

Tontitown Storia



The Newsletter of the Tontitown Historical Museum

Fall 2007, Vol. 3, No. 2

Saluti from the Board

After Tontitown Historical Museum's 4th Polenta Smear, Charlotte Piazza, curator of the museum, received a phone call from a newspaper reporter in Southern Italy. He had read about the Polenta Smear on Tontitown's web site. Having never heard of an Italian dish called polenta, he was curious as to the origin of the dish.

His phone call peaked our interest. How could an Italian raised in Italy not know about polenta? So, we did a little research of our own and would like to share our findings with our *Amici* (friends).

Pulmentum (polenta) dates back to the time of the Romans. It was served both as a mush, or firm enough to cut with string or a knife. Polenta was made with buckwheat until maize arrived in the 15th or 16th century. In Northern Italy, corn ranging in color from golden yellow to white became the grain of preference for making polenta.

Now considered a gourmet meal, prepared by famous chefs in many fine dining establishments, polenta was once food of the very poor. In centuries past, many people died when this simple meal was the only food in their diet. It did not contain all the nutrients needed to survive. In the 19th century, many Italians raised on polenta refused to eat it once they had a choice and a variety of food to select from.

In Italy the making of polenta is a tedious undertaking. A round bottom copper pot known as a *paiolo* and a long wooden stick known as a *tarello* are used in the art of polenta making. When the ingredients are put in the *paiolo*, blended and placed over a fire, the stirring process begins. The *tarello* is used to stir the polenta.



Stirring the Polenta Paiolo

l-r: Kevin Sbanotto, Daniel Sbanotto, Aaron Sabatini, Justin Pianalto, and Ben Sbanotto at the 2005 Polenta Smear

Photo by Brenda Pianalto

The process takes about an hour and requires constant stirring, until it reaches the consistency the cook desires, whether it is a soft mush or firm enough to pour on a board and cut into eatable portions. The basic polenta recipe is made with one pound of coarsely ground corn meal, two quarts boiling water (have more handy) and a heaping teaspoon of salt.

Lavinia Maestri Zulpo shares this story. One afternoon while visiting with Mary Pete Tessaro, her next-door neighbor, she asked what Mary was having for supper? Mary replied, "Polenta." Lavinia had learned to make

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Curator's Choice

By Charlotte Piazza and Bev Cortiana

With the onset of fall, we often think of harvest. The museum has several artifacts that may be of interest to you and might jog a memory of a harvest time gone by. You can see something and think, "Our family had one of those." Two examples are the Corn Sheller and Corn Grinder. One would be useless without the other.

Tontitown families used corn in many different ways. It was a multi-use crop providing for family as well as livestock. After shucking, the ear of corn went into the Corn Sheller and the corncob would come flying out. The collected corn kernels then went into the Corn Grinder. A thick grind was for chicken feed and a fine grind might be turned into polenta. Either way, the crop provided for the family. Stop by the museum to share your harvest stories or just enjoy learning something new from something old.



Tontitown Historical Museum Book Project



We are deep into the research for our book, *Tontitown: The First Twenty Years*. We'd like your help documenting the very early days of Tontitown. We need any of the following items from **1917, the year Father Bandini died, or earlier:**

- ◆ Naturalization records
- ◆ Marriage certificates
- ◆ Anything written/signed by Father Bandini: letters, cards, official documents, etc.
- ◆ Photos prior to 1917
- ◆ Land deeds/abstracts
- ◆ Tax records
- ◆ Newspaper articles
- ◆ Information on two financial supporters of Tontitown: Mr. Charles Renner of Springdale and Mr. J.E. Felker of Rogers
- ◆ Information on the Tontitown Township Company that was financed by J.E. Felker of Rogers sometime between 1900-1916
- ◆ Information regarding the railroad's involvement in Tontitown
- ◆ Holy cards/memorial cards (from funerals)
- ◆ Information on church services/religious events

If you have items stored in a cedar chest, photo album, or box under the bed, please bring them to the Polenta Smear for us to photocopy — we'll give them right back! If you are unable to do that, please call Denise Pellin (751-5771) or Susan Young (750-8165). We'll gladly make special arrangements to copy your documents. Thanks to all for helping to preserve Tontitown history!

