

# ALL IN THE FAMIGLIA



PHOTO: MATTHEW THORSEN

BURLINGTON  
NEUROLOGIST  
**KEN  
CIONGOLI**  
IS NUMERO UNO  
AT THE  
**ITALIAN-  
AMERICAN**  
FOUNDATION.

JUST DON'T  
CALL HIM A  
**GOOD  
FELLA.**

BY  
**PAULA  
ROUTLY**

including novelist Gay Talese and literary theorist Frank Lentriccia. Parini did the editing.

"We have opposite politics," Parini says of his conservative friend, "but we get along very well."

Parini and Ciongoli share a passion for Italian culture. But Ciongoli takes it one espresso-dose further: From his vantage point, the Roman republic was the best thing that ever happened to Western civilization. Christopher Columbus was "a good guy and a visionary humanist." And that famous line, "all men are created equal," should have been credited to Filippo Mazzei. According to Ciongoli, Thomas Jefferson's vintner at Monticello was responsible for more than just harvesting grapes.

At the slightest provocation, Ciongoli will go off on the virtues of Mediterranean culture as if he were running for office. He has statistics to prove that Italian-Americans have the lowest rates of divorce, unemployment, welfare dependence and incarceration among ethnic groups in the United States. People of Italian descent also get high marks for eating together as a family and keeping elderly family members at home.

For all his ethnic pride, however, he insists "balkanizing" is not the goal of his organization. "Seventy-five percent of us marry out," he says, claiming intermarriage is the best test of tolerance. "But what we give the groups we marry into is a priority of family — not just lip service to it, but sacrifice and self-denial, as opposed to self-aggrandizement...Italy doesn't need a government to know how to behave."

Ciongoli's "values" are not exactly those defined by the Christian Coalition, although

Lunch with Anthony Scalia and Mario Cuomo? It is hard to imagine two more polarized politicians sharing a meal. Perhaps the most conservative justice on the Supreme Court, Scalia is a father of nine who firmly believes Roe vs. Wade is bad law. Former New York governor Cuomo is a quintessential liberal who supports gun control and opposes the death penalty.

Opposing ideologies are standard operating procedure in Italy. So Burlington neurologist Ken Ciongoli brought Scalia and Cuomo together over lunch, on the theory "they didn't disagree about anything that mattered." They ate pasta in a private room at Galileo's, and

discussed everything from abortion to the First Amendment.

"It was like having lunch with former Chief Justice John Marshall and Thomas Jefferson," Ciongoli says of the historic meeting two months ago in Washington, D.C. Although both men were wary at first, they were exchanging first names by the time coffee was served. After lunch, Ciongoli recalls, "they embraced and walked out together, arm and arm, like two little old Italian guys."

Ciongoli has a thing for Mediterranean men — in the cultural sense, that is. The 55-year-old father of five is to Columbus Day what Vermont horror writer Joe Citro is to

Halloween. When he's not practicing medicine, Ciongoli is promoting Italian culture and "values" as president of the board of the National Italian-American Foundation — a nonprofit organization with a \$4 million annual budget that funds scholarships and grants, organizes lectures, underwrites trips and honors prominent Italian-Americans in the fields of sports, politics and the arts.

Six years ago, the high-ranking ambassadorial job required Ciongoli to stand in for ailing Joe DiMaggio in his native Sicilian village. Two months ago, it found him convincing Cuomo and Scalia to collaborate on a chapter in Ciongoli's next book. Later this month, at

the annual awards dinner, it will bring him face-to-face with Leonardo DiCaprio, Tommy Lasorda, Sophia Loren, Barbara Sinatra and the presidents of Italy and the United States. On a Saturday morning at the Oasis Diner in Burlington, it definitely explains the suit and tie.

"He'll be examining a patient, getting a fax from Cuomo and talking on the phone to Geraldine Ferraro," Middlebury author Jay Parini says of Ciongoli, with whom he recently co-authored a book of essays entitled, *Beyond the Godfather: Italian-American Writers on the Real Italian-American Experience*. The *dot-tore* brought in the writers,

every mom is definitely at home. He uses the word to mean everything from filial piety and *pater familias* to good food and inspiring architecture. Simply put, the Italian version of values is a code of principles and behaviors that transcends politics, geography and blood. "To impact America with what we know to be excellent," he says, "is all we are after."

