

Food & Wine

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The Tramezzino Turns 100: How an Italian Sandwich Was Born in Detroit

A century after its Turin debut, this beloved Italian tea sandwich traces its origins to Prohibition-era Michigan



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



A tramezzino from Caffè Mulassano (Photo: Luigi Bertello / PHO-TO.IT)

The “tramezzino,” the Italian version of the British tea sandwich, is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. Although first served in Turin, it owes its creation to Detroit.

From Turin to Detroit and back again

In 1919, with her parents’ blessing, 15-year-old Angela Demichelis left Turin 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 nightclubs.

The couple soon had two children, Felice, named for his paternal grandfather, and Gloria, for the 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.



Caffè Mulassano in Turin's Piazza Castello (Photo: © Luigi Bertello / PHO.TO.IT)

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 today, at Piazza Castello 15, for 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 (large, thick-crust 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, cutting away the crust and never heating the bread. Not unlike the British tea sandwich, designed to be consumed in a couple of mouthfuls so as not to get your fingers dirty, the Nebiolos served them to accompany not tea but a morning coffee or the afternoon aperitif of vermouth, and soon tramezzini were the rage, but were no longer called “sandwiches.”

D’Annunzio coins a name

Instead, the term “tramezzino” was the brainchild of Gabriele D’Annunzio, the revered poet also known for his pro-Fascist activities and his refined palate. Although he lived at his villa on Lake Garda, the “Vittoriale,” now a museum full of Fascist



Gabriele d'Annunzio (Photo: Archivio Storico Ricordi, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

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, so 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 either to the wall or partition dividing living space into rooms, or, more likely, to a small snack between meals or the filling between the two square-shaped slices of pancarré cut diagonally into triangles.

A century of endless fillings

In the following years, the popularity of the tramezzino spread to other caffès 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 slowly allowed for endless combinations of fillings, with new ones still being created today, even by three-star Michelin chefs like Matteo Baronetto, at Turin's Del Cambio from 2014-25, Cavour's favorite restaurant, where a table is still set for him daily.

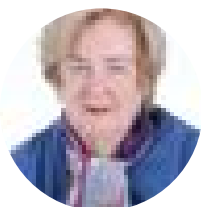
A crucial role in its growing popularity was also played by the magazine La Cucina Italiana, which published several of the tramezzino's early recipes in 1936. Since then, the tramezzino has become a permanent fixture of Italian

daily life, served at buffets, family celebrations, and lunch breaks. On a recent visit, I took Guida Torino's advice: besides Caffè Mulassano, for Turin's best tramezzini, head to Tramezzino Torino, Trivè Time, Bar Zucca, and Caffè Platti.

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