorer Italians paid these men the deference due padroni. The new arrivals avidly sought to acquire productive land and, following the example of their predecessors, became small-scale produce farmers, raising such vegetables as spinach, onions, beets and carrots.

Most of the Milanese gardeners settled in the Blalock area, west of Walla Walla and north of College Place. Many Southerners eventually bought cheaper land in the area known as "South Ninth," from south of Walla Walla to the state line.

The majority of Walla Walla's community, mostly of northern European origin, did not consider the immigrants or their offspring to be "American" or white. In his book, *The Horticultural Heritage of Walla Walla County, 1818-1977*, Joe J. Locati, son of Tony, cited local newspapers that routinely referred to Italians as "foreign elements" and "Dagos." An excerpt from the local monthly, *Up-To-The-Times*, reported: "In the vegetable industry, John Chinaman and the sons of Italy cut considerable figure. As gardeners, these two classes have few superiors....Of late years, however, attracted by the profits of the business, many white men and those representing the best citizenship have become holders of valuable vegetable lands."

As Locati points out, practically all of the "white men" and "best citizenship" soon left the business.

#### Cultural Assimilation

Many early Walla Walla Valley Italians anglicized their names. Spagnuoli became "Spanish." Magnoni became "Manuel." Saturno became "Breen." An amusing community legend that Locati heard from his aunt explains how Saturno became Breen.

I said, "Zia [or Aunt], tell me how is it that Pasquale Satumo became 'Breen?'" "Oh," she says. "That's because he couldn't talk very good and when he went to market he'd say, 'I breen-ga spinach, I breen-ga the onions, I breen-ga thees,' and they started calling him 'Breen.'"

In 1910 barber Frank Yuse (who later became a lawyer and judge in Spokane) led a campaign to erect a statue of Christopher Columbus on the Walla Walla County Courthouse lawn. The Columbus statue was paid for entirely by subscriptions of members of the local Italian community.

Dedicated before a crowd of 3,000 people on October 12, 1911, the statue still stands on the courthouse lawn. Chiseled on the back of the pedestal are the names of the 98 subscribers.

Low produce prices led the Italian growers to establish the Walla Walla Gardeners Association (WWGA) in 1916. By 1917 the WWGA had its own packing house. Before its incorporation in 1983 the association was the oldest packing cooperative in the West still operating under its original charter.

The WWGA served not only as a packing house and marketing cooperative but also as a credit union and a buyers' club for groceries. It purchased bulk foods, which it sold to members at cost and for credit against future deliveries. It also operated a retail grocery store. In recent years the WWGA has supported an ethnic revival through the Italian Heritage Association and Italian Heritage Days.

Another old Italian-American institution in the valley is St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church in Walla Walla. Although a Catholic parish was already in town when the Italian pioneers arrived, most of them did not attend Mass there. Instead, Father Oscar R. Balducci, an Italian priest assigned to a local hospital in 1914, started saying the Mass in private homes for members of the Italian community. He convinced the Spokane Diocese to establish a missionary church for the Italians, separate from the already existing parish.

As a result, St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church was erected and dedicated in 1915. Its establishment revived religious participation among the Italians. In 1939 the old church was replaced by the structure that still stands on West Alder Street today. The stained glass windows in the present church were

paid for by subscription. On opposite sides near the front pew are two windows inscribed "Donated by the Northern Colony" and "Donated by the Southern Colony."

### Emergence of the "Sweet"

The early Italian gardeners planted and shipped a variety of produce, but after the 1920s, as the Walla Walla Sweet emerged, onions increased in importance. The "Sweet" is descended from a so-called "French onion" brought to the valley about 1900 by Pete Pieri, a Corsican. During the 1920s, immigrant growers, most notably John Arbini and Tony Locati, cultivated, by selection, the Walla Walla Sweet as an early-harvest strain of the French onion. Despite the strain's development in the 1920s, the name "Walla Walla Sweet" was not used until much later. In 1960 the Arbini Brothers Farms were asked to ship samples of their onions to markets on the East Coast. For that shipment, Caroline Arbini and her sisters came up with the popular name that has been used ever since.

Most of the gardeners worked small plots, which they cultivated intensively. In recent years the larger holdings south of Walla Walla and some farther out in the county have become the only farms to turn a profit for the full-time grower. Many second- and third-generation farmers have continued to plant small crops of onions and asparagus after retirement, and many of the larger growers also raise acreages of hybrid winter onions that they harvest mechanically.

