Steam and Deliver

How Canning Revolutionized, United, and Globalized Italian Cuisine

Teagan Lehmann

Picture a can. A tin cylinder, with a paper label: Hunt’s Stewed Tomatoes, perhaps. Today, canned food is a mundane aspect of our lives. Cans line the walls of supermarkets; they are products we take for granted. But the canning process, itself a product of the Industrial Revolution, presented a radical and sensational change for the diets of the urban poor of the developing world. For the first time, fresh fruits and vegetables could be processed in mass quantities and distributed internationally. Never in the history of food had so much variety been available to the economically destitute, or during times of seasonality or scarcity. And while canning itself proved extraordinarily revolutionary, one product in particular completely transformed the face of Italian-American cuisine, unifying not only the food of immigrants abroad, but also altering patterns of consumption all over the world: the canned tomato.

The tomato itself is the symbol of Italian-American cuisine. One cannot think of pasta without marinara or ragù, or pizza without the tomato base. Yet more so than the tomato itself, it was the canned tomato, preserved and sealed in industrial style, that enabled “Italian” cuisine to acquire a cohesive global identity. Italian-American food emerged in the world in a unique context of extensive immigration, industrialization, and wartime policies, and the canned tomato is the tin-clad soldier that led Italian food to victory.
Obtaining new methods of preserving foods has been a never-ending quest since the birth of human society. Ancient Romans heated fruit and wine inside jars for storage; sailors in the Middle Ages used barrels to preserve food and drink for overseas transport; and for thousands of years jellies and jams have been a cherished preserved treat. The success of preserving does much to counteract the stresses of seasonality and scarcity of fresh food, enabling food to be stored for longer amounts of time, used in times of need, and during long journeys and exploration.

While societies continued to build on and improve the preservation methods of their ancestors, it wasn’t until the Scientific Revolution that food preservations underwent a radical transformation. Whereas traditional methods of preserving food blatantly altered the nature of the food, the scientists and entrepreneurs of this era sought a means of preserving food without changing it. Building off the experiments of gifted minds such as Denis Papin and Robert Boyle in the 17th century, which proved the necessity of air for life forms to survive,
it was Italy’s own Lazzaro Spallanzani who, in 1799, successfully demonstrated that bacteria could be killed by heat before food is sealed, and would not regenerate. Although his ideas were at first rejected, the results of his experiments set up the two fundamental aspects of canning: heat and the absence of air.

It wasn’t until nearly 50 years later that the French chef Nicolas Appert recognized the significance of these concepts in cooking and capitalized on the significance of canned goods during the French Revolution. Processing foods in tin cans with soldered lids enabled large quantities of food to be shipped to armies at one time, without worrying that it would spoil or go bad. One of the captains that Appert supplied commented, “M. Appert has completely resolved the problem of feeding sailors.” Canned food singlehandedly solved many of the problems related to feeding a large army, and ever since, has been the soldier’s stalwart companion.

Canning did not enter the public sphere until the height of the Industrial Revolution. But as soon as the can got out, it hit the ground running. The Canning Revolution was as much a by-product as a catalyst of the Industrial Revolution. Food became processed via intensive production, taking on a uniform, seemingly mechanized character. Canned food is not only the result of the industrialization of food, but also the fuel of the industrial system. Industrialization spurred the formation of cities all over the US, and these cities needed to be fed. Whereas in pre-Industrial times the urban poor’s diet was characterized by
inconsistency and hunger, canning enabled a regular source of cheap food, transportable over far distances, and guaranteed consistency of taste.

Coincidentally, the massive transport of canned goods during the Industrial era corresponded to a time of massive migration of Italian immigrants. Starting in the 1850s, Italian immigration exploded in the United States. In the span of 30 years, the number of Italians in the US multiplied tenfold, from less than 4,000 to over 44,000, rocketing to over 480,000 by 1900. It is of little surprise, then, that the emerging Industrial cities in the US would have large populations of Italians — out of place in a new country, and hungering for a taste of home. However, as Italian cuisine at this time was not a coherent entity, there existed no “essential” Italian ingredient. In fact, Italian cuisine as we know it today can be explained as nothing other than a product of the interplay of industrialization, globalization, and the creation of the canned tomato — the ultimate Italian product.

