

## **Keyword: Different. What Guidos Are, and Are Not**

Johnny DeCarlo\* (January 17, 2010)



The "Guido/Goomba/Cugine" is a very distinctive-looking, working-class East Coast Italian-American. The whole lifestyle may seem shallow or strange to some, but "authentic" Italian-American life does not have to revolve around formal language, Renaissance art or the opera. This is indeed a subculture that is very complex and needs exploration—not shunning and shame. There can be civil discussions about all these differences, but there should never be any mean-spirited debates on which is right or wrong.

\*Johnny DeCarlo, a self-professed Guido, a freelance writer and a restaurateur, is invited to speak at the colloquium on "[Guido: An Italian American Youth Style](#) [2]" organized by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, City University of New York, on January 21st, 10am.)

I'm a fan, follower and researcher of all things Italian and Italian-American. Part of it stems of course

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from having Italian blood, and part of it is based directly on the fact that I personally feel that it is the most interesting and exciting culture of all. I love anything with roots from the boot; books, TV shows, music, movies, fashion, cars, whatever else—especially culinary and religious traditions and practices. My mother speaks Italian fluently, I understand some, and can identify meanings of words and am certainly fluent in linguine. I also incorporate words of different dialects into my speech patterns, which I call the Goomba-Italiano (but I'll get into that later.)

While I'm no expert, I certainly feel that I am not a faker or a poser like some out there who wrap themselves in the Italian flag to be cool, but can't even tell you the capital of Italy—or even worse—place a flag decal on their bumper backwards. I can say that I offer the unique perspective of having many Guido Italian-American friends, Italian-Italian friends (direct immigrants), and everything in between. I grew up in the heart of it all and I've traveled to Italy as well.

The culture in Italy has its similarities and differences from the Italian-American culture here, so I'd say it's fair to say the "Italian-American" culture in the United States is a subculture in itself. Even if one is a direct immigrant and is trying to carry on the exact same lifestyle they had in Italy, it's still going to not be exactly the same—obviously because they are now in America. Then you have the children of those immigrants who have their own takes on the Italian-American way, and then the children of those children. Within all that, there is yet another subculture with a controversial name: the Guido subculture. What is this, and why is this controversial?

Well what it's not, is a subculture of the aforementioned posers and fakers who couldn't find Rome on the map. It's not just a group of ignorant kids who consume their lives with drinking, fighting and having sex. The word itself is a describing word for this particular subculture, a light-hearted term of affection like Goomba or Cugine or Paisan. It was never meant to be an offensive word like Wop or Guinea or Greaseball, and it's unfortunate that many who are unaware of the true meanings, associate the terms all together. And while a Guido generally describes the single/under-thirty generation, this isn't always the case—as the Guido is a constantly evolving creature. While carefree partying is often an aspect of the Guido from the age of seventeen until the mid-twenties, this can be said with any group of individuals falling in that age range, regardless of the nationality. If a Guido is ONLY consumed with partying 24/7, he has not yet evolved, but people in that age group should be able to enjoy themselves at a dance club or a bar from time to time, and shouldn't be labeled as unproductive members of society or as bad examples of Italian-Americans...

The Guido/Goomba/Cugine is a very distinctive-looking, working-class East Coast Italian-American (found in parts of New York/New Jersey/South Philly/Rhode Island, and a few other surrounding pockets). Steven Schrippa wrote three best-selling books on the subject. Yes, the Guido is an outgoing, sometimes over-the-top type, who may seem like a caricature, but that just stems from the East Coast attitude in general. Yes, many stereotypes are played up like vanity or an affinity for Cadillacs and gold chains, but these particular stereotypes are not extremely harmful as many uptight (and out of touch) individuals claim—especially since they have validity and are not just done because of what's seen on TV. And whether one wants to acknowledge it or not, they do define this group of Italian-Americans, so therefore, while we aren't talking about such high-culture things as opera music or Renaissance art, they are Italian-American things, and there are reasons for them. Having a particular car choice shared amongst the Guidos or a particular wardrobe (Fila tracksuit), are a shared social component identifying the group—and it's equally as valid as any other practice, belief or style, even if it may seem unimportant to others.

See, when you take all of the children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants from all the different regions of the boot and throw them together, you have your Little Italy neighborhoods on the East Coast, and this Guido subculture emerges. Things get translated and changed and carry onto the next generation, but the Italian root is still there, whether we are talking about a recipe or a word like capicola, spoken as "ga-buh-gole" or calling pizza "ah-beetz" (the Goomba-Italiano way). The whole lifestyle may seem shallow or strange to some—especially those who can't relate to it. The fact remains, "authentic" Italian-American life does not have to revolve around formal language, Renaissance art or the opera, these things are just not for us all—but that does not make Guidos less Italian or bad people. If they want to hang out at the corner pizza parlor instead of some black tie restaurant, that does not make them classless. Just like one doesn't have to be a rocket scientist, and could be perfectly content as a plumber. This doesn't make them dumb. I know my heritage and



I know the struggles. And I also know that even though a Guido may not be “up to the standards” of some holier than thou folks, they do have pride.