In the early decades of this century onions were hand-harvested and graded right in the field by the gardeners' own family members. Even when harvesting machines became available, the high moisture content of the Walla Walla Sweet strains (over 90 percent, supposedly the highest for any onion variety) prevented their use.

Planting and harvesting methods remained basically the same until the early 1950s. Truck gardening in the Walla Walla Valley was largely a family affair. Families were large, and children planted, transplanted, thinned, graded, harvested and bagged or crated onions during respective seasons. Onion-growing families shared a work culture derived from ethnic, occupational and family traditions. They were intimately connected with the seasonal work cycle, the relationship of the padroni to the poorer gardeners, and the social and economic relationships around the WWGA.

### Ethnicity

By early in the 20th century the valley Italians had organized several associations, including a church and a cooperative, and they had commissioned a statue of Columbus and instituted a Columbus Day parade, despite the contempt of much of the local non-Italian community. Even so, ethnicity among the Italian-Americans had declined over the years. In the old days a certain amount of tension existed between the Northerners, with their higher status, and the less educated Southerners. People remember them sitting separately in church, and others recall how the Southerners paid deference to their northern countrymen.

Between that period and the re-awakening of ethnic awareness in the 1970s, the strongest manifestation of Italian heritage seems to have been its food customs. For years the WWGA ordered Italian groceries for its members, pasta, eels at Christmas, and wine grapes, by the traincar load from California. The northern families kept making such typically Milanese foods as polenta and risotto. Risotto, however, is often flavored with locally grown safflower instead of the traditional saffron. Southern Italian foods, especially those with pasta and tomato sauce, gradually became part of American mainstream cuisine. Families who kept livestock continued to make sausage the Italian way, with plenty of fennel. A local restaurant and tavern, the Pastime Café, specializes in southern Italian-style foods.

Italian instrumental folk music, usually played on the accordion, was the other tenacious tradition that continued from the immigration years to the present day. Younger accordionists, such as David Deccio, still play the tarantellas and waltzes that entertained their parents and grandparents.

Early immigrants were skilled winemakers. Soon after his arrival, Pasquale Satumo built a two-story brick shed to use as a winery and wine cellar. Standing in somewhat collapsed condition, it still holds the casks, demijohns, a cooperage fermenting vat and a wine press. Old-timers remember the immigrants making their own red wine, which they drank at mealtimes.

Despite the importance of latter-day commercial wine-making nearby, few Walla Walla Italians have been involved in that industry. Although Frank Sabucco of Attalia raised and sold wine grapes until the early 1950s, he never made wine commercially. Giuseppe Pesciallo, an orchardist near Milton-Freewater, raised Black Prince wine grapes especially for Walla Walla's Italian home winemakers, and his son Bert briefly operated a licensed winery. The most successful Italian-American winery is Leonetti's Cellars, inside Walla Walla's city limits. Owner Gary Figgins learned the trade from his mother's family, the Leonettis, and his wines have won national awards.

Home winemaking has not survived to any great extent among Italian descendants, perhaps because of harassment during Prohibition, when they were targeted by local officials who ignored the thriving non-Italian bootleggers in the area. Many families lost every container in the house during raids, and some of the older members of the community still express bitterness over these events, which contributed to a negative stereotype of Italians as intemperate lawbreakers.

#### Oral Traditions

In Ermanno Olmi's 1978 film, *L'Alberi dei zoccoli* (The Tree of Wooden Clogs), turn-of-the-century Lombardian farm workers sang ballads as they worked. The tradition of singing while working in the fields was maintained as late as the 1950s by the Daltoso family. Maria Daltoso, who immigrated in 1928, recalls:

Especially when we topped onions. It's hard! And nobody wanted to come. It's early in the morning to late, about three, four o'clock in the afternoon, in the onions, that's what we used to do. And the kids in the summer, they were home. You'd have to help and they'd come, yeah, "But you have to tell me a story. You have to sing." And they'd sing with me and we'd go and they'd come behind me. They'd stay.

Signora Daltoso still knows a repertoire of Italian ballads, humorous and religious songs, and traditional recitations. Neighbors and family members still drop in and ask her to sing and recite. One of her most requested songs is "Una bella e graziosa fanciulla (A Beautiful and Gracious Girl)," a traditional murder ballad that expresses the tension between men and women in a highly patriarchal society.

Family festivities also preserved ethnicity. There were Sunday afternoon gatherings at the farms, with music, cards and bocce. Weddings were elaborate and festive. Several people remember spring work parties that turned into picnics when the Italians got together to harvest giunci (rushes) from local wetlands. The rushes were preserved and used to tie bunch crops for market.