The tomato was perfectly poised to act as a vessel for Italian cuisine to the United States. While not a quintessentially “Italian” food dating back to antiquity (as most Italians would have us believe), it became increasingly popular during the pre-Industrial era. Not even having arrived until after the era of Exploration and the Columbian Exchange of the 16th century, the first pomodori were widely regarded as unwelcome intruders, and possibly poisonous (due to their suspicious associations with dangerous related species and their bitter taste). Nevertheless, the tomato persisted and slowly secured footing in the Italian mentality, especially for farmers in southern Italy. Regardless of any initial uncertainties, the tomato decided to make itself at home in the fields of Italy’s southern regions, finding the climate most suitable to grow and flourish.
Tomatoes originally gained popularity in Sardinia as a form of condiment, as many “new” foods do, and the first recipes in which they were used describe methods of preparing tomato preserves. As David Gentilcore points out in his comprehensive history of the tomato in Italy, *Pomodoro!*, “These recipes are a milestone in the tomato’s history in Italy, as the ease with which tomatoes can be preserved and the various ways of doing it were crucial [to the tomato’s] success.” The tomato naturally lent itself to preservation, given its inherent acidity and local abundance. The acidity alone made the tomato safer and easier to preserve than most other fruits and vegetables, and people quickly caught onto this. In order to make some of the abundant crop last longer than the short summer months, it became common for Italian farmers and peasants in the South to harvest and hang up tomato vines before they ripened. In this way, “fresh” tomatoes could be enjoyed even through December. Tomatoes could also be preserved in a pasta (paste), made by simmering and straining, then leaving the conserva out to dry in the sun. This rudimentary “tomato sauce” soon spread to the cities, and also became a staple in the diets of the urban poor. In the late 1800s, the narrow streets of Naples were described as smelling
of the “acrid smell of tomato _conserva,_” which filled large vats resting outside on city balconies as the tomato paste thickened and dried in the sun.*

By the late 19th century, tomatoes had become so common in some southern regions that they were being thrown away, or even thrown at people as in the _Pomodorata:_ there were simply too many tomatoes to eat at once! But as we have seen, tomatoes, from their earliest use, have been appreciated in a preserved form. One could almost say tomatoes were begging to be canned: They were cheap and fairly easy to grow, and by constructing canneries in areas of excess production, they could be processed at relatively low prices. Additionally, the tomato is particular in that its preservation does not destroy many of its original qualities. For example, in 1868, Giuseppe and Marcellino Rodas, two horticulturalist brothers, published a piece on preserving tomatoes in bottles in the style of Nicolas Appert, followed by the observation that “the paste maintains it’s loveley original color in the bottles, with a flavor not dissimilar from the fresh fruits” [sic]. Even though the tomatoes were going through the essential transformation process of being “preserved,” the nature of the tomato was still recognizable, even in a container.

* Gentilcore p. 66.

The saga of the canned tomato is one of the greatest success stories of Italian production, bolstering the “Made-In-Italy” market and exporting Italian cuisine all over the world. While tomato processing originated in the United States and Britain, Italy’s own Cirio Company eventually became a dominant force in the production of preserved tomatoes. The tomato processing industry slowly blossomed during the late-19th century, benefiting from the improvements in manufacturing techniques and the expansion of transportation routes. But the industry exploded with the boom in Italian migration and the creation of markets abroad. Indeed, there existed little reason to purchase canned tomatoes with such an abundance of fresh ones,
Through my secret fog I kept myself from detection, and detecting.
yet the new migrant communities (especially in the US) created an entirely new market for preserved Italian products. While some food processing plants previously existed in Italy, mostly in Campania and Emilia, the vegetable canning industry took off in the mid-1900s after the First World War. Processed tomatoes dominated this export industry: There were approximately 140 plants operating by 1925, producing over one million quintals of processed tomatoes per year (N.B. there are 220.46 pounds per quintal), and the majority of these processed goods were
distributed to the United States. In 1940, Remigio Baldoni, author of *Il Pomodoro Industriale e da Tavola*, commented, “The influence of our fellow countrymen living overseas has thus given rise to a thriving flow of exports from Italy.... Cheese, pastas, and tomato preserves are classic products of our industry that have traversed the oceans and continents, finding a place not only on the tables of Italians but on those of many foreigners as well.”

The canned tomato owes much of its popularity to its life-long companion: pasta, the staple food of Italy’s urban poor. Since the combination of these two did not become popular until the mid-19th century, it might seem strange that spaghetti would become the ultimate Italian dish. However, when we consider the two main groups of Italians to immigrate to the United States during the Industrial era—the destitute farmers of southern Italy and the urban poor of Naples—the concept of pasta with tomato sauce as the “Classic Italian-American” dish emerges as a logical result of the interactions of these two sectors. Pasta is easily preserved and transported in dried form, and the canned tomato, familiar in its preserved state, could pair together to form a dish that could comfort the nostalgia of Italians from various regions of the country. This creation even gained status as a truly “Italian dish” as Artusi gives a nod to the canned tomato in his renowned *La Scienza in cucina e l’Arte di mangiar bene* in 1891, which became the self-appointed guide to the fundamentals of the new National Italian cuisine. The style of food he presented was characterized by a simple, unpretentious nature, which was appealing not only to the emerging middle-class population in Italy, but also presented a practical means of urban cooking for immigrants seeking to satisfy their craving for a taste of home. In fact, his recipe for “Neapolitan-style Macceronei” is essentially an early version of the classic comfort dish of pasta with red sauce, and gives credence to the use of preserved and canned tomatoes as an acceptable alternative to fresh ones. So not only did the canned tomato lead the way for the transport of Italian produce back to the states, but by its inclusion in this revolutionary piece of Italian culinary literature it also became embodied in the new “national” cuisine of the

---

* Gentilcore p. 99.
new nation of Italy: something Italians could relate to across intra- and international boundaries.

