

Living (with an) Italian in NYC

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Blending Jamaican and Italian cultures through hospitality, food, and ... “free” speech

What does italianità (or “Italian-ness”) mean to a non-native? How do you explain it? There are certainly abstract stereotypes associated with italianità. We say, for example, that Italians are kind, friendly, beautiful and passionate. We say they know a thing or two about love and having a good time.

Then there are those images that immediately call Italy to mind: Ferrari and Prada, Venice and Florence, the [Trevi Fountain](#) [2] and [Mount Vesuvius](#) [3], pizza and pasta. There are also, we know, negative stereotypes. Italians are often considered loud, quarrelsome and hotheaded. And some people still stress the “M-word”...



But I wanted to try to tackle the concept head-on, not dwell on the usual stereotypes. Why not talk to a non-native who lives with an Italian, I thought. What does “living Jacqueline Greaves Monda in [Capri](#) [4]Italian” mean for a non-Italian? Better yet: What’s it like to live with an Italian, in an Italian context, even outside of Italy?

I decided to seek help from a couple that is beloved by this city, not the transient New York gossip variety, but one with a firm foothold in the city’s cultural milieu, one with ties to literature, film, art. So I decided to pay a visit to Jacqueline Graves, a Jamaican, and her husband [Antonio Monda](#) [5], an Italian writer, film studies professor at NYU and acting director of the [Festa del Cinema in Rome](#) [6].

In New York Jacqueline and Antonio play an active role, often side by side, in various cultural institutions, including, to name a few, the Morgan Library, NYU’s [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#), [7] the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) [8], Lincoln Center and MoMA.

Yet they are also widely known for hosting Italian and American writers, journalists, actors, critics and artists at their home on the Upper East Side. Their house is a “laboratory of ideas,” as Antonio himself calls it, where people gather round the dining room table. Who better than Jacqueline Graves Monda to guide us on this tour of italianità, of family, food, a sense of religion and the virtues of hospitality. Not to mention the vice/virtue of talk, talk, talk – never ending and all consuming.

A lot in common

Let’s start with how they met. In New York, through friends. It was 1985. Antonio was scouting a location for a documentary. Jacqueline was in the city with family. She didn’t know much about Italy then, but, like a lot of people, she did know about its art, music and opera. They immediately warmed to one another. He didn’t speak much English then. “I learned Italian first, starting from scratch,” she says, smiling, “thanks to a full immersion with his family in Italy. He was away at the time!” Beautiful, sunny, Jacqueline’s personal – though with-it – fashion sense enhances her Jamaican features. Her native land shines through in an unpremeditated, gentle way. It’s easy to understand how she enchanted the young Italian.

But what do they have in common? “That’s too easy,” she offers, not batting an eye. “Respect for tradition, for family, for real values, for hospitality.” And then there’s religion, even if the road was a bit circuitous. “My family is Protestant and Protestantism is a lot more rigid than Catholicism,” says Jacqueline. “One of my aunts married an Anglican priest who later became bishop of the capital of Jamaica.

I went to a religious school. I became a Catholic with Antonio, because I think it’s very important to raise children in the same faith.” And yet another factor in their marriage is their shared interest in culture, music, literature and art: “I come from a very cultured family. I grew up around books. My grandfather read ancient Greek. Classical music was in the air...”

Hospitality as a way of life

But the couple’s real – perhaps fatal – area of agreement is in their ability to “host parties,” a mainstay of their life in New York. “Italians are similar to Jamaicans. Thanks to my grandparents and mother, I was used to keeping our doors open to people from around the world. I remember my grandmother’s beautiful garden parties, the tables topped with seasonal fruit. When Antonio brought me to Calabria for the first time, I found the very same thing. Even if I didn’t speak Italian at the time.”

As the New York Times has reported, luminaries like Philip Roth, Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese and Zadie Smith flock to the Monda household. Paying them a visit is a special experience. But making such big names “feel at home” can’t be easy. Or can it? “I’m myself,” Jacqueline confesses, “hosting all kinds of people comes naturally to me.” Indeed, this splendid lady of the house attends to both her kitchen and her guests with great ease.



On occasion, you might even catch a glimpse of Antonio's mother by the stove. And so, as our talk drifts toward kitchen matters, I discover the secret to Italian- Jamaican hospitality: food. Jacqueline's food has become famous for its seamless blend of Italian-Jamaican cultures and is the subject of a forthcoming book.

Blending cultures through food

"Yes, a cookbook done my way. I make a note of what I like around. I always find the right ingredients to strike a good balance, and slowly but surely I've created my own type of cooking. But I don't call it 'fusion' - I hate that!" But where does this passion for cooking come from? "You'll laugh. I must admit that as a girl I didn't know how to cook. I lived with my mother, who was a good cook, so I didn't have to. Then everyone in my Italian family started asking me, 'What? You really don't know how to cook?' Antonio's family placed a lot of importance on the subject. So I slowly began to cook.

My mother-in-law Marilù and my sister-in-law Elvira were a fabulous help." As an Italian, I might have guessed. But cooking for Italians must be grueling for someone not Italian. "In fact for many years I was afraid to cook pasta for Italians!" Jaqueline recalls, "That's not the case today. Everyone asks me to cook pasta now. I like to invent. The flavors I create are based on memories. Much of my cooking is inspired by my memories of the time I spent with my grandmother. After that it's easy. I try to make dishes with a few, simple products. Now it's easier to find quality ingredients. When I began cooking back in '94, you couldn't even find decent basil in New York."

NYC makes it easier

And her family? What is it like to raise children in a bicultural family? The couple has three kids, and their house has that unmistakable family feel. Jacqueline couldn't be more straightforward on this matter: "New York is the best place to raise children with two different cultural backgrounds. Our children go to Italy every summer and have always heard Italian spoken. In New York, they're close to my mother and other relatives of mine. They have experienced my culture, even if we haven't been to Jamaica often. There are many Jamaican events here: concerts, folk dances, shows. We always go. New York is a special city. It let's you remain who you are. It's the essence of hospitality."

Italianness is — talking freely

I try, fiendishly, to provoke her a little. "What can't you stand about Italians?" "You're going to get me in trouble..." she laughs. "The Italians talk all the time! About everything, a lot. Especially about politics. That's not how it worked in my world.

My grandfather would say, 'Don't talk about religion or politics with anyone.' Think of the difference! I remember how astonished I was those first few years. And my mother was perplexed. She didn't understand the language and was hearing all this talk, talk, talk...But, now that you ask, I realize that I love this way of talking freely. My mother says I've changed. She doesn't recognize me anymore. But I love the way you Italians have of freely expressing yourselves."

And when does Jacqueline feel most Italian? "Maybe when talking with my daughter Caterina. She really is Italian. She always wants to speak Italian and speaks so quickly that sometimes on the phone I can't even understand her!" One last question. Getting back to Antonio, what's your secret? How do you live so happily together? "By working every day with a constant need for one another. You have to take as well as give. And be generous..."

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