

## CRAVING Sandwiches

# Giardiniera, explained

How a spicy mix of vegetables crossed an ocean to become Chicago's favorite condiment

By Nick Kindelesperger  
Chicago Tribune

Everyone understands the risk of handing a Chicagoan ketchup, so what's the right condiment to pass? That's easy. Giardiniera. (Say it with me, "jar-din-air-ah.") It's the quintessential Chicago condiment, one that's as brazen and boisterous as the city itself.

This fiery mix contains some combination of pickled chiles, celery, cauliflower, carrots and olives submerged in oil. Like an edible exclamation point, giardiniera adds instant heat, crunch and acid to many of our city's iconic foods, including Italian beefs, Italian subs and deep-dish pizza. It's even there when you might not expect it. Ever ask for hot peppers on a sandwich at Potbelly? That's giardiniera.

Certainly, no other place in the United States cares for giardiniera as much as we do. It exists in every neighborhood, with multiple brands vying for shelf space at grocery stores and many fast food stands mixing up their own batches. When he was growing up in Chicago, giardiniera was a constant presence, says Jimmy Shay, now the meat department manager at Local Foods market in the Clybourn Corridor. "Every Sunday, we'd have the same dishes on the table: a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese and a jar of giardiniera."

Today he makes his own giardiniera at the market. "It brings a lot of things to the table: acid, salt and freshness," he says.

Outside of the Chicago area, giardiniera drifts from an essential to an exception rather quickly. Chef Paul Virant, of Vie Restaurant in suburban Western Springs, who included a recipe for giardiniera in his 2012 book, "The Preservation Kitchen," says he didn't know about the dish until he moved to Chicago. "Being from St. Louis, you just didn't see giardiniera," he says.

As important as it is here, giardiniera wasn't invented in Chicago. It originated in Italy, where it means mixed pickles. Giardiniera also is the name for a female gardener, which is helpful inasmuch as it alludes to gardening. According to Jim Graziano, owner of J.P. Graziano Grocery Co., an Italian import company that's been in business in the West Loop since 1937, giardiniera is the Italian way of preserving vegetables from the garden. "That's the main thing," says Graziano. "It was strictly to protect the vegetables for the winter."

Just about every Italian is familiar with giardiniera, says Domenica Marchetti, author of "Preserving Italy," a book about canning and preserving. "Go into a grocery store in Italy, and you'll find all kinds on the shelves," she says.

Though impossible to know the exact date, giardiniera undoubtedly appeared in Chicago along with the wave of Italian immigration that came to the city in the late 19th century.

That's around the time V. Formusa Co., maker of the best-selling giardiniera brand, Marconi, opened. According to general manager Jeff Johnson, the company was founded in 1898 by Vincent Formusa,



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Lauro Quiroz Cano pours red chili flakes on a layer of cured cauliflower while mixing a batch of Marconi giardiniera at V. Formusa Co.



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A circa 1910s photograph of Vincent Formusa, left, at his storefront near Grand Avenue and Halsted Street in Chicago hangs on a wall at V. Formusa Co. in Des Plaines.

an immigrant from Termini Imerese, Sicily. "At first, he was importing oil and Italian produce," says Johnson. "Then he got into the Sicilian method of preserving vegetables in oil." While Johnson won't claim that his company was the first to sell giardiniera in Chicago, he believes the company is in "strong contention for at least popularizing it." V. Formusa makes giardiniera under a number of brands and also makes all the giardiniera for the Portillo's chain.

But Chicago's giardiniera is not a mirror image of what you'll find in most of Italy. There, the vegetables are cut in bigger chunks and typically canned with vinegar instead of oil. (If you encounter giardiniera in other parts of America, it has far more in common with the Italian version.)

"I've been looking through my books, and I don't see anything like the Chicago-style giardiniera in Italy," says Marchetti. "A lot of different regions make it, (so) you'd really have to travel all over (the country) before you can unequivocally say that there's nothing like it. But I personally haven't seen it." Johnson, however, calls

making giardiniera with vinegar a "northern Italian method" and says oil is used in Sicily.

Using vinegar versus oil makes a huge difference in the finished product. "When it's packed in vinegar, it's an antipasti thing," says Graziano, best served with sliced charcuterie, olives or cheese. Graziano thinks of the Chicago-style giardiniera as more of a condiment.

Chicago-style giardiniera is also usually pickled for longer. According to Shay of Local Foods, making Chicago-style giardiniera is a two-step process. "First, you pickle the vegetables," he says. Then "you drain everything, and then cover (the vegetables) with oil." Shay lets the vegetables pickle for two weeks before tossing them in the oil, where he leaves them to infuse for another two weeks.

Since no condiment stands by itself, giardiniera needed a partner in crime before it could catapult to fame here. It found a home as the topping for Italian beef, the classic Chicago sandwich of thinly sliced roast beef that's often served with its roasting juices (or jus). "It's the perfect accompaniment for the Italian beef," says Shay.

"That brightness and acidity really cuts through everything."

