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A Market for Plenty: Immigrants and the Making of the Fulton Fish Market

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Abstract: Founded in the early nineteenth century at the southern seaport of Manhattan, New York, the Fulton Fish Market was, and remains, one of the largest seafood markets in the world. At its heart was a workforce capable of moving hundreds of millions of pounds of fish a year, that endured public suspicion and resisted activist reform, and which ultimately shaped the palate of not only New York City, but America as a country—a workforce that was, in its formative decades, predominantly immigrants. This article builds on pre-existing general scholarship regarding the Fulton Fish Market and introduces perspectives found in contemporary newspapers, memoirs, and other nonfiction writings to study the contributions immigrants made to the identity and functions of Fulton. It adds another piece to the ever-deepening literature on New York City's immigrant histories and foodways.

Introduction

The Fulton Fish Market is, in many ways, a unique institution. Originally established as a wholesale market in 1820, the fish market grew and splintered into its own entity on the docks in 1831, and rapidly established itself as a centerpiece of the American seafood trade. During its peak in the early twentieth century, it sold a quarter of all fish marketed in the United States; in 1926, it moved a staggering 394 million pounds of fish.¹ Hundreds of vessels, businesses, and workers labored daily to ship seafood to and from over hundreds of miles away, connecting the retailers and citizens of New York to international fishing fleets and providing Lower Manhattan with one of the most diverse selections of fish in the world for over two centuries.² It became an iconic mainstay of New York, surviving changes in technology, government regulation, and public opinion, even as other public markets rose and fell through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³

At the same time, it was still an archetypical public market—a key feature of New York’s consumption and distribution systems, a common product of its time. Fulton Market and other public markets sprung up along the ports of Southern Manhattan, where people and commerce were concentrated, in the nineteenth century, corresponding to an immigration-fueled exponential growth of population in New York at the time.⁴ Food historian Andrew Smith puts it succinctly: “Cities were founded on the government’s ability to deliver affordable, appropriate,

¹ Jonathan H. Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market: A History* (New York: Columbia, 2022), 13.

² Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 11-12.

³ Andrew F. Smith, *New York City: A Food Biography* (Landham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 139-140.

⁴ Andrew F. Smith and Garrett Oliver, *Savoring Gotham: A Food Lover’s Companion to New York City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1244.

and safe food to its people, and New York City is no exception.”⁵ If a city is based around a skeleton of consumption, the significance of the grassroots immigrant presence cannot be overstated: a symbiosis between small shops and pushcarts, growing organically out of low overhead costs and ease of entry for newly arrived immigrants seeking to feed themselves and their families, selling lunches, groceries, and confectionaries, feeding the millions powering the industrial, economic, and sociocultural engines of the city. There is a long history of immigrants creating New York’s foodways, and though many of the individual accounts went unwritten, there has been a respectable effort in academia, especially in urban and immigration studies, to document the foodways of New York’s working class.⁶

Public markets form another crucial piece of the urban food network, consolidating vendors and goods in licensed buildings for ease of feeding the public and streamlining trade. Though its trade routes spanned hundreds of miles and its influence the nation, the Fulton Fish Market has always been deeply connected to its place in the Lower East Side. I became interested in that local connection between the market and its immigrant-dominated neighborhoods, between the institution and the people within it, and how the Fulton Fish Market, with its outsized impact on New York food supplies and the American seafood industry, might provide another conduit for understanding the impact immigrants have had on New York City and America at large. Though there exists a smattering of feature-length histories on the Fulton Fish Market that frequently mention the extensive immigrant workforce at the market, rarely does the scholarship delve any deeper than a note of demographics. Jonathan H. Rees’s *The*

⁵ Smith and Oliver, *Savoring Gotham*, 1244.

⁶ There are too many works and authors to name, but consider Andrew Hurley’s “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture” for the relationship between immigrants and blue-collar diners, Sean Basinski’s “Hot Dogs, Hipsters, and Xenophobia: Immigrant Street Food Vendors in New York” for a history of immigrant food vendors running into the contemporary era, and countless other works focusing on specific ethnic groups, such as Chinese-American restaurants, Greek-American confectionaries, and Jewish pushcarts.

Fulton Fish Market: A History goes further in specifically noting the various contributions of these immigrants, but it is far from comprehensive.