Saluti from the Board ... continued

polenta from her father, Albano Maestri. He used the old method of stirring the pot. Puzzled, Lavinia inquired, "Aren't you afraid the polenta will burn if you are not stirring it." Laughing, Mary answered, "The stick doesn't make the polenta. The fire does!" Mary used a lid to cover her pot and simmered it slowly over low heat until the polenta was done.

Lavinia's father always turned his cooked polenta on a wooden board and patted it into a mound with the back of a plate. When it had cooled a little, he placed a piece of fine twine under the polenta, pulling in an upward direction he cut the polenta into portions, placed them on plates and served them with one of the many varieties of "umedo" (tomato-based sauce).

Leonard Pianalto recalls when neighbors and friends would get together and make polenta and umedo. They used a very large pot made for cooking outdoors over an open fire. Everyone pitched in, taking turns stirring the polenta, while others were busy making umedo. Often an added ingredient, a fifth of wine or some home brew, was added to the pot during the cooking process. In later years, the Knights of Columbus carried on this tradition known as a "Polenta Smear." They took the polenta party indoors and used a gas range and modern utensils. Tontitown Historical Museum honors this tradition each November with their Reunion and Polenta Smear.

Another Polenta Story: We do not remember the storyteller, but the story shows how food shared is part of the Italian Heritage, as well as how important family is to those of us who proudly share our Italian Heritage.

When his grandchildren came to visit, the grandfather of this family would make a large batch of polenta. After cleaning the top of a long table, he would spread the polenta down the middle of the table. He would then give each child a spoon and a chicken or wild game drumstick. Sitting in long rows on each side of the table and sharing this dish with family was a special time for everyone.

Today there are a number of methods for making polenta. One of the easiest is cooking it in the oven, and a quick method is using the microwave. This method is especially good when one wants to make a small amount. Here are the recipes.

OVEN-BAKED POLENTA:

2 cups of white or yellow cornmeal
2 cups of chicken broth
5 or 6 cups of water (depending on preferred thickness)
1 tablespoon salt

Set oven on 350 degree heat. Mix all ingredients together in a deep pot roast pan, and place in oven for 45 minutes to 1 hour. You may stir during cooking and check on doneness. For a richer dish, you can add 2 cups of grated cheese, your choice, when the polenta is removed from the oven.

MICROWAVE POLENTA:

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup cornmeal
3 cups broth
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon sea salt

Mix the cornmeal, broth, and salt in a 3-quart bowl. Cover and microwave on high for 8 minutes. Remove and stir briskly until well blended. Microwave for another 2 to 3 minutes for thicker polenta.

Do you have a favorite polenta or umedo recipe to share? If so, bring it with you when you come to the Polenta Smear on Sunday, November 4th. We look forward to seeing you there!

by Mary Frances Maestri Vaughan



Riley Tessaro and grandson Tyler Tessaro smear chicken umedo at the 2006 Polenta Smear. Yummy!

Photo by Brenda Pianalto

Family Focus ... The Mantegani Story

Sharing this story is a gift to my family.

By Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke

Daughter of Mano and Albina Mantegani Gasparotto
Granddaughter of Cesare and Rosa Fiori Mantegani

Editor's Note: We thank Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke for sharing memories and research of her Mantegani family heritage. Her complete story and research notes are on file at the Tontitown Historical Museum.

Cesare Mantegani, a descendant of Swiss Italians, came to America aboard the Cretic from Naples, Italy on January 14, 1905, at the age of 29. He was born February 22, 1876 in Valli de Signori (now known as Valli del Pasubio), Vicenza, Italy.

Cesare's father, Alesandro, and his younger sister, Angelina, came in 1907 aboard the La Lorraine from Havre, France. Angelina was just 19 when she came over. She married Ben Pianalto and lived in America 13 years. Angelina died in 1920 at the age of 32.

Cesare and Alesandro were stonemasons by trade, from Northern Italy, which is known for stonemasons who built castles and such. They both did the stonework on The Bariola House from 1910 to 1915, which is now on the National Register of Historic Places. They gathered nearby rocks and chiseled them into shape on the original three-story home. In 1927, Cesare handmade blocks using molds for the front two-story addition.