Much like the Italian version, Chicago-style giardiniera has no set recipe, leaving each Italian beef stand owner with his or her own opinion of what goes into the mix. The two most critically acclaimed stands, Al's #1 Italian Beef in Little Italy and Johnnie's Beef in suburban Elmwood Park, offer radically different versions. Al's #1 serves a spare mix of celery and bell peppers, with only some red pepper flakes for heat. Johnnie's Beef goes for a far more abundant version, adding carrots, cauliflower and sport peppers.

J.P. Graziano's house-brand giardiniera includes olives, about the only contentious addition for giardiniera purists. As Jim Graziano readily admits, olives grow on trees, not in a garden, but he loves the flavor they add to the jar. The shop's recipe dates to at least the 1950s, when a woman named Deanna made all of the giardiniera at her house in Cicero. "She made large batches in her basement," says Graziano, noting that regulations at the time were "ridiculously lax." J.P. Graziano continued to buy



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Giardiniera at J.P. Graziano Grocery Co. in the West Loop is one of the only versions made with olives.

the woman's giardiniera until she retired in her mid-90s and sold the recipe to another company. "They started using sliced olives to save money," says Graziano. "It made the whole jar taste like olives." So the Graziano family bought the recipe and now has the giardiniera made to the original specifications by a company in Ripon, Wis.

While the Italian beef helped spread the gospel of giardiniera, people eventually started putting it on other foods. Johnson, the V. Formusa manager, says there's nothing "much better than a dipped beef with giardiniera," but he also likes it on other dishes, including a simple plate of scrambled eggs. "It works on everything," he says. "It's not even about the spice. That oil holds everything together."

"I love it on subs and pizza," says Virant, the Vie chef, "but one of my go-tos, especially if I don't have time to put something together, is to take a canned fish like herring or sardines, open up the can, add some giardiniera, and then mix it with lettuce, tomatoes and onions. There you go."

One thing everyone I talked to agreed on was that giardiniera is surging in popularity. The companies I talked to didn't have exact data on sales throughout the years but say the numbers have increased dramatically in

the last decade.

"In the past 10 years, it's gone from a really niche Chicago thing to a national one," says Jeff Johnson, who estimates that V. Formusa sells around a million pounds of giardiniera a year. "First we saw a growth in the southern Chicago area, and now we are really growing across the country."

Potbelly goes through hundreds of tons of giardiniera a year, estimates Lori Haughey, a vice president for the company (though, again, the chain refers to the condiment as hot peppers). "We sell (our hot peppers) by the 16-ounce jar, and by the table-spoon in sandwiches," Haughey says. "To celebrate its 40th anniversary, Potbelly is selling Zapp's hot pepper-flavored chips right now."

While Jim Graziano runs a much smaller operation, he says that in recent years, giardiniera sales have accounted for 80 percent of his out-of-town orders. He believes that when locals move away from the area, they are surprised that they can't easily find the condiment, so they get some delivered. These people, in turn, expose others to Chicago-style giardiniera.

"People in other cities go nuts for it, because they haven't had anything like it," he says.

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## HOW TO PAIR WINE

## Match crispness in wine with radish sandwich

By Michael Austin | Chicago Tribune

French breakfast radishes, a springtime favorite commonly eaten with butter and sea salt, make a simple, satisfying sandwich when layered with cream cheese, arugula and sun-dried tomato. Have one for a light lunch or pre-dinner bite. Either way, you'll want a crisp, lean wine to cut the richness of the cream cheese and play with the herbal notes of the arugula.

## THE FOOD

**French breakfast radish sandwich:** Spread 2 ounces cream cheese thickly on one side of a slice of lightly toasted rustic bread. Thinly slice 3 or 4 French breakfast radishes (or regular radishes) lengthwise. Layer radish slices over the cream cheese. Slice half of a sun-dried tomato in thin ribbons; scatter over the radishes. Top with fresh arugula, then a second slice of toasted bread. **Makes:** 1 serving



CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTO; RECIPE BY JOE GRAY

THE WINE By sommelier Rachael Lowe of Spiaggia, as told to Michael Austin

**2015 Col Vitoraz Prosecco Superiore, Valdobbiadene, Veneto, Italy:** Made of 100 percent glera, otherwise known as the prosecco grape, this refreshing brut-style sparkling wine will be a great match for this dish. With notes of peach, apricot, white flower and apple, the wine's bright acidity and bubbles will cut through the richness of the cream cheese and dried tomatoes.

**2015 Sylvain Bailly, Sancerre, Loire Valley, France:** Made of sauvignon blanc grown in silex soil, this wine has an amplified mineral content, along with aromas of peach, apricot, white flower and apple, the wine's bright acidity and bubbles will cut through the richness of the cream cheese and dried tomatoes.

**2015 Copain Wines Tous Ensemble Rosé of Pinot Noir, Mendocino County, California:** From a cooler-climate region of California this wine is elegant, nuanced and full of finesse. It is lean and racy, with notes of yellow Rainier cherry, strawberry, lilac and white pepper. The spice character will complement the arugula and radish perfectly, while the acidity will cut through the texture of the bread and cheese.