Notably, peasants immigrating to the US did not cling to the food they had in the past, including polenta or black bread and brine, but with their increase in salary they consumed increasing amounts of the foods they had always longed to enjoy, including more meat, dairy, and fruits and vegetables. Instead of eating the food of their past, the migrant peasants feasted on the “food of their dreams.”* And unlike other immigrant groups coming to the US at this time, the Italian immigrants alone refused to assimilate and instead clung to their own distinctive cuisine, their dream come true.

Frugality characterized the Italian immigrants as a whole and allowed them to maintain a separate identity. These circular migrants, wanting to save up money to eventually return home, were cautious of money while in the States. Luckily for them, a meal prepared in Italian-American style was often significantly cheaper than one of the standard American immigrant dishes. These immigrant workers created a new tradition of Italian

* Dickie p. 243.
food that originated overseas and generated a sense of Italian community through the food. It would be a transgression to overlook the significance of the canned tomato in this particular community. Cheap and affordable, canned tomatoes were imported to Italy and found use in nearly all of the classic foods we associate with “Italian” cuisine today: “smothered on meat, chicken and seafood, spread on bread to make pizza, cooked with meatballs,” and most importantly in the ubiquitous marinara sauce.* Various recipes for this quintessential condiment called specifically not for fresh tomatoes, but cans of “Italian-style tomatoes,” imported from back home. It is also interesting to note that since the cooking process of canning brings out the sweetness of the tomato, processed tomatoes were often widely regarded as more suitable for the classic Italian sauce than their fresh brethren.

As we’ve seen, the canned pomodoro did much to appeal to the mentality of the newly arrived immigrants. On one hand, the tomatoes signified a connection to their contadino past, for tomato preservation conjured images of rural life. The Italian peasants in America were economically stable enough to reminisce about the “happy countryside,” which Massimo Montanari, author of Culture of Food, would argue is an entirely “urban image.”† On the other hand, the canned tomato was also a product of the practicality of the Industrial era, and embodied the Italian idealization for a better life. The affordability in addition to the extensive shelf life of the canned tomato meant that, for the first time, immigrants were able to put food aside, “a peasant’s eternal aspiration.”‡ The canned tomato came to signify so much more than a staple food item; the product became the common Italian dialect, and the face recognized all over the world. Italians abroad found comfort in the symbolism of tomato preservation, security in its durability and long shelf life, and practical use by means of a highly economical production and distribution. Despite the fact that Italian immigrants from various regions were thrown together in a new land, they found a common

---

* Mariani p. 40.
† Montanari p. 159.
‡ Gentilcore p. 109.
language through shared meals of pasta and tomato sauce. Even back at home, the tomato was endorsed as the patriotic leader for Italian cuisine. The Fascist-era *Guida gastronomica d’Italia* proudly proclaimed that the tomato “has gained the rights to citizenship in nearly all the regions of Italy,” and that the classic dish of white (pasta), red (tomato sauce), and green (basil or spice) was the epitome of culinary patriotism. The tomato soldier became somewhat of a national celebrity, starring in the film *Un Americano a Roma* (1945), as a necessary ingredient for the ultimate Italian dish—a heaping plate of spaghetti. Similarly, in the personal testimony of Sophia Loren *In cucina con amore*, the canned tomato is a necessary staple in the post-war thrifty kitchen. Wherever one finds Italian food, the canned tomato is never far away.

This sentimental value, the Italian “essence,” and complex history embedded within the tomato distinguish this canned good from others. As Fernández-Armeto observes, “Canned food is no longer the ‘fists of the food giants’”; canned and other processed foods are beginning to lose their footing in today’s shifting nutritional paradigm. In a backlash against the increasing influence of the Western industrialized food system, it has become more popular to turn toward what is fresh and local, and away from what is manufactured and processed. The benefits of canning that once made it such a fantastic novelty, such as the ability to store and ship mass quantities, are now what our jaded society longs to be free of: “the glut of cheap, the degradation of the environment, the wreckage of taste.”* However, the canned tomato is unique in that it retains a more positive image than its other canned comrades. Similar to the Italian immigrants of the past who so adored and valued fresh produce, yet would import canned tomatoes

---

*Fernández-Armeto p. 224.*
from their homeland, the processed tomato seems to remain the one canned vegetable that is still respected in its own right. Tin-clad tomatoes are still frequently regarded as an acceptable alternative to fresh for use in soups, stews, and of course, pasta sauces. While perhaps retired from its long and fruitful career as a soldier and conquistador, the canned tomato retains its well-deserved throne as King of Italian-American cuisine.

WORKS CITED

David Gentilcore, Pomodoro!: a History of the Tomato in Italy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).