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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Winter 2012), pp. 91-95

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/GFC.2012.12.4.91>

Accessed: 14/12/2012 15:03

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# On the *Zampone* Trail

FEW PEOPLE WOULD ASSOCIATE northern Italian cooking traditions with Cape Cod unless, like me, they'd been lucky enough to grow up in the village of Sagamore on the "Upper" (that is, southern) Cape. My Carafoli grandparents came there in 1904 along with a wave of construction and factory laborers who built the Cape Cod Canal and worked at some nearby factories. In their day, the tightly knit community of Sagamore preserved a whole country-based, seasonal way of life transplanted from parts of Modena, Ferrara, Bologna, and nearby provinces belonging to the general region of Emilia-Romagna.

My grandparents died when I was about eight, so I have only scattered memories of them, and the best of these revolve around food. One vivid recollection sprang to my mind at the end of a skiing trip to Italy during the 1970s, long after they were gone. In Bologna, we splurged on a dinner at Ristorante Diana featuring *gran bollito misto*: a magnificent parade of poached meats ceremoniously wheeled to the table in a special cart. *Bollito misto* comes with several sauces and usually includes capon, beef, calf or beef tongue, and one or two *salumi* (cured meat specialties).

On this occasion the *salume* was a strange-looking object about a foot long, cut into thick rounds. It was shaped like a fat sausage but ended in a couple of unmistakable pig's toes. I seemed to remember some such weird creation from my childhood, when people in our Cape Cod village still made all kinds of *salumi* from the family pig or bought them at Louis's Market, the busy grocery-bakery-salumeria founded by Louis Consoni in 1914. At my first bite distant memories came flooding back—for the first time in decades, I thought, I must be tasting *cotechino*, the luscious sausage I'd eaten so often as a child in Sagamore!

Well, almost. The strange, half-familiar item on the cart actually turned out to be *zampone*. It took a while to sort out names, but eventually I learned that the thing with toes and the fat, stubby *cotechino* that we'd have at Christmastime or New Year's were two ways of presenting a certain type of sausage mixture invented in Modena. For

*cotechino*, or *coteghino*, the mixture is stuffed into hog casings like other sausages. But *zampone*—the name literally means "big foot"—is the intact rind of a whole pig's trotter (front foot) that has been emptied of meat and bones, except for the last two toe joints. The rind becomes an unorthodox casing for a filling identical or very similar to *cotechino*.

So my taste buds hadn't lied. Maybe I would have remembered *zampone* more exactly from childhood if I hadn't thought it was too gross-looking to eat. Now, however, I realized that in the cooking, a delicious combination of fat and gelatinous juices melts from the skin of the trotter

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into the interior, making it even richer and more voluptuous than *cotechino*.

That *bollito misto* dinner was the start of an obsession. On my next Italian trip I went to Bologna to relive the experience. By then, no one was making *zampone* in Sagamore. In the 1970s I could sometimes find it at specialty butchers in the Boston's North End. But over the years such little pockets of tradition gradually died out, making my curiosity about this link with my own village past all the stronger. Who thought up the pig's trotter idea in the first place, and when? Not much historical information exists in English-language

sources. After I learned some Italian and obtained dual Italian and American citizenship in 2008, I was able to follow the trail a little better, though initially in fits and starts.

## Grasping the Historical Thread

If you haven't tasted Modena-style *zampone* or *cotechino*, forget the flavor of any other sausage. Both (along with another Modenese specialty called *cappelli da prete*, or "priest's hats") are based on a pork mixture that's a law unto itself. Not too finely ground, it includes both lean shoulder or leg meat and fat. But what makes it unique is the generous use of oddments like tendons, snout, jowls, and the rind from the belly. One taste of a freshly cooked hot slice reveals a wonderful play of textures, the bits of rind and connective tissue contributing an almost pebbly feel along with meltingly rich juices. The seasonings are also unusual. Traditional makers still use mixtures of spices like coriander seed, cinnamon, and nutmeg that I would later realize date back to the age of the great Italian Renaissance culinary authority Bartolomeo Scappi (d. 1577).

But where did *zampone* and *cotechino* originate? It turns out that almost all popular modern accounts draw heavily on one source, the small 1955 pamphlet *Modena: vista da un modenese* by local historian Marco Cesare Nannini. The literature of the Consorzio Zampone Modena/Cotechino Modena, a producers' trade association, repeats Nannini's report that in 1511 the citizens of Mirandola, a town in Modena province, hit upon the idea of converting every imaginable scrap of their pigs, including skin and feet, into the prototypes of *cotechino* and *zampone* during a siege by the army of Pope Julius II. Many writers rehash the story, whose origins I haven't been able to learn. Whether true or not, it does point to the crucial role of miscellaneous odds and ends in creating the inimitable consistency of *zampone* and *cotechino*.

