Damon Palermo's grandfather used a mule cart to bring produce to market prior to the widespread use of trucks. Photo courtesy of Damon Palermo.

Italians Plant Roots in Houston

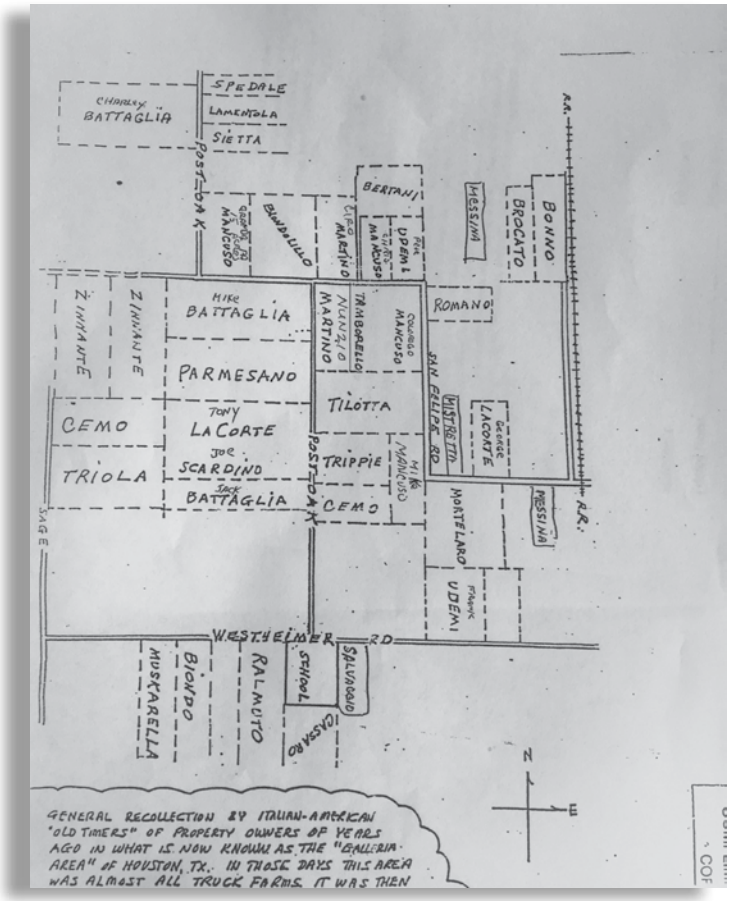
By Sabine Meyer Hill

Not long ago—before Houston paved over the Post Oak area, before skyscrapers riddled the downtown and medical center landscapes, before subdivisions became the norm on the outskirts of town—the banks of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous in downtown were home to a thriving marketplace. Large plots of land within the city limits held expansive urban farms and gardens that provided Houstonians with fresh fruit and vegetables and their cultivators with a chance at making a life in their new home.

Houston, Texas, is widely regarded as a city built by immigrants and now ranks as the nation's most diverse large city.[1] People commonly think of Houston's immigrant population as coming from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. But if we look a little deeper, we find a thriving Italian community, coming mainly from Sicily, that has greatly contributed to Houston's progress. Even more surprising considering Houston's reputation as an industrial, developed city is that a great majority of these Sicilian immigrants managed to establish farms in what have become some of modern Houston's most developed areas: Post Oak and Airline Drive. Each successive generation progressed into a more modern area of the food business. Nevertheless, these early farmers made it possible for their families to thrive and contribute to the development of the Houston we know today.

