

L'Italo-Americano

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IL CENACOLO

By the 1920s, the Italian-American community of San Francisco was firmly established and had reached its zenith. San Francisco was the most important city on the West Coast, and was the center of shipping, finance and commerce. The arts flourished, and opera—a uniquely Italian invention—had been universally recognized as the pre-eminent cultural experience in San Francisco.

With 58,000 Italians and Italian-Americans living in San Francisco, our little Italian colony had grown to comprise nine percent of the entire population. According to historian Andrew M. Canepa, over 500 members of the Italian community were professionals—doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers—and fifteen academics of Italian origin were teaching in Bay Area colleges and universities. It was a small group of these Italian professionals that decided to form what would someday become San Francisco's oldest and most respected Italian cultural club: *Il Cenacolo*.

One Thursday afternoon in 1928, this small group decided to meet for lunch at Armando Campagnoli's restaurant on Geary Street to discuss art, music, language, food, wine, and Italian culture. The thirteen founding members or *fondatori* named their group *Il Cenacolo*. The name was an allusion to Leonardo Da Vinci's fresco *The Last Supper*, which in Italy is referred to as *Il Cenacolo*.

All thirteen *fondatori* had been born in Italy. The most senior, Ettore Patrizi, was the publisher and editor of the daily Italian-language newspaper *L'ITALIA*. Patrizi had first come to San Francisco in 1894 and for nearly half a century was the chief

promoter of the Italian Colony, both locally and abroad. He was also the man who first brought opera to The City, established the first opera house in North Beach, introduced soprano Luisa Tetrazzini to San Francisco, had Enrico Caruso as an investor in his newspaper, held meet-and-greet sessions with opera stars at A. Cavalli bookstore, and was the most respected authority on opera in San Francisco. Even as far back as 1907, the *San Francisco Call* ran a full-page story entitled, "Signori are Many, but PATRIZI is IT." The story described a performance of Verdi's *Aida* where the audience members—as well as the performers themselves—were constantly turning their heads, gauging Patrizi's reaction to the opera, and shamelessly seeking his approval.

Il Cenacolo quickly became known as the premier Italian cultural club. The original thirteen members were a who's who of Italian professionals, and the group expanded quickly. The club continued to meet every Thursday, and by 1932 had expanded to the point where they needed a larger meeting place. The Fairmont Hotel provided the venue until World War II, when the club (and most Italian-Americans) opted for a lower profile. In the 1960s *Il Cenacolo* began to have their Thursday luncheons at the Fior d'Italia restaurant at Stockton and Union Streets. A fire in 2004 at the venerable old restaurant caused the meetings to be temporarily moved to the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club. Once the new Fior d'Italia was re-opened at the historic San Remo Hotel, the club returned and continues to meet there every Thursday to this day.

Over the years, guest speakers

at the club's Thursday luncheons have included Nobel Prize winner Guglielmo Marconi (the inventor of radio), composer Ottorino Respighi, conductor Bernardino Molinari, tenor Lucio Pavarotti, Nobel Prize winning physicist Edward Teller (the so-called "father of the hydrogen bomb"), and numerous luminaries from the fields of art, music, architecture, business, history, law, literature, medicine, philosophy, and science.

From the beginning, *Il Cenacolo* has promoted activities of Italian culture, food, wine, music, art and literature. The club has supported numerous worthy cultural causes, including scholarships for students of the Alder Program at the San Francisco Opera. *Il Cenacolo* actively promotes the study of the Italian language, and in 1984, the club established the Renzo Turco Scholarship for Italian Language Studies in memory of *Il Cenacolo*'s last living founding member.

The professional and cultural elite of the Italian-American community still form the nucleus of the club's membership, now in the hundreds. But these elite *cenacolisti* are anything but snobs. It is not uncommon to attend a Thursday luncheon and find oneself sitting at a table with a doctor, lawyer, banker, judge, admiral, diplomat, or even an occasional politician. But regardless of one's station in life, all are made to feel comfortable and welcome.

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