To put this paper together, I used the pre-existing histories of the Fulton Fish Market as springboards for locating primary sources, primarily historical newspaper articles and interviews, that could tell me about immigrant experiences on the New York waterfront. The lack of written records about the market's workers meant that I had to contextualize their experiences in larger historical trends to fill the gaps in the narrative and carefully consider the information in what examples I could find. From this patchwork, I endeavored to stitch together an understanding of the immigrant presence in Fulton Fish Market and along the New York waterfront at every step of the market's distribution process. This essay thus proceeds in three parts, illustrating their roles as the suppliers of fish, the movers, and the buyers. Through this, I seek to unearth yet another way immigrants have contributed to American foodways and identity.

The Fishermen

As a city on the coast, threaded with rivers and lakes, New York's waters supplied a successful nineteenth century trade in local shellfish (especially oysters) and fish, drawing a steady stream of immigrants looking for work.⁷ In the mid-twentieth century, there were around 1,500 men who called themselves baymen, making a living harvesting the waters of Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens; the majority of trawlers were Italian-Americans, some of whom grew up fishing in the ports of Sicily and still graced their boating vessels with evil-eye amulets and scapular medals.⁸ They and other fishermen either brought their catch directly into the Fulton Fish Market's piers throughout the day, or packed it in ice and had it trucked into the

⁷ Smith and Oliver, *Savoring Gotham*, 584.

⁸ Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the old hotel and other stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 473-474.

marketplace.⁹

Still, New York never attracted the same quantity of immigrant fishermen that some New England settlements did, especially as increasing water pollution in the twentieth century made recreational and commercial fishing more dangerous.¹⁰ By 1938 only a “small fraction” was brought into Fulton directly through the pier—instead, the market primarily processed catch sent in trucks from all around the country, acting as an important distribution hub for fishermen.¹¹ It was a valuable source of income for many new immigrants and encouraged more to enter the market, feeding into the conception of America as a melting pot of financial opportunity, even when said immigrants did not always live in the immediate New York region. From the North Atlantic came international fleets of Irish-Canadian, Portuguese, Italian, and Scandinavian fishermen, gathering along the open streets and coffee-pots of the market, mingling into the diverse crowds.¹²

Another example comes from Stonington, Connecticut. The Fulton Fish Market had long held a special connection with Stonington, with many of the market’s earliest fish dealing companies founded by Stonington fishermen who moved down.¹³ In the nineteenth century, Stonington also became host to a vibrant community of immigrant Portuguese fishermen, who sold the bulk of their catch in New York, almost certainly to Fulton.¹⁴ For these Portuguese, fishing was a part of their identity.

“Of course, back then Portuguese fishermen were in demand because they were taught the basics that most people have to learn after they go

⁹ Charlotte Hughes, “A New Day for the Old Fulton Fish Market,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1938, 126.

¹⁰ Smith and Oliver, *Savoring Gotham*, 584.

¹¹ Hughes, “A New Day for the Old Fulton Fish Market,” 126.

¹² Hughes, “A New Day for the Old Fulton Fish Market,” 126.

¹³ Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 56.

¹⁴ Fred Calabretta, “The Portuguese in Connecticut: ‘They Came Here as Fishermen...,’” Fall 2013, <https://www.ctexplored.org/they-came-here-as-fishermen/>; Fred Calabretta, ed., *Fishing Out of Stonington: Voices of the Fishing Families of Stonington, Connecticut* (Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 2004), 182

fishing. These people were taught this as young men. ... You came home from school, if there was a school, and you helped your parents to survive. So, these people knew their business, their jobs, long before they came here. They came here as fishermen, which was considered an art in the old country. It was something that you didn't learn in school, but it took a talent to know it. You had to have knowledge, and this knowledge was already in these people."

—Joe Reindeiro, 1994¹⁵

Like with the baymen, the fish market allowed Portuguese immigrants to both continue a traditional way of life and support themselves in the new world with it. In exchange, they brought a specialized cultural knowledge to the fishing industry and bolstered Fulton Fish Market's culinary richness, contributing to the foundational blocks of New York's reputation as a city of plenty.