The Bariola House, before the 1927 addition

Cesare and Alesandro Mantegani did the stonework on this original house from 1910 to 1915.

Photo courtesy Joyce Penzo / Tontitown Historical Museum



**Cesare and Rosa Fiori Mantegani
Wedding Photo – July 5, 1906**

Photo courtesy Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke / Tontitown Historical Museum

Cesare's grandfather owned the Mantegani Hotel in Italy where Cesare lived, as well as a furniture factory in Switzerland. His ancestors had helped the Swiss government. In return, they were awarded land in Switzerland that was named for Mantegani, which kept that name up until recently when it was sold for back-taxes and the name changed.

Cesare married Rosa Fiori Ceola on July 5, 1906. They were married by Father Bandini. Rosa was one of Tontitown's original settlers from Sunnyside. She came over in 1897 at the age of 19 from Genoa, Italy with her then husband, 31-year-old Marco Ceola, and their 2-year-old son, Augusto (Gus) Ceola. They ran a boarding house in Oklahoma for coal miners. She had three more children by Marco: Dick, Joe, and Joe's twin sister who died. Marco died of a burst appendix, and at the age of 29, Rosa married Cesare. He was then 30 and working in the coal mines of Oklahoma. Rosa lived a total of 47 years in America, and Cesare lived 37 years here.

Rosa and Cesare made their home in Tontitown and had seven children. They had one son, Gildo, and six daughters: Norina (Stolfi), Cesarina (Bariola), Gemma (Bersi), Albina (Gasparotto), Lena (Stockton), and Palma "Beb" (Springston) (Estes).

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Tontitown Storia

Family Focus ... continued

Rosa took care of not only eleven children from two marriages; but her father, Domenico Fiori; her three brothers, Pete, Tony, and John; as well as John's daughter, Mary Fiori (Granata). This was a lot of laundry and cooking! And, it was all done with hand-drawn well water, and an outdoor stone oven – not to mention the old irons they used.

Cesare planted a vineyard and made his own wine, which he shared. He also used 30 acres for a small tomato cannery. Besides farming, he helped hand-make and set the stones for Tontitown's St. Joseph's School, Convent, and Church.

The Mantegani Winery was officially founded and bonded in 1935. Gildo Mantegani, Cesare's son, continued to run it after Cesare died in July of 1942. In 1959, Gildo sold the winery to Eugene Post with Mt. Bethel Winery in Altus. The original winery equipment is still in the hands of Eugene Post.

The Mantegani Winery is recorded to have a storage capacity of 70,000 gallons. (I knew those wood tanks I saw as a kid were awfully BIG!) This was about double the capacity of the then Altus Winery. The brands were



The Mantegani Winery labels

Labels courtesy Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke / Tontitown Historical Museum

White Diamond, Ruby Red, and Liberty Bell. Italian Queen was pulled off during the war, and the Delaware was pulled because it was deemed indecent because of a Betty Grable look-alike in a bathing suit on the label.

All of Cesare's children worked in the winery as well as on the farm. They also helped pour concrete for his handmade stones for the Church.

Cesare's daughter, Albina, became Tontitown's first Grape Festival Queen in 1932, at the age of 17. Her brother Gildo helped sell many tickets for her to win. The following year Albina married Germano (Mano) Gasparotto in a double wedding ceremony with her sister Norina and Ernest Stolfi. Father Sittre married them on September 26, 1933.

Ernest and Mano met in Detroit Michigan. While waiting for a bus, Mano decided to take his accordion out and play it. Ernest, thinking he was playing for money, threw some in the accordion case. They talked and found out that they were from the same vicinity in Italy and spoke the same dialect. They became fast friends and worked together on tile and terrazzo jobs all over the country.

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Cesare Mantegani Daughters Double Wedding – September 26, 1933

Attendants, l-r: Cesarina Mantegani, Joe Cozzi, Eileen Cigainero, Gildo Mantegani
Wedding Couples, l-r: Norina and Ernest Stolfi; Albina and Mano Gasparotto
Flower Girls, l-r: Annabelle Pozza and Mary Frances Maestri

Photo courtesy Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke / Tontitown Historical Museum

Family Focus ... continued

Then, Mano and Ernest discovered Tontitown, and Cesare's wine and daughters. Norina was engaged to someone else at the time, but Mano encouraged Ernest to ask her to marry him instead. Ernest did, and they had a double wedding ceremony.

