

A man with short, graying hair, wearing a green short-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans, stands in a restaurant or bar. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dimly lit, showing a bar area with shelves of bottles and some tables with chairs.

From Italy With *Love*

More than any other group, Italians set the standard for fine Delta food. The story behind it is pretty tasty, too.

By SARAH BRACY PENN



Wesley Keen, general manager of Lillo's.
PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON

In a ramshackle house, at the highest peak of the warped, slanting floors, 87-year-old Florence Signa rubs garlic into the worn wood of her salad bowls as customers file in through the kitchen with the slam of an old screen door.

Sixty miles east, Karen Pinkston leads diners down a narrow, dimly lit hallway and into a curtained booth where the push of a red button summons a waiter to take orders of hubcap-sized steaks, buttery broiled shrimp and whole pompano broiled with a secret combination of Italian herbs and spices.

Somewhere in between, in an old white clapboard building on U.S. Highway 82, Deltans of every age and stage chow down on piping hot pizza pies and spaghetti while multiple generations dance to the tunes of a four-piece jazz band every Thursday.

Italians have long set the standard for good dining in the Delta. For generations, if you asked where the best food is found, the answer would be “the three O’s” – Doe’s, Lusco’s and Lillo’s, icons all. Today, you can’t have that conversation without including Giardina’s, the flagship restaurant of Greenwood’s luxurious Alluvian Hotel. Ask another dozen Deltans and you’ll hear bragging about the old school fare at Ramon’s in Clarksdale or the Italian deli selection at Fratesi’s Grocery in Leland. And each one created by Italian immigrants whose family traditions and tricks from the motherland influence menus to this day.

Lured to this fertile, flat land in the late 1890s and early 1900s, Italian peasant farmers came to pick Delta cotton and stayed to become some of the biggest farming families and most famous restaurateurs.

Today, spaghetti with pasta gravy and meatballs is as much a Delta staple as fried chicken, black-eyed peas and turnip greens.

“Being immigrants, the best thing they knew how to do was cook good food, so that’s what they did,” said Karen Pinkston, owner of Lusco’s in Greenwood. “After a while, all Italians were in the food business in some capacity, whether it was selling food, cooking food or delivering it. It’s just what they knew how to do.”

The Signa family of Doe’s, along with the Lusco, Lillo, and Giardina families, first found roots in the grocery business. Pinkston said in the 1920s, Papa Lusco used to load up a wagon of goods and cart them out to farm country, while Mama Lusco would stay behind at the store to serve lunch for businessmen downtown. Eventually, the store became a restaurant. Similar transformations took place in many Italian groceries. What started as a plate lunch for a few men led to daily herds of hungry customers, all eager for a little taste of Italy. The Delta Italians had made it—they found their forte, and it is there they have remained.

Just as their ancestors did on the tough terrain of the Italian countryside, Lusco’s, Lillo’s, Doe’s and Giardina’s all lined shoulder to shoulder, gritting their teeth, straining their muscles and tilling the soil that would sprout the restaurant industry in the Delta. These longstanding establishments have endured massive floods and devastating fires and new ownership, yet they continue to thrive.

So do the familiar faces inside.

Take the 87-year-old matriarch of Doe’s Eat Place, Florence Signa. Flo has worked every job in the joint—waitress, hostess, cashier and cook. But her first night on the job was more of an accident. Flo’s boyfriend called her one night—“We had only been dating a few months,” she said—and cancelled a movie date. But Frank “Jughead” Signa had another plan in mind.

“Can you come fry potatoes tonight?” he asked me. I thought, ‘What kind of date is this, frying potatoes?’ Flo said, chuckling.

That night led to many more spent in the crowded kitchen of the Greenville



It was in the private dining booths, behind closed curtains, that the legend of Lusco’s was born. PHOTO BY KATIE WILLIAMSON

landmark, where the sloping floors were never repaired after the big flood of 1927 and the side entrance is locked by a cutlet knife shoved between the dark stained wood door and its frame.

Flo was wooed by Jughead in that very kitchen, watching him shuck raw oysters through an open window while she flipped sizzling potatoes in her frying pan. A year later, they married. Flo knew taking on the Signa name meant lifelong dedication to Doe's Eat Place. What she didn't know, however, is just how many people she'd touch there.