I gleaned a few other details from a brief historical essay by the culinary historian and anthropologist Giovanni Ballarini ("Zampone Modena IGP: Storia sociale, tra leggenda e folklore"), published on the Consorzio's Web site. Ballarini cites a mention of *zampetto* ("little foot") in the Bolognese nobleman Vincenzo Tanara's treatise *L'economia del cittadino in villa* ("Domestic Management for City-dwellers in Country Estates," 1644), with directions for boning pig's feet before either pressing them between layers of fat and salted meat or—preferably—filling them with a well-seasoned mixture including snouts, ears, and the meat from a few more feet, then tying them closed and drying them like salami.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Modenese *cotechino* and *zampone* (or *zampetto*, or *zampino*) apparently became closer to their present commercial form. *Cotechino* was always the cheaper, less labor-intensive option. But people thought of the two as relatives, and still do. In *La Salameide* ("The Salami Epic," 1772), a mock-heroic poem celebrating the glories of Italian *salumi*, the Ferrarese writer Antonio Frizzi described the *zampetto* of Modena as marching on equal terms with *cotechino come fratello* ("like a brother"). *Salumifici* (charcutiers) specializing in both types of *salumi* opened famous shops. The best known, Giuseppe Bellentani of Modena, supplied the composer-gourmet Gioachino Rossini with regular shipments of *zamponi*, *cotechini*, and *cappelli da prete* even when he had taken up residence in Paris. Some of Rossini's requests for his favorite *salumi* remained in the Bellentani archives as late as the end of the 1960s, when the American writer Waverley Root was shown several letters while working on the survey that became his monumental *The Food of Italy* (1971). Other letters from Rossini mentioning Bellentani's wares are reported to exist in the Estense library in Modena. (I haven't been able to examine any of these myself.)

Root's description of *zampone* is really a hymn of praise, filled with lyrical enthusiasm and colorful detail, such as the way that people used to hang it to age in wells, or the translation of *bein taleint*—Modenese dialect for the special consistency the filling mixture should reach before being stuffed into the feet—as "gelatinous, sticky, light, and delicate, all at the same time." Interestingly, Root's report ignores the tale of the 1511 siege.

Whether or not *zampone* originated in sixteenth-century Mirandola, it must have undergone serious changes before it could become a modern article of commerce. I found a crucial clue to the transition in the previously mentioned essay by Giovanni Ballarini. Ballarini points out that until the late nineteenth century, pork in Italy came from small swine with black hides better suited to tanning than culinary purposes. At some point, he notes, livestock raisers brought in the Yorkshire "Large White" breed, a massive pig with white skin "rich in a tender subcutaneous tissue that easily becomes gelatinized in cooking."

The meaty, well-flavored pork that came to be used for much of the best Italian *salumi* (most famously, *prosciutto di Parma*) comes from a breed called the Gran Suino Padano (large Po Valley swine), with a high proportion of Large White ancestry. Here is the secret of the sticky but delicate texture praised by Root, originating in both container (the skin of the trotter) and contents (the generous proportion of ground-up skin in the filling).

*Zampone*- and *cotechino*-making apparently increased greatly after Large Whites appeared on the scene. Mechanical meat grinders, introduced after the mid-nineteenth century, must also have made a huge difference. Previously, the *salumificio* had to pound some elements of the filling in a mortar, chop or dice others with a *mezzaluna* or knife, and give everything a final stamping in the mortar. (Some small artisanal producers were still doing this when Waverley Root visited.) Now the various cuts could be separately ground (some finer, some coarser) by using different dies.

The fame of *zampone*, which had already spread from Modena throughout and beyond Emilia-Romagna, now became international. The association with Modena never died, but people began making it in other regions, even Ticino canton in Switzerland. From there it came to the United States with the Ticinese family of Delmonico. *The Epicurean*, Charles Ranhofer's huge compilation of recipes from Delmonico's New York restaurant at the height of its fame (1893), contains two recipes for "zampino of Modena." In one, the sliced *salume* is served with a string bean garnish and a demiglace sauce; in the other, it forms a border for an incredibly elaborate presentation of chicken galantine.

