

## Digital Media Review

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*The Italian American Podcast.*

[www.italianamericanexperience.com](http://www.italianamericanexperience.com)

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In November 2015, Anthony Fasano and Dolores Alfieri launched a seemingly modest endeavor to broaden exploration of culture and community, a podcast devoted to Italian America. Today, a little over a year—and thirty-six podcasts—later, Fasano and Alfieri have carved a unique niche in U.S. media for people of Italian descent. *The Italian American Podcast (IAP)*, Alfieri explains, aims to “celebrate with our guests, with our listeners” (*IAP01*). But this “labor of love” succeeds in doing much more than either host could have anticipated when they, somewhat casually, began the first podcast with a simple introduction of intent and an amusing anecdote from Fasano’s grandmother. While the podcast celebrates cultural identity, it acknowledges the damaging loss of home place and quietly provokes consideration and discussion of timely political issues.

The unassuming, conversational format of each podcast episode resists outward politicization. This approach does not seem accidental. Both Fasano and Alfieri are interested in unification. Fasano’s aim is to “help Italian Americans learn about their heritage” and to “facilitate learning about self” (*IAP01*). The podcast is a creative work aimed at solidifying Italian American cultural identity for host and listener, encouraging self-examination and exploration of family history through family discussions, storytelling, ancestral research, and—if at all possible—travel abroad. The episodes vary in focus; guests include celebrity chefs, travel gurus, fiction writers, directors, producers, musicians, sports icons, and scholars. While few of the episodes delve deep into the push factors that brought so many Italians to America, on the margins of every episode are issues of poverty, political upheaval, war, immigration, assimilation, education, race, class, and prejudice. Considering the peculiarity and volatility of the current political scene, a podcast that builds community while simultaneously encouraging the listeners to consider their own heritage through the prism of political and social issues at the forefront of American life seems a worthwhile listen.

Fasano and Alfieri are humbled by the benefits they enjoy as a result of their ancestors’ sacrifices. Often, their excitement bubbles over when introducing a famous guest. The hosts are genuine and unaffected. Their sincerity encourages a similar approach from both listener and guest. Each episode of the *IAP* explores the guest’s connection to home place—including regional identity, relationship to language, and family migration. The podcasts also examine family history in America and consider that history in the context of personal

and career choices. The interview segments are conversational, informal, and sometimes meandering—refreshingly so. The listeners sometimes feel as if they are eavesdropping on private talks. Stories sometimes meander, but rarely does the audience feel as if they have missed the opportunity to learn more.

While the podcasts entertain, they also serve to guide the audience on a journey toward self-knowledge by providing practical advice. One of the podcast's earliest interviews, with Mary Tedesco, host of PBS's *Genealogy Roadshow*, documents step-by-step guidelines for beginning research on Italian genealogy. The conversation with Tedesco celebrates Italian heritage but notes the difficulties in locating living relatives abroad, uncovering familial connections, recording travel and migration histories, and ensuring these stories survive for future generations.

Like Tedesco, Cassandra Santoro, founder of Travel Italian Style, provides professional genealogical research services as well as custom travel planning focused on immersive, small-town experiences. Santoro's first trip to Italy was precipitated by her father's early death. He was forty-two when he passed; Cassandra was nineteen. Her grief pushed her toward her ancestral home place. Shortly after her father's death, she accepted an internship in Italy. Upon arrival in Florence, she felt a "connection to the family that you can't get anywhere else, unless you just step on the ground and feel the energy" (*IAP*32). Like many guests on the *IAP*, Santoro gives a description of ethnic and cultural memory that is inextricably intertwined with great loss. The loss of her father becomes caught up with the immigrants' loss of home place and identity after migration. Santoro's praise for slow living and local travel suggests that these efforts help reclaim cultural identity and alleviate the pain of loss all immigrants suffer, consciously or unconsciously, as a result of transatlantic resettlement.

Fasano and Alfieri's session with Domenica Marchetti on preserving Italian food and traditions perhaps captures best the fear of losing home place and ethnicity entirely. For Marchetti, the anxiety surrounding lost traditions is channeled into foodstuffs. A former newspaper journalist, Marchetti is a successful cookbook author and food writer who is lately obsessed with the literal preservation of food. Her most recent book, *Preserving Italy: Canning, Curing, Infusing, and Bottling Italian Flavors and Traditions*, attempts to do just that—capture and preserve a taste of Italy. The podcasts' hosts, too, are a bit obsessed with food. They often argue that food is the avenue most traveled by Italian Americans seeking connection to ancestral home place and to regional identities specifically. The Marchetti episode suggests there is something magical about preserving the food in jars, the rituals in the kitchen, and the recipes in print.