It's been 66 years since she began. She's passed on the potatoes to another cook, but she still works three nights a week at the Greenville gem. Jughead died 17 years ago, but Flo finds comfort in this kitchen, even without him there slurping up two oysters for every three he'd crack open.

From her perch at the highest peak of the kitchen's slanting foundation, she can observe all of the happenings of the restaurant. Straight ahead, through the rising steam of simmering tamales and past

the potato cook, she can peer into the main dining area. A quick cut of her eyes to the right and there's the side dining room, which was once the Signas' bedroom when they still used half of the restaurant as their home.

"This here. This is my spot," she said, standing at the kitchen island, her hands gently rubbing a spot on the faux wood counter that has been worn down from handling countless wooden bowls through countless decades. Heinz tomato ketchup bottles filled with olive oil and a large tin saltshaker sit before her.

"They tried to move me to the corner of the kitchen, but I couldn't do it," she said. "I couldn't just turn my back on all these people. I like to see them and talk to them while I work."

Behind closed curtains

Over at Lusco's in Greenwood, a list of menu specials in swirly cursive is inscribed on a whiteboard propped on an easel. These Lusco family recipes are served exclusively in March of each year, marking the anniversary of the red brick storefront on Carrollton



Through good times and bad, Doe's has thrived on big steaks. PHOTO BY KATIE WILLIAMSON

After being spit out of an extruder, employees at Doe's roll the hot tamales and insert them into plastic baggies. PHOTO BY KATIE WILLIAMSON



Avenue. In its 80th year, Lusco's still stands as one of the most famous and acclaimed eat places in the Delta. But in 1933, Papa Lusco probably never imagined the place of his name would become such an attraction for people in search of food that is always good and atmosphere that is arguably even better.

In the early days, Mama Lusco's cooking attracted Greenwood businessmen to the table. But what really brought in the flocks was Papa's homebrew, served secretly during the Prohibition era. Although Lusco's appeared as a fully functioning grocery, a whisper of the password opened the rear door, revealing a hallway of booths, each sealed off with a curtain. It was in those private dining booths that the legend of Lusco's was born.

The enticing lure of secrecy is perhaps what keeps customers coming after all these years. Each night, folks from across the Delta enter armed with their wine and liquor enveloped in brown paper sacks. They are led down the mint green hallway flanked by framed newspaper clippings and Lusco family portraits. Maybe they are seated in booths 5 or 10, the "Lovers' Booths" that have seen couples get engaged. Or perhaps booth 3, which once served as Papa Lusco's daughter Marie's bedroom after she was married.

But what is it that makes the privacy so alluring? Pinkston believes her customers yearn for the thrilling freedom that comes with being able to say and do whatever you please behind those drawn curtains.

"But people forget you can hear every word they're saying," Pinkston said.

The mystique of Lusco's is further enhanced by the cuisine. A blend of Italian tradition and New Orleans flair, the menu boasts everything from penne rigate pasta topped with red meat sauce to their famous crisp battered onion rings and fried shrimp. You can't forget the steaks dressed with Crabmeat Karen, with spinach soufflé served alongside. But the single dish that sets Lusco's apart is a true New Orleans delicacy—pompano.

The story goes that a loyal customer

had a taste of the delicate white fish in the Crescent City, and returned to Greenwood insisting Lusco's serve it. The first pompano were brought up from the Gulf on a Greyhound bus, and a longtime cook broiled it whole and served it up in a lake of lemon butter sauce. Today, it remains one of Lusco's most popular dishes.

Dance night in the Delta

It doesn't matter how fast you're speeding down the highway through Leland, you can't miss the enormous white and black sign that reads: Lillo's Family Restaurant. The authentic Italian-American restaurant was formerly an American Legion hall, its simple white clapboard exterior and black shutters in no way alluding to

"But people forget you can hear every word they're saying"

-KAREN PINKSTON

the entertainment to be had within.