The ways in which Italians now like to enjoy *zampone* are very different from such Gilded Age excess. Today *zampone* is most often associated with New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. It also figures in many versions of *bollito misto*, a traditional Christmas-season dinner. Those who can't afford *zampone* will cook its "brother"—*cotechino*—in the same manner. The usual condiments that go with either as part of a *bollito misto* echo Renaissance preferences for sweet-and-savory combinations. Zabaglione is a classic accompaniment, sometimes laced with balsamic or other vinegar, sometimes completely or almost sugarless, sometimes fully sweetened. Equally traditional and probably just as old is *mostarda*, a medley of fruits preserved in a syrup intensely flavored with mustard essence. As the centerpiece of a New Year's dinner, either *zampone* or *cotechino* reportedly augurs prosperity when sliced into rounds and served with a hearty dish of stewed lentils. (As Lou Di Palo of Di Palo's Fine Foods in New York's Little Italy told me, "Round signifies coins. The more round things you eat on New Year's Day, the more good luck and fortune it will bring you for the new year.") Other common side dishes are simple mashed potatoes and spinach.

The actual cooking reflects major changes in production technology during the twentieth century. *Zampone* and *cotechino* were never meant to be preserved for long periods of time, but both used to be at least briefly cured and air-dried before sale. At home, purchasers soaked them in cold water

overnight or longer before cooking, then wrapped them in cloth (to keep the stuffing from leaking) and gently poached them in water until tender enough to slice. *Zampone* was traditionally cooked in a special pan called a *zamponiara* shaped like a fish poacher, though any fairly snug-fitting, oval pan could serve. Like *cotechino*, it required several hours of cooking to reach properly luscious consistency.

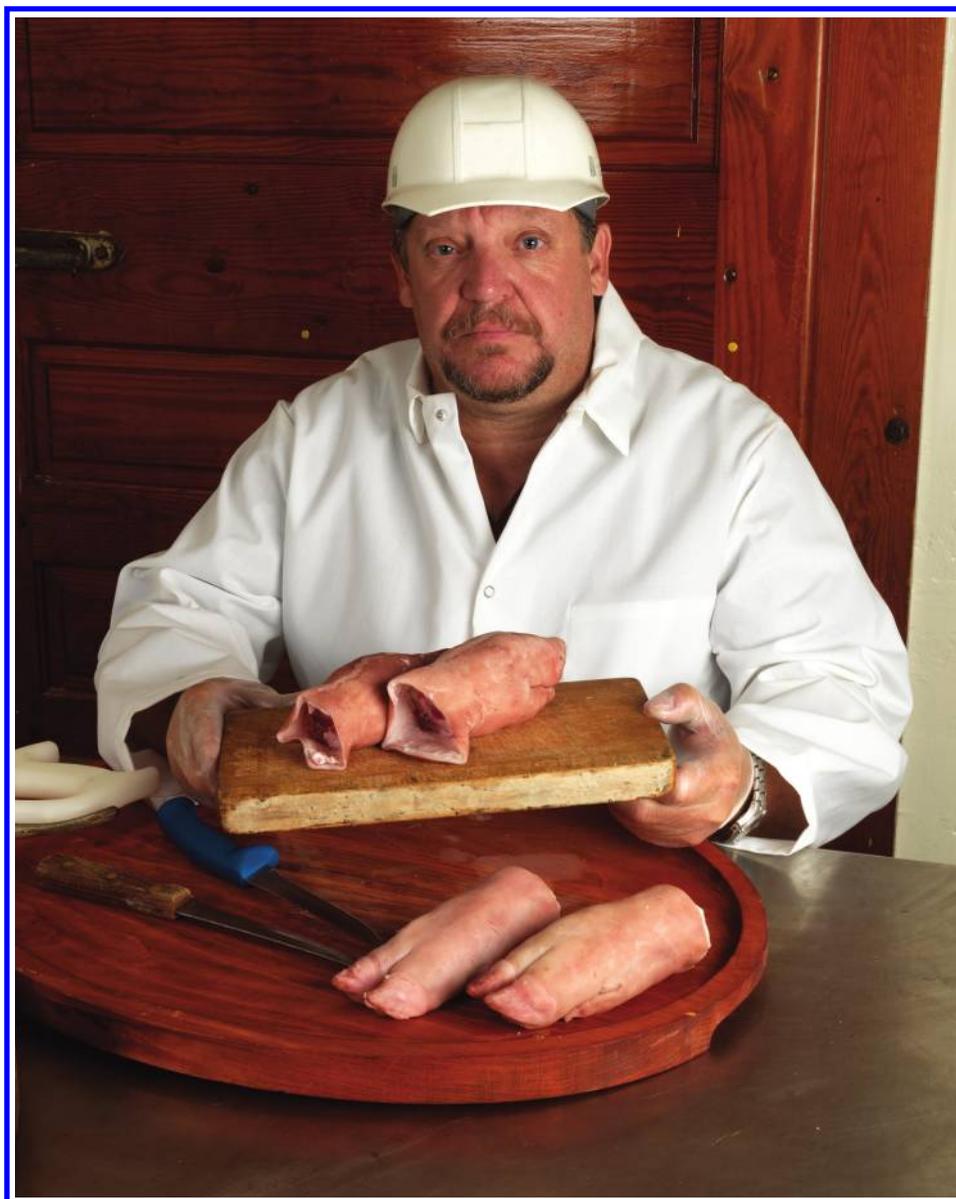
In Italy itself as well as in many of America's Little Italys, small artisan butchers made these partly cured sausages until about the late 1970s. After that, however, larger manufacturers developed a technique of precooking them in industrial autoclaves, reducing the home cooking time to an hour or less (sometimes as little as twenty minutes). This general type is known as *zampone*—or *cotechino*—*cotto* (cooked), as opposed to the older *crudo* (raw) versions. Today the less cost-effective *crudo* has almost disappeared.