Like many groups, Sicilians began immigrating to Houston in large numbers in the late 1800s due to difficult conditions in their homeland. Their history is most accessible through the oral accounts of their descendants. Nuncio Martino, the eighty-five-year-old grandson of Nunzio Martino, a Sicilian immigrant truck farmer, says his ancestors had trouble getting the most basic goods like wheat for pasta and bread. So they came to the United States in hopes of a more prosperous future. Most Sicilian immigrants departed from Genoa on the Italian mainland and entered the United States through the port of New Orleans with their sights set on farmland in Houston's vicinity: the Brazos Valley, Diboll, and Dickinson. Between 1870 and 1920, the Italian population in Texas grew from 186 to 8,024. By 1980, Italian descendants residing in Texas totaled 189,799.[2] The region's climate and soil were similar enough to Sicily's to welcome the farming they were familiar with, so upon arriving in their new home they relied on what they knew best: food. A central component in Sicilian culture, food held the key to surviving in the United States. Nuncio Martino and Damon Palermo, another member of Houston's Sicilian community, say that their relatives were no longer in charge of their own destiny in Sicily. They came to the United States because they felt that they had no other choice, and they made the best of it.

The Post Oak area, now home to the Galleria, had a completely different landscape during the first half of the twentieth century; it was home to some of the earliest and most extensive Sicilian farms and homesteads. More than twenty Sicilian families owned land in this area. Many others held ninety-nine or one-hundred-year land leases. The farmers among them operated so-called truck farms, growing food for their families and community and hauling the surplus produce to markets around the city to be sold. Weather permitting, they grew produce like tomatoes,



Prior to 1950, the Post Oak area was home to numerous Italian family farms as shown on this map. Photo courtesy of Nuncio Martino.

peppers, and squash. More common were hearty greens like mustards and collards that could stand up to Houston's weather extremes. The market where most of the truck farmers started out was located at the corner of Preston and Smith Street in downtown Houston. The market itself was up on a hill. The farmers backed their trucks into stalls they rented to sell their produce. Down the hill, across the bayou on Preston Street, one could find chickens and watermelons for sale. Past that was the mule barn, the parking garage of those days.

Nuncio Martino remembers his father's descriptions of his experiences as a fifteen-year-old in the early 1920s, loading the wagon at night in Post Oak, hitching up the mule, and going to market with a sixty-five cent allotment from his father. Twenty-five cents went to parking the wagon at the market, twenty-five cents went to parking the mule in the market barn, and the remaining fifteen cents went to feeding the mule. He had to sell some produce before he could buy himself something to eat![3]

Beginning in the 1940s, the produce business shifted to the area in North Houston near the intersection of Airline Drive and Little York, known to Sicilians as Tarruco. In 1942 the Farmer's Cooperative Marketing Association of Houston established a farmers market at 2520 Airline Drive. A produce terminal was built further north off Wayside Drive, and the farmers and wholesalers gravitated towards this area as development altered the landscape of Houston's downtown and the Post Oak area. The downtown market closed down completely in 1957. One Sicilian family, the Caninos, farmed land off Little York Road in North Houston. When the Airline Drive market opened, they were among the farmers who started selling their produce there. In 1958 Joe Canino, Jr. began leasing the market space from the Farmer's Cooperative Marketing Association, opening Canino Produce Company.[4]

One of the few Sicilian farming families still operating a small-scale farm in the Houston area is the Atkinson family, descended from the Monachinos of the Airline Drive area. Mike Atkinson's father, Sam Monachino, sold produce to Weingarten's and grocery stores around Houston while also operating a grocery store. Atkinson and his son now farm a 100-acre property in Spring, Texas, that Atkinson's grandfather purchased in 1961 and sold to him upon retiring in 1991.[5] Their produce can be found in farmers markets and restaurants around the city as well as in the farm store they operate on site.

In the 1950s, Italian farms disappeared from the Post Oak landscape. Widening roads at the Westheimer intersection paved the way for the growing retail area, first with Sakowitz in 1959 and Joske's in 1963 followed by the Galleria in 1970.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-0283r.

