

# A knack for nicknames

BY JOSEPH SCIORRA

When we were growing up, my sister and I were convinced that my mother was losing her memory. While she had no trouble recalling dates, places and events long gone, my mother always had problems remembering names. Christian and surnames of close friends and even relatives had long been substituted by nicknames. This was most pronounced at the holiday dinner table as conversation invariably turned to family stories. With the introduction of an unfamiliar character one of us kids would ask:

Who was that, ma?

You know! *U' Zamp'!* The cripple. He had a bad leg from the time he fell of the scaffolds at work.

You mean Zia Margarita's nephew?

No, that was *compare* Tonino.

Then who?

You know! *U' Zamp'!* The one that got into that fight with *u' pazz'* that lived upstairs from your *comare* Philomena.

No, who was that?

*U' Zamp'!* The one that married Henrietta, your father's *paesan'*.

Ahhh! You mean the old man who always complained that he should have married someone from his home town?

That's him.

And what was his name, ma?

*U' Zamp'!* His name was *U' Zamp'!*

It wasn't until later that I came to understand that my mother's preference for substituting given names with nicknames is not an idiosyncratic "problem" but is part of a long-standing tradition.

The English traveler Norman Douglas was aware of this naming system when he journeyed through southern Italy at the turn of the century. In his book "Old Calabria," Douglas relates a humorous but frustrating experience in a village where many of the *contadini* shared both first and last names. Despite the villagers' help, Douglas was unable to locate an individual without the person's *contranome* or *soprano* (nickname). Douglas notes that women were occasionally given nicknames, but men were the usual recipients.

The use of nicknames continues in modified forms in present-day Italian communities throughout the United States. "Italian Williamsburg," a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York is a good example of what some people nostalgically remember as "the old neighborhood." Kids play stickball on the streets, men fly pigeons from rooftop coops, and women sit at window sills and keep tabs on everything below. And as one man told me, "This is a nick-

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## Nicknames

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name neighborhood."

It's a place where you can meet people named Freddie "Mush," or Nicky "Lemons." A cop who once walked the neighborhood beat is fondly remembered simply as "Ziggie." And how about "Todd Green," the son of Sicilian immigrants? "Todd Green"? Now there's a story. His parents named him Salvatore but called him by the Sicilian diminutive, "*Tuddoro*," which his friends Americanized to "Todd." As the story goes, Sal/Tuddoro/Todd bought an automobile which sat in front of his parents' house because he was left without any money to fill the gas tank. His full nickname arose out of the playful creativity of children who composed and sang the following ditty: *Todd Green! And his limousine, / Without a thimble full of gasoline.*

Todd Green, a Sicilian kid from Brooklyn.

This is just one of the ways nicknames are invented. Some appellations take the form of abbreviations ("T.J."), while others are truncated versions of longer Italian names ("Jimmy Dell" or "Ritchie Cats"). As we've seen, the Americanization of Italian diminutives ("*Tutti*" from "*Tuddoro*"; "*Chi Chi*" from "*Che Che*" for Francisco), is another method used. Some names are attributed to a person's physical appearance ("Polack," because a man had blond hair), personality ("He's called 'Buster' because he likes to bust chops") or occupation ("Sarge" once held that position as an employee for the Sanitation Department). Some nicknames are considered offensive and are only used behind people's backs, such as "*U' Morte*" (Death) for a fellow with a bad case of halitosis.

Other nicknames are passed on from one generation to the next. The American-born son of Giuseppe "*U' Fumm'*" or Giuseppe "Smoke" was dubbed "Smokey Joe." One man is known as "*Pasta Asciutta*" (Dry Pasta), and by the subsequent

derivatives "Pasty" or "Bostie." He acquired his nickname through his paternal grandfather, who won a bet for eating the most spaghetti without tomato sauce. Because "Bostie's" maternal grandfather was a butcher by trade and his immigrant clients referred to him as "U' Butch'," his children are now known in the neighborhood as "Larry Butch," "Angie Butch," and "Iky Butch."

These nicknames have so replaced those given at birth that one man reported losing a local parish council election because friends did not recognize his real name on the list. This fact is not lost on one local politician, who circumvents any mistaken identity by placing both his given name and his nickname on all campaign literature that appears in the area. Though the practice of giving people nicknames has subsided somewhat with the present generation, children continue to acquire new names. One 10-year-old boy proclaimed, "Even my father calls me 'Burger'."

For many Italian Americans, the nickname is a touchy subject. The media thrives on including the colorful appellations of *mafiosi* and as a result nicknames have obtained negative associations. Newspapers and television rarely included the nicknames of arrested businessmen and indicted politicians. Nicknames have long been part of criminal argot, organized or not, Italian or not.

While nicknames are practiced by various ethnic groups and can be found the world over, they have special meaning for Italian Americans. For those who grew up together in "the old neighborhood," the custom of bestowing nicknames contributes to a sense of identity and community. Nicknames evoke memories of the past, of family members, *paesani*, and old cronies. When a nickname is uttered a visual image of that person is conjured up, the story of how it was acquired is concisely retold, and a flood of associations and sentiments is released. With each nickname there is a story, a memory, a lifetime shared together. It's no wonder my mother had such a hard time remembering people's names. Nicknames say so much more.