My dad, Mano, was a tile and terrazzo man, but his love was building. He built many houses in his lifetime. One day Mano decided to build a restaurant (he loved cooking). So he went to New York and studied awhile under a chef. He came back and opened the *Venesian Inn*. Mano was from a village near Venice, however that was not the reason for the name. He named the restaurant the Venesian Inn because he put up a lot of venetian blinds in the restaurant. Mano also built the concrete planters in front where Albina would plant flowers. I would run the customers off by shooting my little bow and arrow at them, because they would sit on Momma's flowers.

Another of Cesare's daughters, Bebbba (the baby – Palma Clara), was one of the Rosie the Riveters at the Douglas Aircraft Company in Tulsa, Oklahoma during the war. (After that, she never would fly!)

Lena, another daughter, married Johnnie Woodrow (Woodie) Stockton in 1941. He worked at the Mantegani Winery until he went to war. In 1947, Lena and Woodie started *Woodie's Place* tavern in Tontitown. Woodie was also the mail carrier, played the fiddle at dances, and was on the Tontitown baseball team.

Cesare also worked on the famous tourist spot called Monte Ne, near Rogers. The tourists would get off the train and onto gondolas, which took them to an amphitheatre on the lake and then to the hotel. Beaver Lake now covers all this. Cesare put up 1/4 mile of wall on the estate. Gemma Bersi, another daughter, would go and cook for them. They all put their names in a mason jar (their time-capsule) and buried it in the pillar of an entrance to the estate, located on the road by Horseshoe Bend.

Cesare and Rosa are buried side-by-side in St. Joseph's cemetery in Tontitown, along with most of their children. Also buried there is Albina's first-born child, Mary Esther, who was a long and hard breech birth that nearly killed Albina and left her with physical problems all her life. That is why my Aunt Lena, her sister, was like a second mother to me and took care of me a lot. In Aunt Lena's memory and for all my family, I lovingly share this story. Viva la Mantegani!



Rosa and Cesare Mantegani family, mid-1920's

Standing, l-r: Joe Ceola, Dick Ceola, Gus Ceola, Norina, Cesarina, Gemma, Gildo, Albina
Front row, seated: Rosa and Cesare; Standing, l-r: Lena and Palma (Bebba)

Photo courtesy Rozetta Gasparotto Nelke / Tontitown Historical Museum

✓ *Mark Your Calendar ...*

2007-2008 Museum Events

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Event</i> |
|------------------------------------|--|
| November 4, 2007 | 6th Annual Tontitown Reunion and Old-fashioned Polenta Smear Co-sponsored by the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History St. Joseph's Parish Hall, 1 – 5 p.m. |
| May 2008 – date to be announced | Arkansas Heritage Month Museum Celebration Harry Sbanotto Park and Tontitown Historical Museum |
| June – October 2008 | Tontitown Historical Museum, Regular Season Hours Open Saturday's and Sunday's, 1 – 4 p.m. or by special appointment, call 361-2498 or 361-2607 |
| August 5-9, 2008 | 110th Tontitown Grape Festival, It's About Tradition Thursday, August 7 1 – 4 p.m. Friday, August 8 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. Saturday, August 9 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. |

In Memoriam

Earlier this year, the Tontitown Historical Museum Board was deeply saddened with the loss of two of our leaders, Danny Watson and Andy Franco. Under former Mayor Watson's direction, Tontitown city leaders created the Museum Board of Commissioners and a \$100,000 CD for museum expansion. Danny was a visionary and cheerleader for our efforts. Andy was an integral member of the Tontitown Preservation Project and the Museum Board Vice President from its inception. Andy was ready to help with any project, and his woodworking, handyman skills, and historical knowledge were invaluable. Danny and Andy, we miss you.

We are grateful for and permanently display recognition of memorial donations at the museum.

Donations In Loving Memory of ...

