Eventually Townes gathered enough works to make his own contributions to Nashville's Cheekwood Museum of Art and Belmont University. He helped some of his favorite artists, such as Robert Meredith, make their way, too, by hosting early exhibits.

But the key showings happened at his restaurant, where Townes gave his guests something beautiful to look at while they lined up for something nourishing to eat.

TOWNES OFTEN CARRIED pieces of his art collection to the restaurant to display, but it wasn't the main draw. Rather, customers lined up for the steam table that he manned, dishing roast beef, mashed potatoes, and homemade gravy. The griddle hissed with corn cakes. Tomatoes stewed. Pole beans simmered in cast-iron skillets.

"You'd have all those good smoky smells, because there was fatback cooked into the beans and the greens, and all the sizzly fried smells," Nancy Vienneau, restaurant critic for The Tennessean, said recently of the scene at Hap Townes Restaurant in the 1970s. " It was kind of like if you stepped into someone's country kitchen, because that's what it was."

Townes scooped stewed raisins. He ladled portions of squash casserole, which author and musician Shel Silverstein, a regular on his trips to Nashville, would order. No meat. No sides. The man who penned "A Boy Named Sue" just wanted a plate piled with casserole.

The restaurant drew a mix of writers, musicians, and music-industry folks. "You'd always see music people," Vienneau said. "They loved the food, and they loved Hap's way."

Of the serving line ritual, Vienneau recalled, "As he was spooning it on the plate, he was almost repeating what you were saying like an incantation. It was part of getting your order right, but also this connection with you."

Townes misses that connection. "I miss all the customers," he said. As for the art, he would say, back in the day, "I just brought this down here for the customers to enjoy."

Jennifer Justus is the food culture reporter for The Tennessean.

PAGE 2: Hap Townes, 2006. Photograph by John Egerton.

FROM SICILY TO THE CRESCENT CITY

THE BACKSTORY ON MUFFALETTAS

by Dana Logsdon

I'M A BAKER WHO DABBLES IN CULINARY HISTORY. As such, I've always been interested in the history of the muffaletta. Popular in New Orleans since at least the turn of the last century, the sandwich is a garlicky, pungent stack of olive salad, Genoa salami, ham, mortadella, provolone, and Swiss, layered on a golden round of sesame bread, cut into olive oil–soaked pie wedges and wrapped in paper.

Before I began my recent research, I knew the basics. What I didn't know was the muffaletta's backstory. How did it acquire its

name, and why it has survived through the decades in New Orleans while some other Italian-inspired foods have not?

That assignment proved tough. Many of the bakers and shopkeepers in early twentieth-century New Orleans did not publish menus or advertisements. The earliest written use of the word muffalettamay not have come until the 1950s, when the Sunrise Bakery advertised "muffuletta" bread. The first mention of the muffaletta as a sandwich probably occurred around the same time in an advertisement for Lakeview Grill, which suggested that diners "try our famous Italian muffaletta sandwich – a service for four," which "you slice like a pie."

This advertisement for Sunrise Bakery's muffuletta bread ran in the New OrleansTimes-Picayune on March 12, 1958. Image courtesy of America's Historical Newspapers Archive.

To trace the origin of the bread on which that sandwich was based, I turned to The Atlas of Sicilian Breads, published by Sicily's Office of Agriculture and Tourism. That book calls muffulettoone of Sicily's classic breads. Due to the extra water used in the kneading process, muffuletto loaves have soft and spongy interiors. Most are round and flat. Some are topped with aromatic seeds, like sesame or fennel.

The Sicilian connection proved key. Arriving en masse to New Orleans in the late 1890s and early 1900s, they set up shops and bakeries around the French Market, home to a diversity of importers, groceries, and markets. Records from Solari's Importers show that Sicilian immigrants to New Orleans could buy everything they needed to make a muffaletta sandwich, from German and French hams and cheeses to Italian mortadellas and salamis.

Early Sicilian immigrants bought other goods they would have recognized back home, like ricotta, caciocavallo cheese, olive oil, and offal meats. With those ingredients, I learned that they also made

vastedda sandwiches and sfincione pizzas, first culinary cousins to muffaletta sandwiches.

The vastedda, also called pane con la milza(which translates from the Italian as "bread with spleen"), is a traditional Palermitano sandwich. Still eaten today in Palermo, it is built on a muffaletta-like roll, dressed with melted lard, layered with fresh ricotta and cacciocavallo cheese, and capped with segments of boiled cow spleen.

When Angelo Brocato opened his ice cream shop in 1905 in the French Quarter, he began by producing ice cream in the summer months, and vastedda sandwiches in the winter months. But at some point, vasteddas disappeared from Brocato's menu and, in turn, faded from the New Orleans culinary landscape.

In that same era, sfincione pizza—a type of spongy flat bread—was sold in New Orleans by roving bread men. Although there were several types in Sicily, the version baked in New Orleans was topped with onions, tomato gravy, anchovies, caciocavallo cheese, oregano, and toasted bread crumbs. Like the vastedda, the sfincione is no longer a commercial product, but it is baked in some homes during the Christmas holidays.

Today, even as I revel in my newfound muffaletta knowledge, I grow sad when I think about the virtual disappearance of vasteddas and sfinciones from our gastronomic landscape. What's more, as a baker, I mourn the traditional Sicilian bakeries we've lost. Ace Bakery, run by the Aiovolasti family, has faded. So has United Bakery, the pride and joy of Sal Lo Giudice, decimated by the floods that followed Hurricane Katrina.

Muffalettas, however, survive. Despite the demise of our old-guard bakeries, these sandwiches serve as dynamic twenty-first-century symbols of Sicilian immigrants' lasting impact on New Orleans culinary culture.

Dana Logsdon, a former owner of La Spiga Bakery in New Orleans, bakes and listens to the stories at Angelo Brocato's Ice Cream and Confectionery.

PAGE 5: New Orleans, 1936. Photograph by Walker Evans. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.