

Come Dine With Me

Mike Riccetti* (April 25, 2012)



Soon after noticing the recognizable visage of Frank Sinatra on the electronic marquee at Houston's Hobby Center advertising an upcoming production of the musical *Come Fly Away*, my thoughts turned to food.

I don't believe that I am unusual in this. There is a strong association between Frank Sinatra and dining. Sinatra, in fact, might be as much a part of the American Italian restaurant tradition as red sauce and garlic bread.

His songs and those of a generation or two of popular Italian-American singers like Dean Martin and Tony Bennett – often interpreting the Great American Songbook – have become a nearly requisite part of the soundtrack for Italian-themed restaurants. Sinatra was just the best, and his music the most frequently played.



The reason why begins with the simple fact that the songs are seemingly timeless. People of all ages still enjoy them, even those born decades after Sinatra's prime. Many consider the arrangements of Nelson Riddle and Billy May and the singing by Sinatra at his peak to be unmatched. The music is exuberant or enjoyably sly, or it's romantic or, otherwise, deeply emotive, but always polished and frequently incomparable.

Sung by an Italian-American seems to have made these songs "Italian" for much of the public, immigrant restaurant owners included. The recordings, mostly from the 1950s and early 1960s, also provide both a comforting familiarity and a connection to a romanticized past, a high-spirited, yet outwardly civilized time when the veal was tender, the martinis frequent and dry, and fedoras and fur stoles were the fashion.

In a similar vein, Sinatra's later music - usually of the more bombastic and throatier recordings of the mid-1960s through the 1970s such as "New York, New York" () - provide a regular accompaniment for a steakhouse visit. These songs are often blatantly masculine and work as well as the earlier recordings with a martini to start.

As much as any other singer, Sinatra's public persona is intertwined with his music. That might play more to the classic American steakhouse theme, even more palpably so at an "Italian" steakhouse like The Palm, [Gene & Georgetti](#) [2] in Chicago, or Manhattan's [Sparks](#) [3]. There might also be a recollection of the singer's well-known mob connections, which - especially with a song in the air - can make a diner feel a bit raffish, and the restaurant even slightly dangerous, attractively so.

Sinatra's relationship to American dining goes even deeper. Signs proclaiming "Frank Sinatra ate here" might be rivaled only by "George Washington slept here" in the Northeast. According to Jane and Michael Stern of the [Roadfood](#) [4] books and columns, "There are countless places between Philly and Boston (not to mention some in Vegas and Palm Springs) where, if you judged by the pictures on the wall, you'd have to say that Frank was the management's best friend."

Sinatra was a very welcome customer known for outlandishly generous tipping. More so, he brought a tremendous amount of star power and glamour. He was, after all, one of the most famous Americans from the early 1940s until his death more than a half-century later in 1998.

Today, Sinatra lives on. A few years ago, [Sinatra](#) [5], an upscale Las Vegas restaurant and paean to the singer opened in the Wynn casino with one of the country's top Italian chefs. Elsewhere, it's mostly through his recordings, though memories of his personality and movie-star fame still spice up restaurants across our country.

* When he was very young Mike Riccetti belonged to the same parish in northern New Jersey as Frank Sinatra's mother. He is the local editor for the Zagat Survey and the author of [From the Antipasto to the Zabaglione - The Story of Italian Restaurants in America](#) [6] available on the Amazon Kindle Store and elsewhere.

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[6] <http://www.amazon.com/From-Antipasto-Zabaglione-Restaurants-ebook/dp/B005HB3TXC>

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