

BRIEF HISTORY OF ITALIANS IN NEW MEXICO



When Rosalba thinks "New Mexico," she thinks Italian immigration, the NM Italian Film & Culture Festival, strengthening ties between Italy and the Italo-New Mexican community, and promoting Italian culture.

Since her arrival in 1973, Rosalba's focus has been on keeping her Italian heritage alive in the Land of

Enchantment. Over the years, she has served as President of several Italian organizations and as prime mover of many Italian-oriented celebrations and initiatives. We sat down with her recently to learn more about Italy in New Mexico

Describe the Italian emigration to New Mexico

Italians, and other Europeans, began settling in the territory of New Mexico in the 1700s. They were part of wagon trains moving westward toward the coast and fertile valleys of California. Some became travel-weary or stranded, while others simply liked the area and decided to stay. It was not until the arrival of the railroad in the late 1800s, however, that the Italian immigrant population burgeoned in New Mexico.

At that time, Italians came chiefly from Northern Italy, many from well-respected families in Lucca and the surrounding areas – familiar names here even today: Franchini, Bachechi, Giannini, Matteucci and others. They were merchants and entrepreneurs who saw a blank slate of opportunity to launch businesses like grocery stores, hotels and theaters. Family members soon joined them and, as word spread back home, others followed to escape a bleak Italian economy, especially in the south. They came in droves to work in the mines, to build the railroads – to do whatever it took to make their way in the New World. Their contributions to the development of this state were significant.

Are there many Italian Americans in your state? And what about the new Italians who have just recently arrived in New Mexico?

Census records say that there are approximately 40,000 New Mexicans of Italian heritage here today. The accuracy of those records, however, can't be confirmed. Over past decades, many Italians married into the dominant Hispanic population. Their surnames have changed and their future generations have been absorbed into the Hispanic culture. In questionnaires and surveys, they may not characterize themselves as Italian, so we just don't know for sure.

In talking about Italians in New Mexico, it's important to note that, while this is the fifth largest state in terms of territory, it is very sparsely populated, with only a little over 2 million residents. So, we can't really boast of a "New Mexico Italian community" per se. Distances between towns and cities are vast and Italian communities exist in pockets, scattered across the state, predominantly in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Rio Rancho, Gallup, Farmington and Raton. Those pockets of

Italians, however, are close-knit and active. Native Italians continue to arrive in New Mexico, settling mostly in Albuquerque and Santa Fe. The new arrivals are chiefly professional people who come to work in the state's national laboratories, or to teach in the Universities. Recent arrivals tend to be well-educated; some are students, while others are medical professionals and engineers.

Is there room for Made in Italy products in New Mexico? Are our products appreciated? Which ones in particular?

Absolutely, there is room and interest in Made in Italy products here, and they are greatly appreciated. I'm aware of some local initiatives currently underway to bring an array of Made in Italy products to New Mexico and other states via the Internet.

Traditionally, I would say that food products have been the most popular – things like imported pasta and cheeses. Recently, high quality Italian olive oil has moved to the top of the list; and Italian wines are rapidly gaining in popularity. Imported Italian coffee has long been a favorite all over New Mexico. Gelato shops are popping up here and there. There are specialty shops in Albuquerque and Santa Fe that carry Italian ceramics and kitchen items and glassware. Imported Italian moka coffee-makers are big-sellers everywhere, as are Italian espresso machines.

References

- <https://www.wetheitalians.com/default/italy-in-new-mexico-not-an-easy-adventure-but-a-lot-of-italian-pride>

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