The impulse to preserve tradition in words is one many of Fasano and Alfieri's guests share. Interviews with Adriana Trigiani, Lidia Bastianich, and

Maria Laurino focus on the need to record history before it becomes diluted by time, distance, and death. Trigiani, whose grandmother wrote her entire life story on a single sheet of notebook paper, has built a career on re-creating the lives of Italian American ancestors in her novels. Trigiani's *The Shoemaker's Wife* inspired Fasano to research his own family history.

Laurino's interview is a standout, leaving virtually no fragment of Italian American history untouched. Laurino is a best-selling author and lecturer whose words resonate when insisting Italian Americans "can empathize with other ethnic groups" who suffer stereotypical reduction (*IAP08*). She draws parallels between Italian Americans and Muslim Americans, reminding listeners of the Johnson Reed Act and other discriminatory practices aimed at earlier immigrant groups. Laurino most powerfully captures the difficulty in finding a "balance between two diametrically opposed cultural traditions." So many ethnic groups struggle to manage this challenge. "In all choice, there is a loss," Laurino argues. "We do have to make certain choices in our lives. Those choices will compromise us in certain ways. But we will also benefit from them" (*IAP08*). When we choose the old ways, she explains, we lose some of the promise of America. When we choose the new ways, we lose community. Laurino argues for accepting loss and finding ways to compensate for it.

Balance is not always possible but remains a worthwhile pursuit. The physical distance between family and friends, which is often the result of choosing American values of independence, autonomy, and career success over more old-fashioned ways of living, makes the struggle more complicated. Bastianich touches on this. "Getting everyone together is an effort," she says. "It really is [ . . . ] but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. We need to" (*IAP12*). For Bastianich, the table is the meeting place, but she acknowledges that the podcast serves as a virtual meeting place when the table is not accessible.

Fasano and Alfieri have created a virtual community of Italian Americans. In lieu of a culinary feast, the hosts provide a feast of stories and a collection of voices that nourish, all the while encouraging their listeners to look both inward on and outward from their larger communities. The Italian American Experience website is fairly easy to navigate—even for those who are not tech savvy. The navigation bar at the top of the homepage directs users to subscription instructions, podcast episodes, blog pages, video clips, etc. Users may browse podcast episodes by guest or under any of a number of categories (e.g., "Family History Research," "Holiday," "Language," "Music"), or they can explore podcasts chronologically. The site has a pleasant aesthetic, which adds to the overall user experience. Sound quality on the podcast varies depending on the hosts' broadcasting location and whether or not the guest is present or calling in. Occasional audio delays or speech overlap are noticeable but not a significant distraction. The hosts keep the conversation moving. They

have prepared questions, but they allow the guest to set the pace and direction of discussion.

Listeners trust the hosts as proxy when interviewing guests and are invited to share family histories, humorous anecdotes, rituals, regional traditions, and recipes in the second segment of the podcast. A microphone icon on the right rail labeled “Tell Your Story” links the user to a voice recorder and sends the messages (taped in three-minute clips) to the podcast hosts. This kind of active participation allows the listeners to influence the direction in which the podcast is moving. The intimacy of this segment also encourages the listener to consider his or her own voice in the larger narrative of Italian American experience, without privileging Italian over American—or vice versa.

Fasano reminds his listeners that knowing the past may not always be possible. Families move away, grandparents age, parents get caught up in the here and now and forget to consider what used to be. The fear of losing culture and ethnicity, however, should be less an issue of ethnocentrism than one of individual and societal welfare. Understanding the present and directing the future requires self-awareness, self-knowledge, and knowledge of the place from which we come. There are valuable lessons to be learned from our histories, both individual and collective. And there are errors we should be reminded not to repeat. Continued engagement in community discussion focused on shared history, common goals, a desire for unity, and an understanding of ethnic identity throughout history is essential to moving toward a more compassionate social and political climate. The *IAP* is entertainment, but it is also a virtual *piazza*. As such, the *IAP* may provide a forum for more thorough consideration of controversial issues as they speak to the past or are illuminated by it. As Fasano and Alfieri continue to build this interactive community, they are tasked with balancing the dynamics of the *piazza*—everything from the gravity of conversation to the personalities of those who have gathered to listen and speak. Theirs may not be an enviable task, but the potential for reward is great.

The podcast is available on iTunes (new episodes are released every other Sunday) and has a presence on Facebook (Italian American Podcast) and Twitter (@italamerican).

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