Upon entering, diners are hit with a heavy smell of garlic. Family snapshots and portraits from the St. Joe homecoming dance litter the cashier's counter. Candles flicker to the rhythm of a dozen ceiling fans, and there is a certain coziness to the wood paneled walls. On most nights, owner Wesley Keen and his crew serve up broiled catfish and shrimp supreme in lemon butter sauce, as well as Italian classics eggplant parmesan and spaghetti with pasta gravy. But on Thursday nights, a Delta tradition has taken off.

For twenty years, the tables have been pushed to the walls and the Lillo's jazz band plays out tunes as couples of all ages shuffle across hardwood floors. This is Thursday. This is Dance Night.

From 60 miles off, they come. Whether they can dance or not, they come. It is not unusual for 100 people to show up. "I've got one lady who calls me if they're not

coming," said Keen. "She's 91 or 92 and still dancing. Nobody can believe she's that old."

It all began when a local musician and longtime customer asked to play at the restaurant. Only one of the original four band members is still around, but the Lillo's faithful remember Bubba Hubba, Dr. Bill Booth, and, of course, the eccentric old pianist, Boogaloo.

"He used to say he was married to Tina Turner," Keen said. "You'd have to fine tune him. He'd either be knee walking drunk or we'd have to put a little liquor in him."

Hanging on the wall is a portrait of Jimmy and Conchetta Lillo, the first generation who opened Lillo's as a grocery in the summer of 1948. The Lillos claimed to be the first to introduce pizza to the Delta, and it remains one of the most popular items on the menu.

"Back then, they would ask, 'Do you want a pizza pie?' And customers would ask, 'Piece 'a pie? What kind you got?'" Keen said.

From the Delta to Napa and back

Giardina's began as a grocery-turned-restaurant on Park Avenue. Hailing from the tiny Sicilian town of Cefalu, the Giardina family quickly found their place serving steaks and seafood in private booths. Local rumor has it that Giardina's curtained booths are inspired by those of Lusco's.

The restaurant has since relocated to the Alluvian Hotel in downtown Greenwood. Now under the ownership of Fred Carl, it is the premier fine dining restaurant of the area. Carl did not have to go far to find a chef.

Enter 29-year-old Lee Leflore, Carl's Delta-raised nephew and a descendant of the Choctaw chief for whom Leflore County is named. Leflore's only been the chef at Giardina's for nine months, but he has had a lifetime of training in his Italian family's kitchen. He began working at the restaurant at 18, but has since ventured across the country studying the ins and outs of the fine dining experience. After receiving a degree in hospitality management at Ole Miss, spending a year at the Culinary Institute



Giardina's in Greenwood's Alluvian Hotel is an upscale Italian restaurant where, like at Lusco's, diners can experience a private meal in their own curtained booth away from prying eyes.
PHOTO BY KATIE WILLIAMSON

of America in Napa Valley and a stint in Emeril Lagasse's New Orleans kitchen, Leflore was called back to the Delta.

Like most Italians in the Delta, marinara is in his blood. His family, the Barrancos, reserved pasta for Sunday meals. He remembers hearty dinners of eggplant parmesan and Italian sausage, always served alongside homemade pasta and dressed with Barranco pasta gravy.

"[Pasta gravy]'s more of a Sicilian thing. It's really hard to say why. It's a gravy because it's so thick. It's not like a thin tomato sauce or marinara sauce," said Leflore. Regardless of its unknown etymology, pasta gravy has become a Delta tradition all its own.

In years past at the annual Italian Festival of Mississippi in Cleveland, where convicts dressed in emerald green and ecru stripes stir vats of pasta gravy with canoe paddles, all of the great Italian families duked it out for the best pasta gravy recipe.

When it comes to Giardina's menu, pasta gravy is the dressing of crisp calamari and house-made Italian sausage, as well as the final touch to angel hair pasta and veal parmigiano. Other family classics on the menu include Jojo's lasagna and Camille's bread, named for Leflore's grandmother and great-grandmother, respectively.

Traditions run deep for Giardina's Restaurant. Delta Italians have come a long way since the late 19th century. The majority of Delta Italians come from two regions—Ancona and Sicily. They came by the boatload into either Ellis Island or the Port of New Orleans, where plantation owners immediately hired the eager immigrants as sharecroppers. The work on the plantations was tough—but not as daunting as the labor in Italy.

