

What It Means to be Italian American

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Buckling my seat belt in preparation for departure from Fiumicino Airport in Rome, I realize it will be another long year before my feet rest on Italian earth again. I furtively pull a tissue from my bag and dab at my eyes, hoping my nonno won't see me cry.

“Why you cry?” Nonno asks in his broken, slurred English.

Scolding myself for not having better self-control, I say, “I just don't want to leave. I'll miss it.” At least I could provide such a simple, condensed answer. The little Italian village (found in the Molise region) that my family returns to over summer is my haven; the one place in which I truly feel at home. Of course, being there also makes me understand why my father and grandparents had to leave. Remnants of houses are found down the cobbled alleys, decrepit and left in shambles from the war that tore through Italy in the 1940's. On a wall in our house there hangs a tribute to all the young men from our village who fought; I can see handsome portraits of my nonno and Zio Domenico alongside other less fortunate young faces labeled with a date and, “Caduto”. Even the grand Catholic church, the village's central point, is riddled with scars from bullets. America offered more than the allure of opportunity to my family and thousands of other Italians around that time and prior; America offered, ironically, a haven.

However, it is a different sort of haven that is found in America. A nation founded on the immigration of unhappy peoples, America is a land kept and defended by citizens who are able to recall what it was that made it so appealing. It is a haven for the oppressed, offering chances and hope to those who had none. From learning Italy's long, intricate history, I have discovered both what destroys a country and what makes it great. From growing up in America, I have seen the application of those principles of human rights and freedom that keep a nation content. I have the ability to refer to the history of another nation, as well as knowledge of the consequences when a country crosses the lines of human rights. Through this combination, I am able to understand the importance of protecting the Constitution, as it is what protects us.

From my Italian heritage and culture, I have also garnered an appreciation for other cultures. One of America's most celebrated points is its diversity. The breadth of people living here makes for many different ideas and experiments, coupled with fascinating backgrounds and stories to be told. Unfortunately, with all those benefits there is also discrimination. Knowing first-hand the maliciousness of ethnic slurs and stereotypes, which are further propagated by television shows such as Jersey Shore, I fully comprehend America's necessity for a wider cultural understanding. Thankfully, through my exposure to the true Italian culture, I am able to defend my heritage and empathize with other ways of life.

On a more personal note, having such a strong tie to my Italian heritage has provided me with a lifeboat in choppy waters. Growing up in the melting pot that is America, it is sometimes difficult to find who you are, particularly in these turbulent teenage years. I often struggle to understand how others around me are able to know themselves without first knowing the fundamentals of what they are. I for one, without Italy, would be utterly lost. Where did I come from? Why do I have such a strong affinity for pasta? I love accordions, so what is it that others find annoying about them? These questions and more would seemingly have no base or answer if it weren't for my being Italian American. The time I spend in that tiny village is the highlight of my entire year, and the people there are my closest friends anywhere. Because of my connection with my heritage, I will always have a place to go, where I feel I belong, among the people with whom I fit.

Being Italian American means, in short, that I have something to be proud of, something to hold on to. I have the pride of knowing that I come from a nation with many outstanding accomplishments, from multiple World Cup wins to the most renowned artworks on the planet. A bit more personally, being an Italian American means that I am a part of a network of culturally similar people, and will therefore never walk alone.