The Waterfront

The essential operations of the Fulton Fish Market took place on the waterfront—the loading and unloading, the buying and selling. In early decades of the market, native-born, white, Protestant Americans dominated the upper echelons.¹⁶ Even so, the “forgotten” waterfront, its inner workings obscure to the public even at the time, reflected the diversity of New York's working class. Along the Brooklyn and Manhattan shorelines, the vast majority of longshoremen, in charge of moving cargo to and from ships, were Irish Catholic, Italian, and Austrian—a *New York Times* reporter in the mid-twentieth century ventured that among dockers they made up “nine out of ten.”¹⁷ It was difficult work, and they were considered exploited even compared to other blue-collar groups like miners and railroad workers.¹⁸

At the same time, those underregulated conditions made working in the market an

¹⁵ Calabretta, “The Portuguese in Connecticut.”

¹⁶ Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 225.

¹⁷ Budd Schulberg, “Joe Docks, Forgotten Man of the Waterfront,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1952, 133.

¹⁸ Schulberg, “Joe Docks, Forgotten Man of the Waterfront,” 114.

opportunity for some to climb the economic ladder. In Barbara Mensch's *South Street*, a book deriving from the author's personal experiences with Fulton in the 1970s, an owner of an unloading company recalls growing up in a poor Italian-American family, in the ghetto, and dropping out of school at age fourteen to work alongside his father moving boxes, his first step in heading his own firm.¹⁹ The waterfront gave immigrants with little formal education and no official documents a chance to join the workforce, and more than that, feel pride in his work, regardless of how difficult the job was—as one old-timer put it, “their job was their worth and to do your job well meant something.”²⁰ For many, frustrating as the strict pecking order was, the market was a space where they could forge purpose and identity, away from government and public scrutiny.

This became especially true with the turn of the twentieth century, as the ranks of Anglo-Saxon wholesalers were increasingly joined by Irish, Italians, and Jews working their way up.²¹ The rise of the Italian Mob in the 1920s, in particular, is often traced to Joseph “Socks” Lanza's ascension from immigrant journeyman to Genovese capo, controlling the market through the United Seafood Workers Union.²² Lanza's public image ranged from criminal bully to hero and protector of the people, but more uncontested is how he and the mob affected market demographics. Throughout the Fulton Fish Market's lifespan, its needs for labor were frequently met by workers bringing over relatives from their homelands, utilizing the family-based immigration networks underlying the growth of Lower East Side ethnic neighborhoods.²³ The mob further encouraged that migration, pulling from old-world political and social connections

¹⁹ Barbara G. Mensch, *South Street* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 149, 151.

²⁰ Mensch, *South Street*, 151-152.

²¹ Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 226.

²² Phillip Lopate, “Introduction: The Fulton Fish Market,” in *South Street*, by Barbara G. Mensch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 22.

²³ Lopate, “Introduction: The Fulton Fish Market,” 19.

in Italy to fill the market's ranks of union labor with men they could trust to be loyal.²⁴ By the end of the twentieth century Fulton was well-accepted as “the province of Italians and Jews,” eventually joined by small influxes of other groups, including Greek-, Portuguese-, and Asian-American seafood dealers.²⁵

For all that this ‘Fulton fish mafia’ shielded the market from conventional law enforcement, though, in many ways it was the insular culture of the Fulton Fish Market that allowed the mob to prosper, rather than the other way around. It was a culture not manufactured by any criminal underground, or ordained by business needs, but one that came foremost from the people working there. In her time at Fulton, Mensch observed that “the men of South Street shared work ethics and habits, and codes of moral behavior, originating deep in the past,” allowing them to function as “an insular group, every member with his particular role and all working to guarantee the survival of the market.”²⁶ Often these were habits of resilience and industry, a familiarity with gritty environments and a willingness even among bosses to get their hands dirty, even a tattered proletarian fashion—passed down from their fathers and reinforced among coworkers. Though this work culture prompted Progressive backlash, for its perceived chaotic and “unsanitary” practices, it kept Fulton’s workers tight-knit and productive, running the largest seafood market in America for over two centuries.²⁷ The insularity, too, drew from the presence of undocumented immigrants—as well as an old-world distrust of authority. A journeyman, reflecting on his Sicilian heritage, explained to Mensch how his ancestors lived in “lived in a world of suspicion and paranoia” and poverty, traumatized by a brutal, corrupt government, and how they developed careful ways of protecting themselves against outsiders,

²⁴ Schulberg, “Joe Docks, Forgotten Man of the Waterfront,” 133.

²⁵ Lopate, “Introduction: The Fulton Fish Market,” 19.

²⁶ Mensch, *South Street*, 160.