In a sense, *zampone* has benefited from national programs to promote regional culinary specialties and control labeling over the last several decades. Since 1999 Modena-style *zampone* and *cotechino* have enjoyed certified IGP ("Indicazione geografia protetta") status under European Union law. However, IGP is one of the loosest categories of regional-origin labeling, so that products qualifying as "Zampone" (or "Cotechino") "di Modena IGP" may contain pork from pigs raised as far away as Milan or Ravenna. Nearly all are of the *cotto* type, which is far simpler to manufacture than *crudo*. The precooked sausages can be very good, and the IGP system of certification overseen by the Consorzio Zampone Modena/Cotechino Modena has made both products more uniform in quality than at any time in the past. But it's sad to see how rare the cured and dried kind has become.

## Closing In on a Goal

In recent years I began to dream of actually making *zampone crudo* myself—and perhaps encouraging others to resurrect this endangered specialty. After all, aren't cutting-edge food mavens everywhere talking about artisanal butchering, nose-to-tail eating, and the pleasures of slow-cooked, fatty, gelatinous meats like pork belly?

The moment when I decided to take my dreams a step further came one day when I was doing a food-styling assignment for a photo shoot for a major New England cured-meats company, Harrington's of Vermont. There I was, with not only all kinds of pork parts easily obtainable but a skilled pork butcher at my side—Todd Liberty, the Harrington production manager. I described my *zampone* obsession to him and explained that the first step in making it was to debone a whole trotter. Todd and I enlisted John



Goodman, the photographer with whom we had been working. The two of them ended up documenting the tricky removal of the bones from the skin in step-by-step detail.

I felt I was hot on the trail. Now for the filling! I had a trip scheduled to Bologna in a few months, the perfect opportunity to visit Emilia-Romagnan artisanal *salumifici* and learn just what went into the mixture.

It was harder than I thought, because the remaining old-school makers guard their *zampone* and *cotechino* formulas like the crown jewels. My breakthrough came unexpectedly at the giant factory-scale *salumi* plant Negrini S.p.A. in the Ferrarese town of Renazzo—coincidentally, the birthplace of both my Carafoli grandparents. The owner, Gianni Negrini, told me everything the other makers hadn't been willing to divulge.

With a flourish of a pen, Signore Negrini produced a drawing of the typical Suino Padano—best suited, he

Above: Todd Liberty, the smoke master and plant manager at Harrington's of Vermont.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN GOODMAN © 2011

explained, for *salumi* purposes at nine months of age, when it weighs around 350 to 400 pounds (160 to 180 kilograms). Part of the reason that pork seldom achieves truly “porky” flavor and rich texture in the United States and many other countries is that the animals are usually slaughtered at six months and 220 to 265 pounds (100 to 120 kilograms). At the slaughterhouse, different cuts for *zampone* and *cotechino*—usually jowls and other parts of the head, throat, shoulder, and the all-important *cotenna* (pork rind) from the belly—are separated, to be used in specific proportions so as to yield that wonderful gelatinous, tender but slightly grainy texture unique to a good *zampone* or *cotechino* filling. Negrini prefers to use somewhat less fat for the *zampone*, since the skin of the trotters will add a lot in cooking. Without hesitation

he gave me the proportions for his preferred seasoning mixture of salt, coriander seed, cinnamon, nutmeg, and both black and white pepper, a combination that could have come straight from Renaissance culinary manuals.

