



*Salt
Yeast
Flour
& Water*

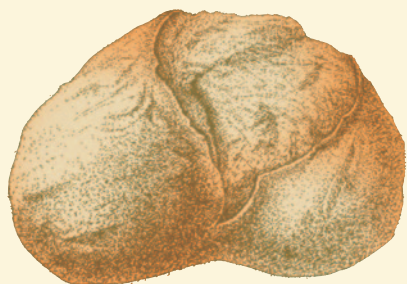
Recollections of Dom Castellitto



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A chapbook from the “Vanishing Hoboken” series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project



Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum and
the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

The views expressed in this publication are those of the
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All photographs in this chapbook are by Robert Foster, 2019,
including the cover photo of Dom Castellitto, unless otherwise
noted. Drypoint etching (above) of one of Dom's breads by
John Procyk.

*This is salt, yeast, flour,
and water. That's it.*

—Dom Castellitto at Dom's Bakery,
August 21, 2019



New Prices

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As of
July



Introduction

Dom Castellitto became a baker because he fell in love with Florinda Policastro. Her father, Leopoldo Policastro, owned Marie's Bakery in Hoboken, and after Dom saw her outside her school, he says, "I made myself a home in the bakery there." He had been working as a plumber, but soon learned the baker's arts. Dom, and the man who would become his father-in-law, were both born in small towns near Naples, Italy, and every day they offered rustic round loaves and short "French" breads to local families, restaurants, and delis—breads that had been baked in ovens built by their countrymen around the turn of the last century.

In the early 1980s, Dom set off on his own, to start the bakery that bears his name. Over the years, the other coal-fired brick oven bakeries in the city closed: the last to go were Marie's, which closed for good, and Antique, which transplanted its baking operation to Jersey City. Dom's Bakery is now the last operating brick oven bakery in the city.

Dom continues to come into the bakery every day, and in addition to a regular shift at the counter, he oversees the late-night and pre-dawn bread-making. The bread is prepared and baked by Dom's son, Joseph, and by a longtime Dom's Bakery worker, Lupe Flores. On holidays, Dom's daughter Joanne and wife Florinda will also help out, making sure customers get the *pane di semolina* (semolina bread), *panellas*, baguettes, stuffed breads, and *focaccia* that have won praise from generations of Hobokenites.

Dom says Hoboken water makes good bread. We have to agree.

Robert Foster and Holly Metz interviewed Dom Castellitto at Dom's Bakery, 506 Grand Street, Hoboken, on August 21, 2019, and Robert Foster photographed the baking process in early September 2019. The transcript has been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

A Plumber Becomes A Baker

I was born in Caserta, Italy, near Naples, and came to Hoboken in 1957, [when I was a teenager]. My father and brother were already here, and me and my mother came two years later. My father was a barber.

[Originally,] I was a plumber. My brother was a plumber. I started plumbing when I was about 17, 18 years old. [But when] I got married—51 years ago—I became a baker. I went to work for my father-in-law, [Leopoldo Policastro, who owned Marie's Bakery]. He's the one that got me in there. "What are you doing in the wintertime, handling those cold pipes?" Everything was cast iron years ago. "Stay here, when I retire, the bakery's yours." Of course that never materialized, so that's when I started my own. I've been here 35 years.

I had another [bakery, before this,] where the liquor store used to be. There was a restaurant there, [and] a bakery on top. That was the first bakery I bought. Then this one went up for sale, and I said to my wife, "We can't have another bakery right around the corner." I operated the two of them for about two years. There was a lot of competition years ago.

[But first] I worked for Marie's Bakery. There were other bakers working there [and I learned]. One person makes the bread from start to finish. When I started working there, I learned how to do everything.

My father-in-law didn't do much then, because he was old. He could hardly speak English. He was

born in Italy, in an old town named Saviano, which is near Naples also. He was a baker in Italy.

There were a lot of bakeries in Hoboken then. We were all together five. Marie's, Antique. Gustavo's, around the corner. There was another one in the back here, I forgot the name. There were a lot of brick ovens. [Antique is now] in Jersey City, Second Street. He didn't own his building. The lease was up. You know what happens in Hoboken when the lease is up. They want double the rent.

Years ago, we made a lot of bread. About a thousand loaves of bread. [And we went through a lot of coal.] Two tons a week. Now, there's not much call for coal anymore, 'cause no more brick ovens.

That oven, [in my bakery,] it's 120 years old. You can't find parts for it any more. [When something breaks down] we got to patch it up. We patch it up somehow. You can't find anybody to build these ovens anymore.