²⁷ Smith, *New York City: A Food Biography*, 139.

such as special codes.²⁸ Many of those systems of communication and defense mechanisms were inherited and carried on against the white-collar world and law enforcement opposed to Fulton. Into the twenty-first century, sociologist William Helmreich observed that the relocated Fulton Fish Market remained a stronghold for the expression of “rough-edged white ethnic culture”—a quality that kept it running for so long.²⁹

And for all of its seediness, its exploitation and rough edges, Fulton Fish Market was, for some, a community. Louie Morino, a mid-sixties restaurant proprietor, left his home fishing village in Italy at the age of eighteen, and over twenty years later, in 1930, opened his business in Fulton, choosing a run-down building on South Street over other, posher locations. Why?

“The reason I did, Fulton Fish Market reminds me of Recco. There’s a world of difference between them. At the same time, they’re very much alike—the fish smell, the general gone-to-pot look, the trading that goes on in the streets, the roofs over the sidewalks, the cats in corners gnawing on fish heads, the gulls in the gutters, the way everybody’s on to everybody else, the quarreling and the arguing. There’s a boss fishmonger down there, a spry old hardhearted Italian man who’s got a million dollars in the bank and dresses like he’s on relief and walks up and down the fish pier snatching fish out of barrels by their heads or their tails and weighing them in his hands and figuring out in his mind to a fraction of a fraction how much they’re worth and shouting and singing and enjoying life, and the face on him, the way he conducts himself, he reminds me so much of my father that sometimes, when I see him, it puts me in a good humor, and sometimes it breaks my heart.”³⁰

The “rough-edged white ethnic culture” that Helmreich observed, then, was a lasting culture of perceived familiarities—of habits such as “the way he conducts himself” and of aesthetics including dressing “like he’s on relief,” symbolizing to immigrants a particular sense of community and home. The marketplace connected migrants to the old world, to the ways they

²⁸ Mensch, *South Street*, 160.

²⁹ William B. Helmreich, *The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6000 Miles in the City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 317.

³⁰ Mitchell, *Up in the old hotel and other stories*, 442.

thought they had to leave behind. In the workforce, in its values, and in its nature, all integral to its longevity and success, immigrants made themselves an inseparable part of Fulton's identity.

The Consumers

The suppliers, the sellers, and finally, the consumers: the instrumental participants in a public market. The ethnic diversity of Southern Manhattan presented itself not only among the workers of the Fulton Fish Market, but in the attending buyers, too. A city attuned to its coast, the average New Yorker eats ten pounds per capita more seafood than the national average, in the twentieth century nearly all of it moving through Fulton, and that consumption has been heavily shaped by immigrant tastes.³¹

The Italians, for example, ate plenty of fish in their seafood-based Mediterranean diets, outstripping Americans in quantity and variety—making some twentieth century Americans believe that for cooking fish, the Italians were a people to learn from.³² In 1897 *The New York Times* wrote that “to the Italian the tunny fish is the fish of all fish,” praising the “peculiar” Italian way of preparing it with olive oil.³³ Known more commonly as the bluefish tuna, the “tunny” was rarely eaten by Americans before the twentieth century, until Italian-American customers made the fish a staple in Fulton stalls.³⁴ There were also associations between other ethnic groups and fish choices, such as the Irish with cod, the Germans smelts.³⁵ Ethnic demand pioneered the diversity of products set out in the market, and therefore the seafood introduced to

³¹ Lopate, “Introduction: The Fulton Fish Market,”

³² Jane Nickerson, “News of Food: Fish Cookery Borrowed from the Italians,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 1950.

³³ Unknown, “The Rival Fish Dealers,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1897.

³⁴ Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 204.

³⁵ Rees, *The Fulton Fish Market*, 204.

native-born Americans. In return, Fulton's world-class selection allowed immigrants to recreate traditional foodways in a foreign land, a tether that ensured repeat customers.

Vendors at the Fulton Fish Market took note of which groups frequented their stock. In 1975, one seller stated, "The Jewish people is some of our best customers. You better believe they buy a lot of fish. Carp, buffaloes, sable, whitefish, you name it."³⁶ Indeed, Jewish immigrants drove high demands for freshwater fish, especially around religious holidays. Around Rosh ha-Shanah, for example, where freshwater fish is served as a symbol of fruitfulness, the Fishery Council and trade spokesmen communicated the readiness of stocks of popular fish varieties and kosher poultry, implying established, if informal arrangements of seafood products between suppliers and ethnic communities.³⁷ Some also forged strong personal relationships with their buyers. Italian-American Johnny Montauk, owner of Montauk Seafood Co., gained his reputation as "king of the crabs" in part by selling hard-shell crabs, over 150 bushels a day, to Black, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Greek, and fellow Italian households.³⁸ In his own words, he was grateful for "my ethnics, my foreign clientele" —going so far as to learn several Asian and Mediterranean languages to communicate better with buyers.³⁹ The seafood supply networks linking Fulton and its nearby ethnic neighborhoods were founded on reciprocal trust and loyalties, certainly mutually beneficial.