Like many of America's most passionate Italophiles, Ciongoli was not born in the Old Country. His parents, born and raised in Rocky-renowned South Philadelphia, never thought much about being Italian. "It was their hands, their arms, their hair, their food," he says. "It takes a generation of success, and some free time, to go back and understand who you are and where you came from."

Alfredo Kenneth — the Ciongolis' only child — had his career planned for him. "From the day that I could understand, they called me 'doctor,'" he recalls. Architect might have been a better fit, but Ciongoli didn't want to disappoint his father, who had to give up a scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania when his own father died unexpectedly. Says Ciongoli, "He wanted to be a doctor. He couldn't. He wasn't going to let that happen again."

The first step was St. Joseph's Prep, where Ciongoli was one of six Italians in a school of 700 mostly Irish-Catholic boys. Then it was off to the University of Pennsylvania — an Ivy League school not too far from home. Like the Roman historian Pliny the Elder, whom Ciongoli quotes from memory, his father believed children should be educated "in the city of their birth."

Culturally, though, Ciongoli was a wannabe WASP — at least initially. He joined a fraternity with a bunch of guys who were rich enough to spend weekends in Europe. "My clothes weren't right. My hair wasn't right. My accent wasn't exactly right. My attitudes were *all* wrong," Ciongoli recalls. But being culturally isolated taught him a lesson that was not covered in med school. "You get hassled," he says, "and it makes you think about who you are."

It was decades before Ciongoli really embraced his Italian heritage. Like so many immigrant families, his did not look back. He was the first of his clan to visit the homeland — an island off the coast of Naples within view of Mount Vesuvius. Although he had morphed temporarily from a preppe to a bearded liberal, "They knew instantly that I was a family member," Ciongoli

says, recalling the first of many trips back to Ischia. He now owns a vineyard there that has been in the family for generations.

Ciongoli credits his own children for the development of his conservative ideology. "Imparting values," he says, "is when I got into this Italian thing." And although Burlington is not exactly Little Italy, it appealed to Ciongoli and his wife Barbara when they came north for his medical residency. They spent two years in Denmark before Ciongoli returned to head up the Multiple Sclerosis Clinic. On the advice of his wife, who is not Italian-American, he gave up "Al" for "Kenneth."

It was a far cry from South Philly, but Ciongoli found a few kindred Roman souls in the Green Mountains. Years later he helped found the Vermont Italian Cultural Association — a benevolent group of opera-loving Italophiles who have learned to steer clear of subjects having to do with politics and religion. Ciongoli still remembers a "disastrous" session on the subject of feminism that almost tore the organization apart.

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**— KEN CIONGOLI**

He was still president of the local group when he attended his first meeting of the National Italian-American Foundation in New York. The topic was Hollywood stereotypes of Italian-Americans — a real sore point among high-ranking Mediterraneans. "I went to the bathroom, and guys were three deep combing their hair. I have never seen a guy comb his hair in Vermont. I instantly knew I was home."

"Then I went and sat down in the third row next to this beautiful woman, who was

maybe 70," he goes on, describing how his *Saturday Night Fever* moment gave in to a *Dolce Vita* one. "She opens her purse and says to me, 'Your lips look dry. Would you like a pear?' She was the ultimate nurturer, just like my mother. I thought, boy, what have I been missing?"

Huge parties, for one thing. The annual bash of the Italian-American Foundation is required schmoozing for a plethora of multi-voweled glitterati in politics and entertainment. Ciongoli has yukked it up with Frank Sinatra, John Travolta, Sonny Bono, Perry Como, Al Pacino and Yogi Berra. And he has paid Sophia Loren the ultimate compliment by noting her resemblance to — you guessed it — his mama.