Well-rounded people should not be treated or looked at poorly if they act a little silly from time to time, and to me, I find it disgusting that someone who shares Italian ancestry (these “activists”) would look down on them because they may not share the exact same lifestyle. They just seem to look down on any Italian-American who is not in a certain social class and they want to classify this entire group (which is very large and very real) as fake or dumb, or as bad people. That kind of behavior only points to their own insecurities. I thought only God is supposed to judge?

I’m only going to reference MTV’s “Jersey Shore” once here. Reality shows are meant to play up the most dramatic and crazy moments—and the “cast members” are encouraged to ham it up for the camera. (Keep in mind, most who go on reality shows are aspiring entertainers.) No one really knows if their lives at home are consumed with what we see from a small sampling of a few months in a beach house. Within each of those housemate’s worlds, they have their own lives and their own complexities just like every other person. I thought we may have perhaps seen some more of that on the show to balance things out. Maybe then there would be less “haters,” or it could have at least given more insight. There were a few episodes with genuine Italian-American family moments but overall, it’s a fact that the shock TV stuff is what brings in the most ratings. We’ll have to wait for the season to pan out to see whether or not redeemable qualities or an evolution occurs for them. And if it doesn’t, one should simply not tune in to season two if shock TV is not your cup of tea. It’s really nothing to demand boycotts over, as if we are watching them glorifying murder. I say that because I am very tired of people equating the Guido and the gangster as the same thing as well. A Guido or Goomba may have parallels with a mobster, but nothing pertaining to the criminality aspects.

When “The Sopranos” was on, what I said to any Italian-American who had a problem with it was that yes, you can say they aren’t such great people based on the fact that they are Mafiosos, but many of the other aspects of them have direct parallels to a regular Goomba from the neighborhood. And I’m speaking from the perspective of a lifelong Jersey Paisan. The show was filmed right in my backyard. Their particular styles of dress, food choices, and the speech patterns—these are not “made up words,” or bastardizations, the slang/dialect Italian is just part of it all. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.

I consider myself an evolved Guido, just about to turn twenty-nine. That does not mean I am a “reformed” Guido as if I have something to be ashamed of. I have a family and my own catering business and I have goals and aspirations. Do I still spike my hair up in the “Brooklyn Blow-out” way and occasionally go to a dance club? Yes. But that does not consume my life. It never really did, but I know I am a good person and don’t deserve any criticism if I do retain some of my Guido practices or dress and speak a certain way. There needs to be more understanding of this whole thing so that automatic negative reactions aren’t the norm.

Like “Tony Manero,” who really was the first Guido showcased on film, it is indeed a subculture that is very complex and needs exploration—not shunning and shame. “Manero,” although flawed, had dreams and aspirations. We may not be perfect but if there are obvious redeemable qualities present, the Guido is simply not a bad thing. Not many people recall the sequel to “Saturday Night Fever,” which came out a few years later and showed Manero’s evolution from dancing and hanging out in Brooklyn to making in on Broadway as a dancer. Why was that film not as successful as the original? No doubt because the partying aspects were not what the film focused on, and that’s simply too boring to the mass audience.

Years ago, immigrants felt the need to change their last name to assimilate. Should we tell every Italian-American to drop the vowel at the end of their names—from the highest scholar to the lowest Guido? Because it can’t go both ways here. We can’t say it’s OK for one Italian from one social class or one part of America to be prideful in his background, yet a Guido should be silenced because they are a little different. Look, nobody is perfect and nobody has the right to judge someone’s behavior—unless of course lines are crossed where laws are broken or where someone is being directly insulted.

I live my life and don’t put down anyone—and you can’t “insult” someone else by living your own life

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a certain way. We should all be fellow Paisans—we are all from a different class or a different region in America—traced back to all the regions of Italy. And we all know there are vast differences there. Key word: different. Is there such levels of animosity between Italians in Venice and Italians in Sicily? As any casual observer of Italian studies can attest, yes indeed this was how it was, but I would like to think that such feelings have evolved too. If it is necessary, there can be civil discussions about all these differences, but there should never be any mean-spirited debates on which is right or wrong, or any hating going on. Or you can do what I do and just live your life one way, and I'll happily live mine. A person can be a staunch conservative and not believe in the gay lifestyle. Does that mean all conservatives HATE gays? No. There are some who do that, and those are called extremists.

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### **Links**

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[2] <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/guido.html>