"In Italy, they'd line 'em up across the field and they would shovel across it all day long 'til dark and they'd walk back. That's how bad it was over there," said third

generation Delta Italian Sam DiAngelo.

In time, Italians would own some of the biggest farms and restaurants in the Delta. But it wasn't always easy being an immigrant entrepreneur in early 20th century Mississippi. Discrimination found its way to Chinese, Lebanese and Italians alike. Steve Fratesi, a fourth generation Delta Italian, remembers what it was like to feel different.

"Back then, we didn't want to be Italian," Fratesi said. In fact, most Delta Italians can speak only a few words in their native language. At the time, it seemed assimilation paved the road to success. But now, the prosperous Delta Italians are enormously proud. And it shows on menus like the one at Giardina's.

Despite his fancy culinary training, Leflore has left the menu untouched. Well, almost.

"My dying meal would be pasta Sunday," he said. "Rigatoni is my favorite. I put it on the menu, and it's the only thing I've added."
Design by LeAnna Young

A Cheese Straw Society



Gayden Metcalfe says women there are never shy to pull out the silver. She calls polishing silver “a southern lady’s version of grief therapy.” PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON



At Metcalfe’s elegantly furnished home, Delta entertainment is on full display. PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON



Merrill Alexander, national executive director of the Junior Auxiliary, which, naturally, is headquartered in Greenville.
PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON



Author Julia Reed believes in mixing "the high and the low." She once held a black tie wedding rehearsal dinner in an abandoned cotton gin, complete with roast suckling pig.
PHOTO BY KATIE WILLIAMSON

Guests floating in by parachute. Galas in cotton gins. They party differently in the Delta.

Story by Sarah Bracy Penn





It wouldn't be the Delta without a decanter of Scotch on a silver tray.
PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON

There's a man—a legend, really—named Lewis Watson, who liked to jump out of airplanes.

So much so, that whenever he and his wife were invited to a party, the hostess knew to find a wide-open space outside to place their martinis. And sure enough, as guests mixed and mingled with cheese straws and glasses in hand, the Watsons would float down from the sky, landing squarely in front of their cocktails. The tousle-haired guests would raise their glasses, toast their audience and join the festivities as if they'd just walked in through the front door.

Julia Reed loves to tell this story, and she has millions more just like it. She has taken these stories all the way to Washington, D.C. and New York and New Orleans where she tells them to roaring crowds of New York Times writers, Vogue editors, screenwriters and socialites.

Gayden Metcalfe has a million stories of her own.

"We're an eating, drinking, talking society," she said. One of her closest friends told her once, "I had to move back to the Delta because I never heard a good story anywhere else."

Reed and Metcalfe hail from Greenville, a hospitality-obsessed city that likes to claim more writers per square mile than any other in Mississippi. Tales of extravagant Delta hospitality have been retold in print since William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee* instructed the world on the proper way to make a mint julep. Outsiders couldn't believe the hyperbole, wondering out loud whether these lavish bashes were myths, little tales embellished for dinner party chatter.

But what's to embellish? This is a place where the silver isn't stored away long enough to tarnish. Many joke that a Delta girl will ponder over a Rorschach inkblot and say, "Now, that looks like Chantilly silver to me! Or maybe that's Tiffany?" Whatever the pattern, a Delta hostess is never shy to pull out the silver.

"If you have it, why not use it?" Metcalfe says. She believes the more you use your silver, the less you have to

At the Greenville Country Club, ladies lunch on "The Duo," tomato aspic and homemade chicken salad with a side of fresh fruit drizzled with celery seed dressing. PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON





polish it. Polishing silver is “a Southern lady’s version of grief therapy.”

Reed — author, magazine columnist, former New York Times food writer and daughter of former Mississippi Republican Party chief Clarke Reed — went on to New York to share these hilarious tales. She has compiled many of them into four books, all collections of essays detailing what she calls the “relentlessly over the top” ways Deltans celebrate. Metcalfe has remained in Greenville, but has shared her stories coast-to-coast by coauthoring a trilogy that lifts the “magnolia curtain” separating the Delta from the rest of the world.

