■ By Mother Martha

Happy 100th Birthday, "Tramezzino"

This Italian tea sandwich owes its creation to Detroit, Michigan

In 1919, with her parents' blessing, 15-year-old Angela Demichelis left Turin, Italy and crossed the Atlantic by herself, arriving in Detroit to become the child-bride of 30-year-old fellow-Torinese Onorino Nebiolo. With his brothers and their families, he owned several restaurants and night-clubs.

The couple soon had two children, Felice, named for his paternal grandfather, and Gloria, for the in-vogue actress Gloria Swanson, but motherhood didn't stop the ever-enterprising Angela from becoming one of the first women in the United States to obtain a driver's license. Ambitious and stubborn, she did so to help the families' businesses, her responsibility being to drive alone to Canada to buy contraband liquor during the beginning of Prohibition. Not surprisingly, the local Italian-American mafia soon discovered her escapades. When it threatened to kidnap Felice if she didn't stop, the young family decided to return to Turin, bringing with them a newly-invented pop-up toaster.





Above, a *tramezzino* at Caffè Mulassano; below, the entrance to Caffè Mulassano. (Courtesy of Caffè Mulasssano)

Safely home again, in 1925 the couple decided to invest their savings by buying the license of the small but fashionable Caffè Mulassano, still in existence in Turin today, at Piazza Castello 15. The price: 300,000 lire. Here they introduced the American staple "toast," but when it wasn't a success — because the bread consumed in Italy at the time (and still today: large crusted loaves) wasn't appropriate for "toasts" — they switched to making small sandwiches using the soft white bread (*pancarré*) they'd become accustomed to in Detroit, but first cutting away the crust and never heating the bread.





Left, the book cover of Salvatore Tipodi's biography of Angela Demichelis Nebiolo. Right, a portrait of Gabriele D'Annunzio.(*Wikipedia*)

Not unlike the British tea sandwich, designed to be consumed in a couple of mouthfuls so as not to get your fingers dirty, they were served by the Nebiolos to accompany, not tea, but a morning coffee or the afternoon aperitif of Vermouth, and soon *tramezzini* were the rage — but no longer called "sandwich."

Instead, the term "*tramezzino*" was the brainchild of Gabriele D'Annunzio, the revered poet but also famous for his heroic pro-Fascist activities and his refined palate. Although he lived at his villa on Lake Garda, the "Vittoriale," now a museum full of Fascist memorabilia and the Vate's (a title previously reserved exclusively for Dante Alighieri) enormous art collection, he made frequent visits to Turin, the birthplace and production center of his great love, cinema, and he often stopped at the Caffè Mulassano.

During Fascism, words in foreign languages were considered unpatriotic, so D'Annunzio substituted "sandwich" with "*tramezzino*." His choice originated from the word, *tramezzo*, meaning "something in between" referring to the wall or partition dividing living space into rooms, or more likely either a small snack between meals or the filling between two square-shaped slices of *pancarré* cut diagonally into triangles.

In the following years, the popularity of the *tramezzino* spread to other caffés in Turin, and gradually to other Italian cities. Its strength lay in its simplicity: it was easy to prepare (at first filled with butter and anchovies), convenient to eat, and allowed for endless combinations of fillings, with new ones still being created today, even by three-star Michelin chefs like Matteo Baronetto, from 2014-25 at Turin's Del Cambio, Cavour's favorite restaurant, where a table is still set for him daily.

A crucial role in its growing popularity was also played by the magazine *La Cucina Italiana*, which published several of the *tramezzino*'s early recipes in 1936. Since then, the *tramezzino* has become a permanent fixture of Italian daily life, served at buffets, family celebrations and lunch breaks.

On a recent visit, I stopped at Caffè Mulassano, for Turin's best I headed to Tramezzino Torino, Trivè Time, Bar Zucca and Caffè Platti. If you speak Italian and want to know more about the history of the Caffè Mulassano, Turin's "*tramezzini*" and Angela Demichelis Nebiolo, order her biography *La signora del Mulassano* by Salvatore Tripodi from Amazon. For example, here you'll learn that in 1938 Angela and Onorino stopped making "*tramezzini*," sold the Caffè Mulassano and, probably on D'Annunzio's advice, bought five movie theaters.❍