As Houston grew and developed, pushing farmers further out from the center both geographically and in terms of the city's focus, the United States also saw improved shipping and refrigeration technologies. Both factors contributed to a shift from local farms to transnationally and internationally sourced produce. Mirroring this shift was the generational change in Sicilian families from occupations on farms to employment in the produce wholesale and resale business. Not one to be left behind, Nuncio Martino's father, born in 1908 on his own father's farm in Post Oak, became a produce buyer for Weingarten's at age nineteen. Weingarten's became the largest produce retailer in the Houston area; the number of local stores under the Weingarten's name peaked at twenty-seven. Nuncio followed in his father's footsteps to become a produce buyer for Weingarten's and remained in the business for forty-five years, also working for Northside Banana beginning in 1958.

The produce business was no easy game. Buyers arrived at the market around two in the morning to choose the best produce and get their purchases on the shelf in time. This

The downtown market in the 1930s offered grocers and farmers the chance to buy and sell the freshest local produce to Houston customers.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0200-0383.

daily affair meant long hours for everyone along the food chain just as farming had been for the generations before. Camello Palermo, a Sicilian American grocery store owner who passed away in 2018, likened the business to a jail sentence: the repetitive days and constant work that kept him chained to his store took its toll. But during hard times, the consistent demand for food and the work of people like the Sicilians in the food business was a blessing. Through the two World Wars and the Great Depression, the Sicilian community stayed afloat due in large part to the ability of its members to provide food for themselves and others through their work as farmers, grocers, and restaurateurs.[6]

Until the early 1980s, Pauline and Jimmy Tamborello owned a grocery store inherited from Jimmy's father on Lyons Avenue in Houston's Fifth Ward. Pauline remembers her in-laws breaking down bags of bulk goods like flour and sugar into quantities that struggling families could purchase for ten or twenty-five cents. This "dime pack business" kept people fed through the hardest of times.[7] The Tamborellos recall their families selling their customers food on credit and that this kind of service allowed family-run grocery stores to remain competitive even after large chain stores monopolized the market. Jimmy Tamborello adds that, during those times, they sold meats like rabbit, possum, and raccoon in their store, as those were what people could afford. They sourced this meat from a farm in Madisonville, Texas, that they visited every Sunday. In the store, the Tamborellos left a foot on each animal as proof that they were not selling dog meat.

The conditions under which many Sicilian immigrants were raised—both the parenting methods and the economic and political situation—led to a community that places a high value on its food and allows very little to go to waste. Meat was uncommon when Nuncio Martino was coming up; vegetables and pasta were the staples, though this did not please everyone. He had a Sicilian friend who once thought he had his fill of pasta. Upon announcing this to his mother at meal time, she informed him that they did not have anything other than pasta and directed him to sit out on the porch if he did not want any. Eventually, his hunger overtook him, and he returned to the table for his bowl of pasta.

Nuncio Martino's grandfather with the last name Trambatori was the first of his family to come to the United States in the late 1800s. He left his wife, four daughters, and his son waiting in Sicily as he made a place for himself by building a pushcart and selling produce for pennies and nickels. Celebrating Christmas without her husband in Sicily, Mrs. Trambatori wanted to buy meat for her family for the first time that year. She traded her valuables to purchase a small portion of meat and had to hide it away on her way home so as not to make the neighbors wonder. Meat was so expensive in those days that it took drastic measures to make it available for a household. By 1898, Trambatori earned enough to bring his family to the United States. Selling food gave him the opportunity to make a life for his family, and this coupled with living through scarce times gave them and families like them a great appreciation for their food that has trickled down through the generations.[8]

