



Afua Preston: A Proud African-Italian-American...

Marina Melchionda (March 03, 2009)



I met her by chance at a conference and could not believe my ears and eyes when she stood up and declared "I am a proud African-Italian-American!" Here is the story of this exquisite and incredibly rare Zuppa Mista!



The auditorium at [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [2] was crowded with young students from New York University. They were all there to participate to an open debate with the Italian singer [Lorenzo Cherubini Jovanotti](#) [3]. The conversation was funny and interesting and we were all having a relaxing time. People were very active: several took the microphone, asked their questions and kept the enjoyment flowing. There was one person, however, that really grabbed my attention. She was sitting in the back rows, I hadn't noticed her before. She stood up and introduced her question exclaiming "I am a proud African-Italian-American!". I never imagined that an Italian-American could also be African...or that an African-American could have Italian roots. To my eyes, she was a living, marvelous melting pot.

How could I let her go without getting to know her?

Afua immediately accepted to share her story with i-Italy and also selected for us some pictures from her family albums: the people you see below, although absolutely different in color, physical features and every other possible way, are all her relatives!

She is a single, young woman in her mid 30s who works as Assistant Director for Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting Programs at [NYU School of Continuing and Professional Studies](#). [4]

The rest is to be read...

You said you are an African-Italian-American. Tell me something more about your origins...

I was born in Ghana, West Africa, to an Akan mother from Ghana and African-American father from New York City. I came to America when I was less than 1 year old and my Father re-married my Mother who is an Italian-American. Her family is abruzzese from [Sulmona](#) [5] and [Roccacasale](#) [6]. I call my stepmother my Mother because I was raised by her since I was a baby. But I now also keep in contact with my birth Mother's family as well.

What is the "most" Italian side of your personality?

My cooking, sense of style, love of art and devotion to my family. I'm fiercely protective. People say that I have a sort of casual reserve called "cool" or sprezzatura -- depending on which side of my family is speaking.

Do these three very different origins collide sometimes?

When I cook, I'm always mixing some of my paternal Grandmother's recipes and adding some more garlic or taking an Italian dish and making more a Southern American dish. The music in my life also has cultural collisions. I am a big fan of Jovanotti who mixes sounds of Italy, black America and Africa.

The other day you told me that "you are proud to be an African-American and Italian". What is that makes you feel so proud?

I'm proud to be different and blessed with so many different cultures in my family. There's also more than just Africans and Italian in my family. To say I'm American means I'm a mixture of many different cultures - [Catawba Native American](#) [7] on my father's side, for example, French on my mother's side, for another example. Then my brother is part Jewish and my sister-in-law is Filipina. I'm blessed because both sides of my family, including the Italian side, taught me not to be prejudiced and welcome everyone into myself.

Recount me an episode in which you really felt as an Italian girl...

Spending Christmas at Mamma Dina's and setting the presepio (Nativity Scene) . Also going to a latteria (dairy) in the East Village of Manhattan where I grew up. Every week my Mother would take me there and I challenged the Di Bellos to give me the most stinky and exotic cheeses they had,



which they loved to do because they couldn't believe this tiny black girl loved Italian cheeses. They would tell the other customers: "See, she's really Italian!"

Do you speak Italian? Do you think language is an important factor of the Italian culture?

Yes. But I need more practice. Mom would speak very little when I was child but it was when my Great-Grandmother Mamma` Adele would speak to my Grandmother Mamma` Dina (in our family, the maternal nonnas are called "Mamma" plus their names) that made me want to learn Italian, and I eventually got a B.A. in Italian Language and Culture. I studied in Florence many years ago and spoke Italian very well back then. That was over 15 years ago. I still understand a lot but need to practice more. Yes. The language is an important factor. The sounds of the language are beautiful. (Not to mention, it helps to know Italian when ordering Italian food.)

How do you cultivate your Italianity?

Through food, art and music. I'm a good cook. I cook Italian food often. My Nonna has blessed me stating that I am the best pizzelle maker in the family.

I read [Cucina Italiana](#) [8] all the time. Both my parents are art historians, so I was always a lover of art. But it was especially after my semester in Firenze, that I came back to New York and had a new appreciation of the beautiful architecture and the stone and marble work in buildings in Harlem and Washington Heights. My great-grandmother was a huge fan of opera, but I also still listen to Italian music like Jovanotti, [Eros Ramazzotti](#) [9], Luca Carboni, [Zucchero](#) [10] and [Nek](#) [11].

Does your family follow Italian traditions?

Yes. Every year my mother has the "[Italian Seven-Fishes Christmas Eve dinner](#) [12]." I also wear a medallion of the Black Madonna of Loreto – ironically worshipped by the women in the family in Italy for generations.

As an Italian, African, American which is the value you would really want your children to learn?

When I do have children, I mainly want them to be an American first and appreciate the freedom in this country to be anyone, worship anything – or not, date anyone and say (almost) anything you want to. And to be kind and caring to all people of all ethnic groups and all socio-economic classes.

You are part of two different minority groups, the Italian-American and the African American. How do you feel the new Administration will represent their needs?

Remember Obama, like me, comes from many cultures: African from his father, Middle American from his mother, but also Indonesian from his stepfather! Obama will definitely give young black children hope of striving for more, that being a president is in their grasp. Young Italian American children who want to embrace other cultures (even if they didn't grow up in inclusive families like mine) are being inspired by Obama. Maybe they will go back to their own Italian families with a new message.

I was lucky as I grew up with two well-educated parents and two grandmothers who worked very hard in life to raise themselves up from poor origins with education. My paternal Grandmother Millie especially raised me to believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I never looked at color as an obstacle for me to do what I wanted in life. But many children of color do have real obstacles and therefore feel that they could "never" be what they want to be. Finally for them there is hope. Maybe more will want to be doctors, lawyers, politicians etc...

How important is for you to preserve your origins? Do you think it will be possible in the new global context?

I'm kind of a zuppa mista. I don't identify with any one group. Although my skin is black, I can't really define myself totally. I would like to explore my African roots more though. My face and name are Ghanaian, my voice is very NY American and my soul is black-Italian American.



A message you would like to send to all Italian Americans.

Yes. I could never live without olive oil or garlic. African Americans and Italian Americans are more alike than you realize. Mix!

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