[But there's a lot that's the same in the bakery.] I come in at 9 o'clock at night, I've got two shifts. One shift starts at 9:00 at night and finishes at 1:00 in the morning, and then another shift comes in at 4:00 and they get done about 8:30 [in the morning]. I've got one guy working for me, [Lupe Flores, who's originally from Guatemala]. He's been working for me for 30 years. The guy who puts the bread in the oven. I do it, too; and my son Joseph does it.

Opposite: Dom's oven.

What It Was Like When I Came Here From Italy

I lived right across the street [from where the bakery is on Grand Street], when I came from Italy. There was a junk yard on the corner. Next to the junkyard there was a pencil factory. This was always a bakery here. There was a delicatessen. And on the corner, where the Grand Vin [restaurant] is, there was a clothing store. Used to put down two dollars a week before you got a suit. *(Laughs.)*

[The neighborhood was mostly Italian. But] there was a lot of Irish before the Italians came on. When the piers [were hiring], remember the docks down there? They were all Yugoslavian. All the longshoremen were Yugoslavian. They'd go to shape up in the morning. The hall, right across from City Hall. The guys who used to pick the guys who would work. And if you don't know somebody, you never go to work. *(Laughs.)*



Sinatra Liked His Bread Well Done

We used to send Sinatra bread, years ago. There was a red flyer out of Newark, somebody used to pick it up. His godson. I forgot his name. [He'd pick up] five, six at a time. Whatever he needed, whenever he needed it. He liked everything burnt he said. Well done.

And there was a restaurant in California. The guy was originally from Hoboken, the owner. They used to call him "Matty Action". And that's where they'd deliver the bread. Lucille Ball used to eat it, Dean Martin used to eat it. Because they were all there. I met him [the restaurateur] once in a Chinese restaurant in New York. I said, "What are you doing with the bread? I send it over there and you charge your customers over there?"



*Above: Bread inside the oven.
Right: Loaves waiting for delivery.*





At the Counter and In Restaurants

I supply most of the restaurants in Hoboken. And delis. Vito's Deli. Frankie & Johnny's restaurant, 14th Street. Delfino's Pizzeria. Leo's. I never advertise. Only by word of mouth.

[We make about] 800 loaves a day. That's including the restaurants. [Hoboken restaurants, but also one in Livingston.] I've been delivering there since they opened. That was thirty years ago. He takes like 100-200 loaves a day. The small ones. The name of the restaurant is *Pane e Vino*—bread and wine. [I've eaten there.] The food is good. I only eat where they have my bread. (Laughs.)

[We make] French bread [baguette], round bread (*panella* or peasant bread), whole wheat, semolina. And the stuffed breads, we do them every day. The *panella* is all they made, years ago. Two sizes [with] flour [on the top. It's one of the last things we do, sprinkle on flour]. The semolina is a different flour. It's the flour they make macaronis with.

[We also make] *focaccia*. Just tomato sauce and dough. I'll make it with cherry tomatoes on order, if somebody orders it.

[We haven't changed our methods of making them.] Why fool around with success?

We don't have that much left at the end of the day. Whatever's left, [Esther, a longtime employee at the bakery] calls the shelter, the shelter comes and picks it up. It doesn't go to waste.

Dom counts out loaves for delivery.



Hoboken Water

[Hoboken water's] the best for bread and for pastries. [If] they use the same flour someplace else and the water stinks, it's no good. It never comes out right. Whatever they put in the water here, it works. I don't want to know. *(Laughs.)*

But this oven's no good for pastries. *(Points to sfogliatellei pastry that he's baked.)* That's the only pastry I make. They come frozen.

Lupe Flores starts the dough-making process.



Dom's Bread

A lot of people put shortening in bread, oil. (Holding up one of his panellas.) This is salt, yeast, flour, and water. That's it. No shortening, no milk. A lot of people make bread and they put a gallon of milk in the batch.

I don't make gluten-free. Then it doesn't have any taste. Just like glue, that's exactly what it tastes like. A lot of people ask what's in the bread. Is there sugar in the bread? A lot of people are allergic to milk. And shortening. That's a new thing. Years ago, there was no gluten-free bread. It's a special flour. It's a different mix.



Adding flour to the mix.

(Shows the oven at the back of the bakery.) It's all brick. It's sixteen by sixteen [the same as all the brick ovens in Hoboken]. You put in three or four shovelfuls of coal. It can get up to 700 degrees. We get it to about 550 [and keep it hot]. If it goes out, forget it. You're in big trouble. The [bakery] door's open all the time. Can't close the door with this heat back there.

Everything gets weighed. You can see the difference. (Points to a large panella.) This is fourteen ounce. The big one is fourteen ounce. You can take two ounces off there. It might be nothing, but you can see it in the size of the bread [after it's baked]. Then people complain: "How come this is so skinny?"



The oven heats up to 500 degrees.