Both have won national attention as chroniclers of this entertainment culture—this other side of the Mississippi Delta. Beyond the boarded-up boutiques and abandoned factories of Greenville, there is a whole different world that Reed, Metcalfe, and many others have attempted to reveal and explain.

A Special Place

It is a genteel society with an appreciation for the finer things in life. The Percy family’s parties were legend but Greenville’s love of society did not stop there. It is home to the first debutante club in the state, which for decades has presented young ladies to society at Christmastime at the country club. It is the birthplace of the Junior Auxiliary, home to no less than eight garden clubs and a thriving arts culture that has spawned noted authors, artists, sculptors and a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper editor. What other town in the Delta has a writer’s garden with plants culled from the seeds of the Percys’ own landscaping?

You can’t understand this world until you experience it. One day spent riding around Greenville in Metcalfe’s sleek black station wagon provides at least a glimpse of the Delta joie de vivre.

When Metcalfe hears a car pull up the loose gravel drive, she’s waiting at the door to invite you inside the exquisite foyer of her ivy covered red brick home. She’s wearing a smart black dress, a strand of pearls, and antique gold coin earrings. Her bright white hair is swept up neatly and tied off with a

thin black grosgrain ribbon. She smiles the Gayden smile and welcomes you inside.

You are greeted by a stuffed bobcat lounging on a chaise, and above, the hide of a grizzly bear hangs from the railing of the second-floor landing. Weaving through the white sofas of her sitting room, she leads her guests into the floral covered walls of the dining room.

Crystal goblets and silver mint julep cups are perfectly aligned in neat rows on the glossy mahogany table, and a crystal dish holds cinnamon pinwheel rolls. There is a tray set with china coffee cups on delicate saucers alongside a silver coffee urn. And atop a doily-lined silver stand is the snack that is never forgotten in the Delta—cheese straws. Forget the Queen City of the Delta. Greenville is the Cheese Straw Capital of the World.

“We have this horrible thing in the Episcopal church called ‘The Peace,’ where after the sermon you have to stand up and give the peace to everyone. Shake hands and say ‘Peace be with you, peace be with you.’ I just say, ‘Peace sit down,’” Metcalfe jokes. “My husband Harley leans over every time and says, ‘Who brought the cheese straws? This is like the ten minute break.’”

Over coffee, she rattles off a list of must-dos for this quick tour of Greenville. First, a visit to the Greenville Arts Council, a busy non-profit she founded with other faithful Greenvillians. It is housed in the E.E. Bass Cultural Arts Center, a restored middle and high school which is also home to the likes of Delta Center Stage, Delta Children’s Museum and a 1901 vintage Armitage Herschell carousel adored by generations of schoolchildren.

It hosts art exhibits, concerts, parties and other events, including a Southern Foodways Alliance traveling exhibit celebrating the life of legendary New York Times food writer Craig Claiborne, who hailed from Sunflower County.

“My husband told me I’m so involved that the only clubs I’m not in are Sam’s Club and Ku Klux Klan,” she jokes. She’s a member of the Greenville Garden Club, the oldest garden club in the state. “They say behind every man is a strong woman,

but I say the Greenville Garden Club can stand on its own,” she said.

Enroute to the next stop, Metcalfe’s SUV glides past St. James Episcopal Church, where she is an active member and is seen in the pews every Sunday.

“Location, location, location,” she says, pointing to the red brick church. “When you die, you come out that door, cross the street, and process over here to the Greenville Cemetery. Afterwards, we all go through the other double doors and into the reception hall for a little food and drink.”

Metcalfe knows a thing or two about funerals. Her book, *Being Dead Is No Excuse*, is a sidesplitting guide to planning the perfect after-party when a relative reaches the afterlife. It includes anecdotes of a woman lying in state across her pristinely polished dining room table and a crop duster sprinkling a man’s cremated remains onto a cotton field. Naturally, she brings any guests to the cemetery, a place she calls “the best address in town.”

“Juuuuuust visiting,” she says with a grin through the open window to a friend taking a stroll through the rows of graves.