Some of the biggest wigs on the 50-member board of directors are business types. Ciongoli rubs elbows with the chief executives of McDonald's, Brooks Brothers, Barnes & Noble, Saks Fifth Avenue, Honeywell, 3M and the New York Stock Exchange. The largest single donation to the organization came from the American ambassador to Italy, who wrote a personal check on the spot for \$500,000.

for it," Ciongoli reports. "The establishment groups — Anglo-Saxon and Jewish — had already been there for generations. So who was being bumped aside? Euro-Americans." Through his efforts, a number of scholarships have been established at prestigious universities earmarked for students of Italian descent.

Pride or prejudice? Ken Ciongoli walks a fine line between the two, whether he is dissing daycare — "I don't want my grandchildren raised by strangers" — or defending Roman slavery with a pro-Latin spin. "Men have always subdued other men and women. That's how the world works," he says. "But in Rome, you could buy your way out, into citizenship, even, with an honorable deed."

"I call him all the time on that stuff," says author and historian Willard Stern Randall, who has a standing date to spar with the doctor every Saturday morning at the Oasis — a longtime Democratic stronghold. "He beats me over the head with William Bennett and proverbs and statistics. Everything I say to him starts, 'But Ken...'"

Randall agrees that Italian-Americans got the "dirty end of the stick in America. They got jobs digging ditches and tunnels. A third of them went back. The two-thirds that stayed forbade their kids to speak Italian, which is tragic," he says. "Finally, somebody comes along and says 'be proud of your Italian heritage.' I don't think there is anything wrong with that."

Politics are not supposed to be part of the agenda at the Italian-American Foundation, which boasts as many left-wing members as right-wing ones. But like most Italians, Ciongoli has a tough time separating the personal from the political. It's hard to miss the contradictions in his pitch. A mistress is acceptable, provided it doesn't damage your family. Architecture is great, when it looks like the Parthenon. Women are free — as long as they nurture their husbands and children. Basic biology inevitably comes up in any discussion of gender roles. Some women on the board, including Geraldine Ferraro, strongly object to Ciongoli's views.

The good thing about Ciongoli, though, is that you *can* disagree with him. No matter how heated the discussion gets, he keeps his cool. Friends describe him as respectful, diplomatic, dignified and ambassadorial. And many of them are as liberal as they come. "He is not obnoxious," Randall says, noting Ciongoli is a "perpetual student" who reads

very carefully. Parini praises him for his eloquent tributes — in passable Italian — after six-hour dinners in Italy.

He and Randall do get into it on historical matters, however. "I go for documents, and Ken goes for spin," says the co-author of *Forgotten Americans: Footnote Figures Who Changed American History*. "I think Columbus deserves terrific credit for his discovery," Randall says. "Where Ken and I part company is: What were his motives and what were the results?"

Ciongoli defends the Italian explorer as a Catholic "visionary" who instructed his men to treat the Indians with kindness and respect. "It wasn't until the second time, when he discovered they had destroyed the little La Navidad village and eaten everyone, that he decided they were cannibals. That's when the word 'savage' came out," Ciongoli explains. What is now described as genocide, he says, "was more self-defense than anything else."

Ciongoli takes issue with what he calls "presentism" — a kind of politically correct revisionism that passes judgement on past actions by using current moral criteria. "When you consider the culture at the time, Columbus is to be congratulated, as he has been throughout history, for his vision — even if he was wrong about where he was," Ciongoli says. "He had the guts to get in that boat and keep going. That's drive..."

Ciongoli himself can be faulted for a different kind of revisionism. His rosy Renaissance view of Italy ignores pressing problems there such as drug abuse, organized crime and the inexplicable animosity between north and south. "Italy is inspiring to me. I am not there to change the worst of it," he counters. "It is not my country."

But it *is* his vineyard. For years, Ciongoli's relatives on Ischia have been pressuring him to sell his land to developers who want to put a hotel there. Ciongoli has refused, saying land that's been in the family for three and a half centuries will not be lost on his "watch."

Not surprisingly, his cousins are not in the mood for a lesson in cultural consciousness-raising — from an absentee landlord, no less. "They say, look, this is a modern country. Things change," Ciongoli says. "And we have the American saying things should stay as they are."

No amount of good food and wine can bridge the gap between the immigrant who yearns to belong and the native who longs to leave. Just as Columbus discovered the New World was not quite like he pictured it, Ciongoli is learning the old one gets younger all the time. ⑦