Now I was ready to do my own experimenting back in Massachusetts. I won't say it was an easy or straightforward process, but with patient searching and help from several sources I was able to arrive at a version of homemade *zampone* that honestly repaid my quest.

Any other hopeful *zampone*-makers should know that the first and perhaps most difficult step is lining up the meats for the "casing" and filling. This is best done in late fall or early winter—old-fashioned hog-butcher season, when the cold temperatures are on the *salumi*-maker's side. Even with good contacts in the food world, I had no way of getting Gran Suino Padano pork at the right age and size. But with a lot of searching, I did manage to order half a pig's head, along with what I guessed to be suitable proportions of fresh pork fat, lean meat, rind, and several trotters from a company of heirloom pork breeders, Flying Pigs Farm in Shushan, New York. I supplemented all this with more trotters from Harrington's and from an organic farm on Cape Cod.

Using Gianni Negrini's overall formula and ideas collected from a few other sources, I worked out a general script. Now I needed a collaborator. I may be a well-trained cook, but I knew that this job was more than I could manage on my own. I talked a chef friend, Toby Hill of Pain d'Avignon in Hyannis, into pitching in.

Equipped with good knives and a KitchenAid mixer with a grinder attachment, the two of us tackled the heap of pork parts in the restaurant kitchen. It was a long, messy trial of our patience. In the first place, the pig's trotters were—logically enough—smaller than the ones used for *zampone* in Italy. This made the deboning process harder. We broke with tradition by cutting the feet open lengthwise to get at the bones and meat inside.

Meanwhile, Toby dissected every inch of the pig's head with a boning knife. Ears, snout, jowls, and any stray pockets of meat were all carefully set aside. We also decided to add the tongue because we both like the rich, satiny texture that it contributes. All of this, along with about a pound each of lean meat and fat, was cut into dice or strips small enough to be fed into the grinder. I separately chopped up the all-important rind into very small pieces.

It all came to about seven pounds of ingredients for the filling mixture. After some discussion, we decided to grind everything together fairly fine, using the  $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch plate of the grinder and putting everything through twice, except for the rind, which we gave only a single grinding. We combined the ground meats with the chosen spices in a large mixing bowl, to stuff into the hollowed-out trotters.

Now Toby was ready to show off the sewing skills he had acquired from his mother. Using a long, formidable trussing needle and stout trussing thread, he showed me how to stitch up the long incisions on the trotters from ankle to top. It was hard going because the hide was tough and resistant (I don't know whether this is equally true of Italian pigs). We stuffed the filling into the trotters and sewed the open ends firmly shut. The only thing left to do was briefly age our debut *zampone* by hanging them in the restaurant cellar for four or five days. There was a lot of surplus filling that we turned into impromptu *cotechini*, temporarily rolling them up in plastic wrap (because we didn't have proper casings) to be dealt with later.

The final results were...let's say, honorable. The finished and cooked *zampone* weren't on a par with the ones that had started me on the quest at Ristorante Diana. But they were very good sausages. Our main conclusion was that we needed to play around more with the texture by grinding some of the head parts and rind more coarsely than the lean meat. Is *zampone* something that home sausage makers can tackle on their own, or that small artisanal manufacturers could turn into a prized specialty? The answer to both is a resounding "yes."

As we critiqued our maiden venture in Modena-style *salumi*, my thoughts turned to a recent conversation I'd had with a second-generation immigrant, ninety-one-year-old Gioanna "Jenny" Consoni Bulla (daughter of the Louis Consoni who founded Louis's Market). In her parents' and my grandparents' Sagamore, she told me, every family had made *zampone* and *cotechino* (*cudghen*, in our village patois) at home for the winter holiday season. To them, *zampone* at Christmas or New Year's was as necessary as Thanksgiving turkey was in other households. *Zampone* was a dual citizen of the ancestral land and the adopted one.

Now that I know it can be done, *zampone*, with some refinements, will be on my holiday table this year. And I plan to tell everyone who shows up why there couldn't be a more genuine regional Cape Cod dish. ☉