As tastes adapted and expanded, the Fulton Fish Market's diversity became a clear source of pride in the wider city. In 1956 *The New York Times* reported:

The market holds its importance because of the average New Yorker's sustained taste for fish and other seafood. That may be owing to the cosmopolitan texture of the city's population. Where else in the United States would there be a large demand for specialties such as scungilli

³⁶ William W. Warner, "At the Fulton Fish Market," *The Atlantic*, November 1975, 58.

³⁷ Jane Nickerson, "News of Food: Festive Fare for Rosh ha-Shanah," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1950, 41.

³⁸ Warner, "At the Fulton Fish Market," 60.

³⁹ Warner, "At the Fulton Fish Market," 62.

(conch), squid and whitebait (tiny fish, 5000 to the pound), much favored by persons of Italian ancestry? Many Italian shoppers, incidentally, are also responsible, especially at Christmas time, for the sale of large quantities of eel. Where else are fresh carp, whitefish and pike—the ingredients of gefülte fish, a Jewish holiday specialty—so much sought after? And where else, because of the many persons of Mediterranean or Scandinavian ancestry, is there a ready market for dried codfish, known either as baccalau or lutfisk? There is always, of course, the demand for fresh Dover sole, fresh pompano and red snapper, juicy scallops and tender swordfish.⁴⁰

The writing emphasizes not only Fulton Fish Market exceptionalism among fish and public markets, but its ultimate significance as a reflection of the “cosmopolitan texture” of New York City—a boast of the city’s unique identity. Another interesting study of the public’s fascination with the Fulton Fish Market can be found in a day trip of several dozen dietetics students from the Columbia University Teachers College, who came with “eagerness to see America’s largest wholesale fish market in action” and learn about institution management, consisting of students from all over the United States and from regions as far as Shanghai.⁴¹ For the students Fulton represented the alluring hustle of American industry and the working-class, the “weighers... [calling] out in sing-song fashion some strange, inexplicable sounds to the checkers in the booths behind them” as part of the “formal sales procedure” simultaneously practical and charmingly esoteric. While there “they discovered the existence of squid; they were told that eels are sold alive; they found out how to differentiate between bonita and bluefish” —selections heavily influenced by immigrant tastes, on display on behalf of Fulton and New York pride.⁴² Indeed, almost all of what the students saw and admired in Fulton, from the productivity, to the insular modes of communication, to the diverse seafood selection, had been touched by the immigrant

⁴⁰ Werner Bamberger, “Fulton Fish Market Becomes an Exchange for Products of the World,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1956, 75.

⁴¹ Unknown, “Fish Market to Host Diet Students,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1897, 21.

⁴² Unknown, “Fish Market to Host Diet Students,” 21.

presence in some way. Though not always explicitly recognized, their contributions formed the basis of a market New York would proudly display to the world.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it was no surprise to discover a strong immigrant presence in the Fulton Fish market. Its location in the Lower East End, the evidently physical nature of its work, and the well-established relationship between immigrants and the urban consumption networks all placed Fulton in clear proximity to an immigrant blue-collar workforce and community. Uncovering the extent of that relationship, though, by tracing the roles of various ethnic groups in all stages of the marketplace, from supply to waterfront labor to purchase, provides far more robust insight into the specific impacts immigrants had on Fulton Fish Market and the American seafood industry, as well as how their work in the field affected the immigrants in turn. The knowledge they brought from the old world shaped the skills and culture of their labor in America, and their consumption patterns bolstered the profile of New York cosmopolitanism. As with many other traditional New York foodways, Fulton Fish Market would not exist as an American icon without the immigrant contribution—not only because it simply would not have the workforce, but because it would lose so much of the character fundamental to its identity and success. Many of their individual histories may have gone unwritten, but their sum impact was undeniable, and lasting.

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