#### The Ethnic Revival

In the 1970s the influence of the civil rights movement, the American Bicentennial and the television mini-series *Roots* made ethnic awareness respectable. The impact was felt in Walla Walla as well. In 1976 the local Italian community staged a rededication of the 1911 Columbus statue. Retired produce inspector Joe

Locati researched and published his definitive Horticultural History of Walla Walla County, 1818-1977...With a Section on the Italian Heritage in 1978, and retired librarian Richard Campanelli began offering Italian language classes. Fort Walla Walla Museum began organizing "Ethnic Days" weekends in the fall, complete with booths, entertainment, food and exhibits. The WWGA lent its support and also commissioned local Italian-American artist Tom Moro to sculpt "Walla Walla Sweet," a bronze statue of a little Italian boy sitting on sacks of onions.

It was during this period of ethnic awakening that the Walla Walla Sweet was first noticed by gourmet food writers and that the WWGA began to ship "Sweets" by air freight to Alaska, California, the East Coast and Japan.

During the 1985 commemoration of the 70th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi Church, the possibility of establishing a local Italian Heritage Association was first discussed. Some of the older Italian-Americans opposed it, feeling that they had finally lived down negative stereotypes and become Americans. They feared that emphasizing Italian heritage risked reviving old prejudices.

Despite these objections, the IHA was chartered in 1986 and the first Italian Heritage Days celebration was held in October of that year. From the start, the organization and festival were supported by the WWGA as well as several Italian-American-owned businesses. But it was the educated third- and fourth-generation community members, many of whom had left the farms, who flocked to the association in the greatest numbers.

The Italian Heritage Days festival begins with a parade down Main Street to the courthouse on Saturday morning. In a ceremony at the courthouse the Knights of Columbus place a wreath on the Columbus statue. Singing, musical performances and dancing fill the afternoon, and the IHA's booth sells great quantities of "hot" and "mild" sausage. The first day ends with a banquet.

Festivities continue Sunday afternoon at Fort Walla Walla Park with a "Grape Stomp." Local businesses sponsor teams that compete to see who can squeeze the most grape juice out of a measured amount of grapes in five minutes by stamping on them in casks on a flatbed truck before a crowd of cheering onlookers. The "Grape Stomp" is followed by more dancing, singing and sausage selling.

Walla Walla Valley Italian-Americans have risen in status and economic circumstances during the century they have lived in the valley. They overcame internal cultural divisions and, as many of the Anglo surnames attest, assimilated themselves to the mainstream culture of the American West. History and ethnicity, as these people now celebrate them, have become American pastimes and hobbies. When the Italian ethnic revival in Walla Walla Valley occurred, the informal folk ethnicity of narratives around family albums and pictures on the mantelpiece still survived.

The community maintained its ethnic identity because of the unifying role of the onion crop, family and church ties, and most recently because of the renaissance in ethnic awareness. The continuity and the revival are, in part, products of individual efforts to maintain or re-awaken an Italian identity. The leaders of the revival are well known, but the heroes of continuity are less visible. They include the second- and third-generation descendants who maintained at least a smattering of the language and dialects, and the women who kept and prepared and passed along the recipes for traditional foods.

Walla Walla Italian-Americans have often been apprehensive about ethnicity, and for some this uneasiness persists. Since the 1970s there has been a certain amount of tension between those who quietly sustained tradition over the years and those who quickly embraced the IHA and the festival. In the long run, these two

approaches to ethnicity probably reinforce each other. The festival's celebration of Italian heritage has made ethnicity a source of community and individual pride.

As the status of the sweet onion grew, the status of the gardeners and their progeny increased proportionately. Once ethnic festivity became a common feature in small-town America, the stage was set not only for an ethnic revival but also for a deeper appreciation of those who had quietly kept Italian traditions alive, traditions of savory foods, lively dance tunes and memories of a culture finding its way in a new world, a legacy of both joy and pain.

The Walla Walla Sweet, once merely a local variety, is now a "gourmet" export onion. A small colony of Italian-Americans, isolated from the vigorous communities in California and the Northeast, nurtured this strain from its humble beginnings. As they integrated into the mainstream culture of Western American farmers, many families continued to keep Italian traditions at home. When later generations left the farms to become teachers, engineers and real estate agents, they learned to cherish their Italian heritage and turned it into an expression of public pride and celebration.

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