

# The Buffalo News

## Life & Arts

### Image of Italian Americans is mired in crime, capos and Corleones

BY JOSEPH CONTE - NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

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An episode of the fourth season of the HBO series, *The Sopranos*, finds the Soprano crew agitated by the threat of a protest of the annual Columbus Day parade in Newark by the New Jersey Council of Indian Affairs, led by a Native American Studies professor at Rutgers. Silvio Dante, the Sopranos' family "consigliere," objects to this assault on his community's ethnic pride.

"Ultimately," he says to the boys, "it's anti-Italian discrimination."

Attempting to rally support from his boss, Tony Soprano, who considers the matter outside of his business purview, Silvio remarks that such battles are won in the media. "They attack your image; you attack theirs."

George De Stefano's *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* provides a nearly exhaustive rendition of the figure of the Mafioso in American film, television and literature, beginning with the gangster film genre in the 1930s, its development in the mythic patriarchal figure of Don Corleone in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and Francis Ford Coppola's triptych of films, and concluding with the suburbanized, psychoanalyzed and Suburban-driving boss, Tony Soprano, and even more crass imitators on network television and in Hollywood films. De Stefano points to the paradox that the "Mafia is flourishing in popular culture at a time when Italian American organized crime is on the decline."

As is generally agreed, La Cosa Nostra in the United States never claimed more than 5,000 members from among a population of Italian Americans in excess of 20 million. In the battle for the image of the Italian immigrant in America, it's disconcerting to see that the public imagination continues to be shaped by the figures of organized crime.

John Gotti, the "Dapper Don" beloved by the media for his flamboyant defiance, expired unshaven in prison, along with much of his business empire. But Victoria Gotti's fetid reality series, "Growing Up Gotti," airing on the Arts and Entertainment Network, continues to feed from the corpse of Gotti's shining Teflon image, and in turn nourishes the public impression of nouveau-riche Italian Americans as tasteless, uneducated, acquisitive *cafoni*.

Brief mention is given to the host of Italian American writers and filmmakers who decline to contribute to the popular image of the Mafia in America. Don DeLillo, one of the most important American writers of the past two decades, features a half-Italian American protagonist in his novel, *Underworld* (1997), who hails from DeLillo's Fordham Road neighborhood in the Bronx. Nick Shay can "do that voice" of the "gangster making threats" to amuse his co-workers, but he would otherwise prefer not to perpetuate the image. Yet his office mates are all just a bit scared of him. No doubt, Shay reflects DeLillo's own reluctance to become embroiled in the street fights over ethnic identity.

DeStefano's book provides an historical overview of the transformation of Italian immigrants, most escaping the agrarian poverty and political subjugation of the south of Italy and Sicily, into Italian Americans.

DeStefano's own family left the unemployment, famine and oppression of the Mezzogiorno behind them, only to encounter a northern-European, Protestant culture that classified these Mediterraneans as non-white, uneducable, and temperamentally prone to criminal violence.

If there's an American "success story" to be found in *An Offer We Can't Refuse*, it appears to be the transformation of some of these negative stereotypes through popular films. The gangster films of the 1930s were moralizing condemnations of the hoodlum as "public enemy" who gets what he deserves.

As the genre becomes largely identified with the Mafia after the publication of Puzo's novel in 1969, the Don is admired as a "reasonable man" (who nevertheless can't be refused), devoted to his blood-relation family and to the strict governance of his paramilitary family. His wife is the pious woman who reigns over the nurturing of children, the preparation of food, and the lighting of votive candles for the sick.

Yet the problem remains one of an identification of "Italianness" with criminality.

DeStefano, in his chapter "Don Corleone Was My Grandfather," recognizes that *The Godfather* presents us "with a paradox: the most vividly realistic and lovingly detailed depiction of Italian American life in the history of the movies was framed through the singular experience of an atypical group, a secret society of outlaws.

"The irksome image that Italian Americans had decried since the 1930s, when the Sons of Italy assailed *Scarface*, was now, thanks to Mario Puzo and Francis Coppola, more compelling, and, for many Americans, more persuasive than ever. 'Italianita' and 'criminalita' were now inextricably fused together in the popular imagination . . ."

Surely there are films and television series that include Italian American characters and yet don't pander to violent or comic representations of the Mafiosi. Stanley Tucci's *Big Night* (1997) features two brothers, Primo and Secondo, whose restaurant in New Jersey in the 1950's offers authentic regional Italian dishes to an American dining public comfortable only with baked ziti and meatballs. The dilemma of immigration is figured by the rift between the two brothers, as Primo, the proud chef, refuses to compromise his menu, and Secondo, the businessman, tries to hold off bankruptcy and assimilation by American industry.

As DeStefano notes, the film was a critical success but a modest box office draw. When Secondo's loan is called by the local bank, he doesn't seek out a Jersey mob loan shark for assistance.

Tucci all but begs his audience not to turn to the baked ziti in lieu of an authentic Italian American culture, but as we know from Carmela Soprano's success, it's simply irresistible.

Buffalonians wanting a taste of this dish can enjoy the interviews with the West Side's own Tom Fontana, producer of the television dramas "Oz" and "Homicide." When he identifies himself to a grade-school classmate as Sicilian, he's told, "Oh, so your father's in the Mafia."

Fontana reflects: "I had never heard the word 'Mafia' before—or if I'd heard it, it had never registered and never meant anything. So I go home and I say to my mother and father, 'Are we in

the Mafia?’ and my mother said, ‘No, honey. They didn’t want us.’” DeStefano’s book tells Italian Americans much about the origins and popularization of a dish that we don’t want, but apparently can’t refuse.

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*An Offer We Can’t Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America*

By George De Stefano

Faber and Faber

424 pages, \$23