Next is lunch in the sunny, white-tiled dining room of the Greenville Country Club. Metcalfe and her posse enjoy panoramic views of the golf course and tennis courts while sipping sweet tea. They lunch on “The Duo,” tomato aspic and homemade chicken salad with a side of fresh fruit drizzled with celery seed dressing.

Delta weddings

She recounts the day her daughter was married, an event her friends still rave over years later.

“Most girls in the Delta want to get married at 6 o’clock, so they can have a lot of food and a lot of drinks and a big party. And I’d always told her, you don’t have to get married to have a big party. We will be delighted to have a big party without you making this commitment,” she said. “But my daughter, little Gayden Bishop Metcalfe, said I don’t want to have just a wedding. I want to have a wedding day.”

The day began with a brunch, followed by the wedding that afternoon. The reception

For Delta ladies seeking to entertain in a special way, Lagniappe’s one-stop specialty shop has shelves of china and Juliska pottery, among other items. PHOTO BY JARED BURLESON





was held in the Metcalfes' backyard, where caged birds were sprinkled throughout. The day ended 20 miles outside of town in Benoit with a black-tie affair at the Burrus House, colloquially dubbed the "Babydoll" House after the 1965 film was shot there.

"We went out there because she wanted all her European friends to see the cotton. We had drinks in the front yard and a seated dinner inside. Then we recessed to the back yard where we had the 'jukin' band from hell,' but oh, did I dance with everybody," she said.

Julia Reed has her own Delta wedding tale. For her second wedding, she held the rehearsal dinner in an abandoned cotton gin — "My mother took one look at the place and said, 'Julia, you've lost your mind.'" Long banquet tables were lined with fried catfish, boudin, crawfish rémoulade—all nods to her new home in the Big Easy. Guests clad in black tie also feasted on a true Southern beast, a massive roast suckling pig.

"It was such a dramatic sight in the middle of the pitch-black Delta. It's the classic thing we do—create something out of nothing. I just had all of these people from out of town and I wanted to show them where they were," she said.

Reed preaches the philosophy of "the high and the low." She loves this combination of black-tie elegance meets down-home cuisine. This mix of gritty reality and genteel fantasy is, in essence, what often defines Delta entertaining.

"There's no point in trying to be pretentious. That's not who we are," Reed said. "My mom always said, 'As long as you have food that tastes good, everyone's happy.'" When entertaining in Greenville, Reed often picks up fried chicken from Fratesi's Grocery and serves it alongside a steaming chafing dish of crabmeat Mornay.

"[The rehearsal dinner] just reminded me of what it must've been like to be in the early days of the Delta when it really was the 'most southern place on earth,'" she said. "It was a time when they thought, 'We're stuck with mosquitoes and snakes, so we might as well drink cane and eat fine food.'"

And that's exactly what they do. In the Delta, if you want to be entertained, you



have to make the fun yourself. It's been this way since rich landowners traveled to this fertile floodplain and started clearing cotton plantations out of the rugged swamps and forests. There was always a push for a good party during the long period between planting and picking season.

Those months saw a party every night, sometimes lasting for days. They were dazzling, Gatsby-esque affairs where the rhythm of the band was in tune with the chatter, and the beat of the drum made ripples in a drink that was poured by the bartender's very heavy hand.

"I remember when I was a kid, I'd literally get up in a pear tree, and my friend Tee would pull a plank out of the fence and we'd just watch the parties. I had a great bird's eye view of all the parties at my neighbor's house," she said.

Through her books, her latest being *But Mama Always Put Vodka in Her Sangria!*, Reed has attempted to recreate this "mad-cap" entertainment culture she grew up in. But there's much, much more to the story—and it lies in the true spirit and hospitality of a Deltan.

"I brought the British Ambassador down to the Delta once, and he is still kind of bowled over by the sort of generosity and spirit of these parties," she said. It truly is a different world—a place unlike any other. It's a world that requires an invitation. But here in the Delta, it's easier to score one than you may think.

"It's such a funky place that's attracted all these types of people—from river rats to journalists to politicians," Reed said. "That's what I've always loved. It's such a melting pot. And in the Delta, there ain't no standards."

Design by Elizabeth Beaver