Every March, Sicilian households and community organizations create altars to San Giuseppe, Saint Joseph in English. They start preparing as early as January, making elaborate decorations, baking unleavened breads with ornate designs, and laying out vegetables, fruits, and sometimes fish, once the holiday arrives. The altars, or tavola, are dressed in the finest of linens and typically blessed by a priest. This tradition dates back centuries in Sicily. The Christian legend, recounted by Nuncio Martino and Damon Palermo, is rooted in a severe drought during the Middle Ages for which the Sicilians prayed to their patron saint, Saint Joseph, to intercede to God on their behalf. According to the story, God ended the drought thanks to San Giuseppe's intercession, and the Sicilians began their Tavola di San Giuseppe tradition. Carrying on the tradition begun by their ancestors, Sicilians as far from their homeland as Houston continue giving thanks to their patron saint for their harvest bounty and strong families every

year by crafting their altars to the highest standards and laying out the best foods that nature offers them. Local Sicilian women like Damon Palermo's grandmother whose sons were drafted into World War II made promises to San Giuseppe to celebrate him with an altar for up to five years in exchange for their sons' safe return.[9]

Saint Joseph may have relieved the Sicilians' first food crisis, but in the late 1800s the best answer to the scarcity of money and food was to emigrate to the United States and replant their roots. The longest-running Italian American social organization in Houston, Sacred Heart Society of Little York, is one channel this group has maintained to stay connected with its past and its food culture. Formed in 1923 in the backroom of a mom-and-pop grocery store at the intersection of Airline Drive and Little York Road owned by Tony Porcarello, it began as an organization of Roman Catholic community leaders under the guidance of Father D. Viola. In 1953 the organization established a permanent meeting location on East Whitney Street in North Houston, where it still operates today.

The organization, made up of Sicilian and Italian men in the Houston community, meets monthly to discuss the business of the organization and hosts frequent social engagements for their family and guests. Until 2018, every Thursday for sixty-five years the hall hosted a pasta lunch with Sicilian American home staples like spaghetti, homemade gravy, or sugo, Italian sausage, meatballs, Italian bread-crumb crusted baked chicken, and eggplant or melanzane. Despite being tucked away in an industrial area of the city, this event fed several hundred diners every week. "Food is the central theme," as Damon Palermo, current president of Sacred Heart Society says, and "all are invited." Reflective of the appreciation of food and community that Sicilians are known for, Palermo says Pasta Thursday was an attraction for comfort food with friends "the way we grew up." Social organizations like Sacred Heart are powerful in keeping newly arrived ethnic communities afloat and allowing them to thrive in an otherwise unfamiliar place. As the Italian community flourished and integrated itself into Houston, Sacred Heart's events became a place to share its cultural pride with the rest of the city as well as to keep younger generations in touch with the traditions and values of their ancestors abroad.[10]

Also active in Houston's cultural community is the Italian Cultural and Community Center, which hosts dinners, puts on language and cooking classes, celebrates an Italian festival, and organizes a wide range of lectures and other events. Established in 1976, this organization's mission is "to advance, celebrate and preserve Italian culture and heritage."[11] Families and individuals from across the Houston area's Italian and Sicilian community collaborated to put together two editions of their individual and shared histories for future generations and the greater Houston community to benefit and learn from them.

Due in large part to a strong network and deep roots developed as a result of the success of early farmers and entrepreneurs, members of the Sicilian and Italian community have had a profound impact on building Houston from the ground up. The community built Saint Michael Catholic Church in the Post Oak area. An uncle of Nuncio Martino's planted the shrubbery at Rice Institute, now Rice University, as groundskeeper. Members of the Ferrari family grew oak trees in the Post Oak area that they sold to be planted throughout the city. The Italian Montalbano family established successful lumber and tire businesses in Houston. Restaurants like Carrabba's Italian Grill, Tony's, and Mandola's, to name just a few, come from the Sicilian community and have become household names across the greater Houston area. Some Sicilians worked in leadership at Weingarten's—Nuncio Martino and his father, Angelo Trippi, and others. Smaller grocery stores were common as well. The Porcarello family, the Palermos, the Tamborellos, the Biandolas, the Ragusas, and others ran small-scale stores that bought produce from farmers and sold it to the Houston community. Camello Palermo remembered selling summer sausage to workers of all ethnicities out of his store in Houston's Fourth Ward. He was born in his grandparents' grocery store at West Dallas and Columbus Street. Weighing in at over eleven pounds, Palermo tipped the scale at his grandparents' store where his family weighed him at

Father and son Harris and Joseph Weingarten opened their first Weingarten's in 1901. This store is shown circa 1930, about the time Nuncio Martino's father became a produce buyer for the grocery chain. The business grew to include seventy stores advertising "better for less."
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0334-1025.

