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Geographical Expressions

Il mio nome: Paola Geraci Calderone Tigani Corso. Two lines of Sicilian blood on my mother's side and on my father's, two of Calabrian. Just about everyone calls my heritage Italian.

Everyone except:

Relatives on both sides of my family who claim the half of me descending from their region. My parents' marriage was mixed, if you will, because in Italy, region trumps country.

Come and sit at the table with my relatives from Calabria and Sicily. Or from this region of Italy and that. When dinner is prepared and served, the scenario goes a little like this:

Pasta with egg or not with egg. Butter it up or oil it down.

To spike with chili peppers or not to spike. Accent sweet or accent salty.

Accent the contrast between the two.

Don't serve pasta at all.

Not tagliatelle or pappardelle. Not the little ears of orecchiette. Not the stuffed hats of cappelletti. Nor the hollow tubes of bucatini. Not even the flower fritters in tortellini.

Put rice on the table, a Lombardo risotto with beef marrow. A Molisano tripe dumpling. Ligure farinata flatbread.

No. Make it polenta.

Valdostano porridge with peas. Perhaps a Sardo couscous pilau.

“Pizza anyone?”

“Pizza pie or pizza bread,” a Campano asks.

Another region heard from: “Where’s the pork and eggplant,” a Calabrese wants to know.

“Spring lamb with anchovies,” says the Laziale.

And then the Marchigiano: “Spicy fish stew for me.”

On this table: cuisine as diverse as between countries. Regional differences in Italy go beyond food on the plate to climate and terrain, origins and history, dialects and cultures, attitudes and allegiances, socio-economic status. Ways of life.

Italy is a story of divide and conquer.

Of invasions and rule.

Of outside influences.

By Greeks, Romans, and Gauls, Carthaginians, Phoenicians, and Celts, Macedonians, Goths, Vandals, and Byzantines, by Lombards, Franks, Normans, Germans, the Catholic Church, and the French, Spaniards, Austrians, Russians, Arabs and Africans, Slavs and Syrians, Christians and Muslims.

The country is only 155 years old, a peninsula of politically fragmented states

for nearly 2,500 years longer than it's been united.

Of mainland and islands, coastline and mountain ranges, plains and forests, underground caves and active volcanoes.

Geography more diverse than the whole U.S. of A.

And within this country the size of Arizona, thousands of dialects are spoken With different vocabularies, accents, and grammar. Even villages as little as 10 miles apart in the same region in Italy speak different dialects. That's why my Sicilian relatives have trouble following my Calabrian relatives and vice versa. It's no surprise my Sicilian grandmother wanted me to marry a Sicilian man from her coastal town, Termini Imerese.

If not a Sicilian from Termini Imerese, then a Sicilian.

If not a Sicilian, an Italian.

Southern Italian.

A Risorgimento may have unified Italy in 1861, but the divide between the North and South continues. Despite the resurgence. Despite Garibaldi, Mazzini, and Benso. Despite all the women who dared to trade their skirts for trousers and join men on the frontlines. They were engaged in two battles at once—one against Italy's foreign oppressors, and one crossing gender boundaries.

We Southern Italians don't forget how we lost everything when the North took power. Decades of laws and violence against the South to concentrate Italy's

poverty in the southern regions and its wealth in northern ones.

Ancestors like mine didn't have many options:

Stay and starve.

Stay and resort to banditry.

Leave for the new world.

Memoirist Carlo Levi was right when he said that Christ stopped in Eboli.

Progress and prosperity went as far as that town below Naples. South of it was a life of misery.

My great grandparents, grandparents, and parents left their coastal and hill towns in Sicily and Calabria, very south of Eboli. They passed through Ellis Island, and settled in the Pittsburgh area. Family members found work in the steel mills, the glass plants, and the mirror works. As fruit vendors and bricklayers. So entwined are blue-collar workers with Southern Italian immigrants in my experience that I have a hard time separating one from the other. I identify with class as much as I do ethnicity.

I just might relate better to a blue-collar immigrant from another country than I would a Northern Italian immigrant who arrives to the States highly educated, professionally employed, and affluent.

Back to dinner:

Food rearranged on the table. Musical chairs. Italians from the North now sit at the upper end of the table. The Southerners are clustered at the lower end.

Conversation is made as they eat their pasta, their rice, their polenta and porridge. Their flatbread, couscous, and strudel.

The Northerners and Southerners don't understand each other.

Then a muttering. A Northerner calls Southerners "Terroni." Terra means "land" and terroni "farmers," but it's an offensive term that shows contempt for uneducated and uncultured Southerners. It's like calling someone dirt.

Another muttering. A Southerner calls Northerners "Polentone," or "polenta eater," a slur to the inferior cuisine and culture in the North.

Despite dialect and accent, the words Terroni and Polentone:

Loud and clear.

Italians are still divided over their unified history.

Some say that when Garibaldi united Italy, he divided Africa because Sicilians have more in common with Arabs and North Africa than the industrialized North.

Some say that when he united Italy, he divided Austria because South Tyroleans in the Alps have more in common with Germans than the more agricultural South.

For the anniversary of unification, most Italians wave red, green, and white flags and sing "Brothers of Italy," but the conservative Northern League, known for its separatist platform, doesn't celebrate. What they'd most likely celebrate is the North seceding from the South and their tax dollars staying up North instead of

going down to what they call the indolent Mafia-plagued South.

Some Southerners don't celebrate either.

So a country was made in the revolution. A "geographical expression" as it was called. Not a people.

Italy.

Not Italians.

At the dinner table: The North against the South.

At the dinner table: Quite possibly a food fight.

Comes a guest: *Americano. Americanu. Amerikanisch. Amriki. America'*.

At the dinner table: Italians.

Paola Corso is the author of six books of poetry and fiction, most recently *The Laundress Catches Her Breath*, winner of the Tillie Olsen Award in Creative Writing, and *Once I Was Told the Air Was Not for Breathing*. A New York Foundation for the Arts poetry fellow and Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award winner, Corso's nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Women's Review of Books*, *The Progressive*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and more.