

Flavor and Soul: John Gennari Discusses His New Book

Joelle Grosso (March 17, 2017)



Professor John Gennari recently held a seminar at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute about his new book, “Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge.”

As part of the Philip V. Cannistraro Seminar Series in Italian American Studies, [Anthony J. Tamburri](#) [2], the Dean of the [Calandra Institute](#) [3], and [Rosangela Briscese](#) [4], the organizer of this special event, welcomed Professor [John Gennari](#) [5] to speak about his latest publication. The book entitled Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge was published by the [University of Chicago Press](#) [6] and depicts the intertwining of African American and Italian American cultures for more than a hundred years.

Flavor and Soul



In this book, John Gennari spotlights the affinity between African American and Italian American cultures calling it “the edge.” Through studies of music and sound, film and media, sports and foodways, he shows how an Afro-Italian sensibility has nourished and vitalized American culture writ large, even as Italian Americans and African Americans have fought each other for urban space, recognition of overlapping histories of suffering and exclusion, and political and personal *rispetto*. It is only at such cultural edges, Gennari argues, that the nation can come to truly understand its racial and ethnic dynamics.

Gennari comments, “we all know that we live our lives in ways that defy the breaking up of people and culture so we need to get a deeper understanding of Italian Americans and their history in relation to our own families but we also need to understand the connections that we’ve had with other groups.”

A Very Personal Book

John Gennari is a Professor at the [University of Vermont](#) [7] and an American Studies-trained U.S. cultural historian and nonfiction writer with specializations in jazz and popular music studies, Italian American cultural studies, food studies, race and ethnic studies, and cultural criticism. He is the author of [Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics](#) [8] which won an [ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for Excellence in Music Criticism](#) [9] as well as the [John Cawelti Award](#) [10] for the Best Book in American Culture.

Despite all the praise his work has received in the past, Gennari’s claims that *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge* is his most personal book to date.

He elaborates, “this is a very personal book owing to my own Italian American background, my interest is in African American music, and my training in the history of jazz, that’s really a big part of my identity. I’m married to an African American woman who grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, we adopted our twin daughters from Ethiopia 10 years ago, in other words I live in a Black-Italian family.”

“I think more of us have to put ourselves into these stories and create a record of this cross cultural experience. It’s a book that’s largely about cultural representation and performance but it’s also my story so it means a lot to me on that level and I hope that comes across on the page.”

John Gennari is an American Studies-trained U.S. cultural historian and nonfiction writer with specializations in jazz and popular music studies, Italian American cultural studies, food studies, race and ethnic studies, and cultural criticism. For those who are interested in purchasing *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge*, the book is now available in bookstores everywhere. Click [here](#) [11] for more information.

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