Camello Palermo's Sicilian American grocery store was located in Houston's Fourth Ward. Photo courtesy of Damon Palermo.

his birth. Immigrant families like the Palermos, seeking refuge from harsh conditions in their homelands, brought positive and lasting changes to Houston in the form of their culture and entrepreneurship.[12]

Damon Palermo explains that, in the Sicilian culture, food is synonymous with love. Positive food associations have led to recipes and cooking methods being passed down through generations. He learned to make the Italian sausage from his youth by testing recipe after recipe on older members of the Sicilian community like his father. He was raised eating cucuzza, a squash that grows to the size of a baseball bat, and on a return visit to Sicily, he brought back seeds to plant in his own garden. Every year Palermo and others bring their children to learn cooking traditions like the Tavola di San Giuseppe food preparation from older generations. He first brought his youngest son at the age of eight and assigned him the job of rolling out dough for cuccidati, or fig cookies, under the guidance of a Sicilian woman in their community who corrected his technique until he had learned the skill for life.[13]

The grocery business, which many Sicilians first entered, was made up of family-owned businesses that maintained a constant customer base in their neighborhoods. As technology and U.S. agriculture changed, however, larger chain stores took over. A&P, Henke & Pillot—which later became part of the Kroger brand—and Weingarten's were some of the largest. A&P, the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, was technically in the market since its founding in 1896. Weingarten's opened its first store in 1901. Kroger began operating in the 1920s.[14] But mom-and-pop stores under Sicilian ownership stayed in business until a combination of convenient one-stop supermarkets, efficient shipping and refrigeration technology, and the dispersion of the city's population across suburbs catalyzed their decline. More sizeable stores gained the competitive advantage and eventually pushed the majority of smaller, family-owned stores out of the trade.

Italian restaurants remain mainstays in Houston's food landscape, but the rest of the food industry continues to change. Canino Produce was originally established by an Italian immigrant family and changed to reflect the makeup of Houston's agricultural workforce and the demographics of the surrounding area, which are largely Hispanic. The produce sold there shifted from local fruits and vegetables to ones imported from Mexico or California. The market area is approaching another potential shift in landscape as the developer MLB Capital Partners, who purchased the property in 2017, makes plans to create a "cleaner, safer environment" and add in a pavilion and green space. The grocery portion of Canino Produce ultimately closed its doors in January 2019.

New trends particularly among affluent buyers include buying locally grown, organic produce, eating out frequently, online grocery shopping, and grocery delivery services. Physical store locations still seem to appeal to many people, but the consumer expectations among groups with high buying power continue to change. Low-income shoppers with little purchasing power find significantly less access to fresh foods due to Houston's widespread food deserts, where geography and economic constraints limit residents' access to healthy and affordable food.[15] The wide range of consumer needs in the food industry provide abundant access points for entrepreneurs to feed people and do good. With its historical stance at the forefront of food service movements in Houston, it will be interesting to see where the Italian community ventures next.

Sabine Meyer Hill is a Houston native and a senior in the University of Houston Honors College majoring in Spanish and minoring in Food and Society. When she is not doing schoolwork or field work—learning about other cultures and eating their foods—she likes to read, write, garden, and cook. She works at a farmers market produce booth on the weekends and hopes to develop a career in food access once she graduates.

Established in 1958, Canino Produce, shown here in 2018, sold all types of produce, including avocados, pineapples, citrus fruits, and pistachios, adding to the variety of locally farmed produce. Photo courtesy of Alexander Beck.