Above and next pages: Joseph Castellitto and Lupe Flores weigh the dough and shape it, bake the bread and clean up.





[People also mention the holes in the bread.] That's the yeast. If there's no holes in the bread, that means it didn't rise enough. A lot of people say, "You can't put butter on the bread, there's too many holes in it!" The bread has got to have holes in it. Otherwise it gets like a piece of lead.

[When we're ready to bake the loaves, we use wooden peels, eighteen feet long, to slide them into the back of the oven.] You've got to line the loaves up. You can fit 250 loaves of bread in there.

[Sometimes I'll make something different, like the garlic, olive oil, and oregano loaf.] It depends on what kind of mood I'm in that day. I get things in my head and I just get the dough and do it.

[How do I like my bread?] No butter. I don't eat no butter, no ketchup, no mayonnaise, no milk, none of that stuff. And I got high cholesterol. *(Laughs.)* I eat everything with bread, except macaronis in a sauce.

Not Just Bread

[Years ago, at Thanksgiving,] we used to cook turkeys here, [for the customers]. No more. Fifty turkeys. I don't cook turkeys anymore. I haven't cooked turkeys in twenty years. [But] we used to have a feast on Thanksgiving Day. [First,] we used to tie a number on the turkey's leg, and we'd give one to the customer. We'd put the turkeys in the oven, and then we'd go back there and get drunk. 'Cause you had to wait, four, five hours for the turkeys to cook. Couldn't make bread,





because we had all the turkeys in the oven. That's what we used to do. [But] we just had to make too much bread, so we stopped.

Everybody did it—all the bakeries]. It's a nice thing. If you've got a 30-pound turkey, you can't cook it at home. 'Cause it won't fit, to begin with.

We used to cook pigs, too. Whoever wanted a pig cooked, we used to cook it. The whole pig. About four or five hours. And you got to get it out, and turn it around. You got to braise it. We don't do that anymore.

Customers

[Across the street at Church Towers,] they're a lot of old ladies; they don't eat bread no more. [Their doctors are telling them it's bad for their health. But] there's one lady who comes out about 11 o'clock. She waits over there. And if I spot her, I'll bring her the bread across the street. 'Cause she [really] can't walk...

[I've got all kinds of customers.] A lot of kids grew up on this bread.

Some [of the customers] are a pain in the neck. Some want to go back there and pick their own bread. I chase them out. It's against the law! You can't be going back there and touching the bread. What, you want to go pick one potato out of a bag of sixty potatoes?

You want to hear something? A guy bought one of these last week (*points to small round pizza wrapped in Saran wrap*). He asked me: "How do I eat it?" I said, "You can eat it cold or you can heat it up in the oven." He comes back a half hour later. He put this in the oven with the Saran wrap. He said: "What happened to my pizza?" I said, "Now I gotta call you stupid." "Why?" "A two-year-old... you gonna put that with the Saran wrap in the oven? Of course it's going to melt." He said, "What do I do with it now?" I said, "Throw it away!" "You not going to give me another one?" I said, "No, you give me three dollars, I'll give you another one." (*Laughs.*) And this is a 25, 26-year-old man. Two-year-olds know not to put that in the oven with the Saran wrap. You don't know?

Everything Changes...But Dom's

Thirty years ago, we used to sleep on the stoops in Hoboken. Nobody had air conditioning; everybody had the windows open. We used to sleep with the doors open and everything. It changed. When Cappiello became mayor, he built these buildings over here [across the street]. It's supposed to be low income, but it's not. *(Laughs.)* And like everything else, everything changed. I can't find a baker to work here. Nobody wants to do it anymore! I had an ad in the newspaper for a month, I didn't get one phone call. Somebody looking for a job.

When I'm gone, [my son, Joseph will] do it. I didn't want him to be a baker [but] he didn't want to go to school! I tell my son, you don't want to go to college? There you go, go sweat back there now.

But he likes it. And at the holidays they're all down here, [my family]. Christmas, New Year, they're all down here, [helping out].

[And] I'm still here. I still come in two, three o'clock in the morning. I'm here seven days a week. Seven days a week I'm here. Sunday, I come down at 3 o'clock. My wife says, "Where're you going?" I say, "Hoboken." "What are you doing in Hoboken? The bakery's closed." I buy my papers. I get my coffee somewhere. I like the people. I have my chair out here. Everybody who passes by: "Hi Dom," "Hi Dom." I'm in my world. That's why I don't stay at home. Here, I talk with people. I'm 76 years old. *(Laughs.)* I'm here, I'm active. I speak to people. I have a conversation with them when they come in for bread.



Installed for years in the bakery, a flour-dusted photo of Dom and his children, Joseph and Joanne, n.d.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken’s row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral

histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-four chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the “Vanishing Hoboken” series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.





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