Cathy Ardemagni
Cecil Ardemagni
Gene and Irma Taldo Ardemagni
Candida Morsani Crane
Andy Franco
Russell Greenlee
Clementine Morsani Haney
LeeWana Bariola Keck
Amerigo Morsani
J.H. Pozza
Danny Watson

Donations In Honor of ...

Paul & Judy Maestri's 50th Wedding Anniversary

Tontitown Historical Museum, 2007 Board of Directors

The Tontitown Historical Museum Board welcomes your input and involvement. Please contact us with your ideas on how we can best serve the community.

Charlotte Piazza, Curator, 479-361-2498
Bev Cortiana, President, 479-361-2609
James Riley Tessaro, Vice President, 479-361-2607
Vanessa Sbanotto, Secretary, 479-361-9075
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Non-voting Junior Members:
Kara Jo McKinley, 479-361-2134
Kevin Sbanotto, 479-361-9075

Tontitown Storia is published in the Spring and Fall by the Tontitown Historical Museum Board. We welcome your input. Please submit story ideas or other comments to Newsletter Editor, Bev Cortiana at 479-361-2609.



Join Tontitown Historical Museum Amici (Friends)

- ☒ Yes, I want to be a charter member of Tontitown Historical Museum Amici!

Benefits:

- ✓ Satisfaction in supporting the growth of the Tontitown Historical Museum to preserve and protect the heritage of Tontitown.
- ✓ Receive annual membership card.
- ✓ Receive special invitations to museum events, including the Annual Tontitown Reunion and Polenta Smear.

Mail your tax-deductible check to:
Tontitown Historical Museum
P.O. Box 144
Tontitown, AR 72770
(or give it to any Museum Board member)

Annual Membership Levels

- ☐ Individual – \$10
- ☐ Family – \$20
- ☐ Senior Individual – \$8
- ☐ Senior Family – \$15
- ☐ Sponsor – \$50 to \$250
- ☐ Lifetime – \$250+

Name _____

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257 E. Henri de Tonti Boulevard
P.O. Box 144
Tontitown, Arkansas 72770

Tontitown Storia
Fall 2007 - Vol. 3, No. 2
insert follows



6th Annual Tontitown Reunion & Old-fashioned Polenta Smear

Tradition with a Smear

by Loretta Brunetti

The time is almost here
For Our annual Polenta Smear
So mark your calendar with the special date
Get here early and don't be late
Bring old pictures of relatives and friends
Let's add to Our Heritage so it never ends
Old newspaper articles are needed too
This helps document facts that are really true
We'll sample some Polenta and visit with kin
And reminisce about the past, where it all began
We'll gather together with God's Blessings from above
That's the Tradition of Tontitown, a Place built with Love.

Sunday, November 4
St. Joseph's Parish Hall
1:00 – 5:00 pm

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Polenta & Umedo, Dessert served | 2:00 – 3:30 |
| Short program that is sure to make you laugh – “The Coffee Pot Song” & more | 2:30 |
| Visit, look at photo displays, copy photos, update Tontitown Genealogy, have fun! ☺ | 1:00 – 5:00 |

40 Acres

by Kathy Pianalto Miller

I got this 10 from my Dad,
He wished each child 10 before he died.
3 are here to keep it cut and groomed,
1 is two hours away with pride of home.

He got this 40, with help from his Dad,
Married Mom in 48 and had 5 children.
One died at birth, 4 to carry on his legacy,
4 hard-working children with a mind of their own.

Died in 1975 Dad lives strong in our hearts today.
Knowing he was hard and strict on us growing up,
He seemed so old, but died so young at age 51,
Far too young for this strong and powerful man to go.

He helped the ones in need when needy,
We help the ones in need when needy.
He had that look in his eye we all know,
That second son has that look in his eye.

Dad would be proud of his 4 children today,
We take our heritage from him with pride.
His strong will and Momma's caring heart,
Makes us 4 children complete.

Remember, Thank You is not a forgotten word.
Respect your elders still applies.
Take nothing for granted,
Especially home, land, and heritage.

Celebrate Our Heritage ...

6th Annual Tontitown Reunion & Old-fashioned Polenta Smear

Sunday, November 4, 1 - 5 pm at St. Joseph's Parish Hall
Be sure to stop by the Tontitown Genealogy table
and update your information.