A FIRST-TIME HANDS-ON ITALIAN COOKING CLASS AT THE Italian American Community Center

BY FRANK ZEOLI

IItalian Proverbi: "Chi Mangia Bene Vive Bene". "Chi Mangia Bene, Mangia Italiano"!
Italian Proverb: "He who eats well, lives well". "He who eats well eats Italian"!

For the first time, the Italian American Community Center Foundation hosted a hands-on cooking class designed to bring the rich history and flavors of Italy directly to its members and non-members.

The class was designed not just for cooking but for an immersive cultural experience. Whether participants were beginners or experienced cooks, it offered an excellent opportunity to learn the basics of Italian cuisine while gaining a deeper understanding of the origins and significance of each dish.

GETTING HANDS-ON WITH ITALIAN COMFORT FOODS

From the very start, participants were welcomed by Chef and Foundation President Frank Zeoli with open arms, ready to dive into the culinary adventure. The class was centered around Italian comfort foods that are staples in households across the country, offering a taste of authentic Italian living.

Among the dishes prepared were:

- **Greens & Beans** (a dish made with several types of greens along with beans in a flavorful broth)
- **Pasta Fagioli** (a dish made with pasta and cannellini beans in tomato and garlic sauce)
- **Pasta e Piselli** (a dish made with pasta and sweet peas in tomato and garlic sauce)
- **Homemade Pasta** (homemade fettuccine pasta with a homemade marinara sauce)

- **Risotto ai Funghi** (a creamy rice dish made with mushrooms and parmesan cheese)
- **Chicken Marsala** (a creamy chicken dish made with mushrooms in a marsala wine sauce)
- **Sunday Sauce** (a slow-cooked tomato sauce made with meat made of pork and beef)
- **Polpette or Meatballs** (made with pork, beef, cheese, and spices)
- **Braciola** (beef rolls stuffed with cheese and spices)

These dishes not only filled the room with mouth-watering aromas but were also the perfect introduction to the basics of Italian cooking. The cooking techniques, such as how to properly prepare risotto to achieve the perfect creamy consistency and the importance of using fresh, high-quality ingredients for an authentic flavor, were explained in detail.

Each dish told a story—how it was passed down through generations or how certain ingredients were selected to highlight the distinct regional tastes of Italy. Charter Member Maria DeNitto explained what these comfort foods meant to her during her childhood in Italy.

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE DISHES

Every dish was introduced with a fun history lesson, giving participants not only the "how" but the "why" of each recipe. These small stories added a layer of depth to the cooking class, making it much more than just about food. It was about culture, tradition, and the joy that comes with sharing a meal.

Frank would emphasize how deeply Italian food is intertwined with family traditions, with many dishes having been perfected over time and adapted to regional availability and how the likes and dislikes of family members shape how these recipes were made.

LEARNING ITALIAN PRONUNCIATION

What made this cooking class even more unique was the focus on the Italian language. As each ingredient was introduced, Maria LaMorte our language class instructor, took time to pronounce the words correctly, teaching participants how to say them in Italian. From **"Parmigiano"** (Parmesan) to **"Cipolle"** (onion), it was a fun and educational experience to learn Italian pronunciation while cooking.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The hands-on approach encouraged participants to work together, stirring risotto, rolling fettuccine dough, and cutting greens in a communal, relaxed atmosphere. It wasn't just about the food; it was about bonding with others, taking and immersing themselves in a passionate and vibrant culture.

The class concluded with everyone sitting down to enjoy the fruits of their labor, sharing stories and laughter over a beautifully prepared meal. The bonds formed over stirring pots of risotto or rolling meatballs carried an unspoken camaraderie that transcended the kitchen.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE CLASS

Not only did participants leave with a full stomach and a sense of pride in what they created, but they also walked away with an appreciation for the tradition and history behind each dish. They now knew how to pronounce the ingredients correctly in Italian, understood the techniques behind classic Italian dishes, and could confidently recreate them at home for friends and family.

This first-time cooking class at the Italian club wasn't just about learning to cook; it was also about experiencing the culture. It was a celebration of Italy's rich culinary history, a deep dive into the culture, and a reminder that food is more than just sustenance—it's a way to connect with others and tell stories that have been passed down for generations.