IL MIO COGNOME · ARCHIVE OF ITALIAN FAMILIES

FREE GUIDE

How Italian Surnames Began

a father, a trade, a place, a nickname, a good wish:
the five ways yours may have begun



Find out the story of your surname

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

Dear reader,

a gift for everyone who has wondered "what about mine?"

Every day, in the comments on our videos, someone types their surname and asks the same question: where does it come from? It's the right question. Your surname is the oldest word you carry. You didn't choose it, and your great-grandparents carried it long before you.

This guide explains how Italian surnames came about. Almost every Italian surname began in one of five ways: from a father, a trade, a place, a nickname, or a wish for a newborn. Each one comes with a famous surname as an example, and there's a short quiz at the end.

By the last page you'll be able to spot many origins on your own. You'll also see why a surname that looks obvious can hide a very different story.

✦

> **A promise.** We don't make things up. A surname deserves better: an honest doubt is worth more than a pretty story that isn't true.

Giacomo Scrivani

1	2	3	4	5
A father	A trade	A place	A nickname	A wish
Di Stefano	*Ferrari*	*Messina*	*Rossi*	*Esposito*

CHAPTER ONE

A thousand years ago, almost nobody had a surname

from village nickname to parish register

For centuries a first name was enough: Giovanni, Maria, Pietro. Then villages grew, and once there were ten men called Giovanni, people needed a way to tell them apart: Giovanni son of Pietro, Giovanni the smith, Giovanni from Bari, Giovanni the redhead.

After the year 1000 these extra names began to pass from fathers to children, first among nobles and notaries, then among everyone else. In 1563 the Council of Trent required priests to record baptisms and marriages. From then on the surname was fixed on paper, often spelled the way the priest heard it.

In the nineteenth century came civil registration, and town halls began recording births, marriages and deaths: in mainland southern Italy from 1809, in Sicily from 1820, in Sardinia from 1866.



after 1000 surnames pass to children

1563 priests record baptisms

1809 civil records in the South

1820 in Sicily

1866 in Sardinia

> **Did you know?** Italian names were not changed at Ellis Island. Passenger lists were drawn up at the port of departure, usually Naples, Palermo or Genoa, and inspectors simply checked each arrival against them. When a spelling changed, it usually happened later, often because the family chose to change it.

Want to know where yours comes from?

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THE FIRST WAY

From the father’s name

“son of”: the largest family of all



The simplest way to identify a man was to say whose son he was. In the South many names kept **Di** or **De**, meaning “of,” in front: Di Stefano, De Luca, D’Angelo. In central and northern Italy the little word usually dropped away and a final **-i** remained, a leftover from Latin: Martini meant “Martino’s son,” Paoli “Paolo’s.”

A FAMOUS SURNAME

De Filippo

means “son of Filippo.” But Eduardo, Peppino and Titina, Naples’ great theater family, come with a twist: their father was the actor Eduardo Scarpetta, who never legally recognized them. They took their surname from their mother, Luisa De Filippo.

THE SECOND WAY

From a trade

the smith, the tailor, the miller



In a village everyone knew who worked iron, who sewed and who ground the grain. The father's trade became the children's surname: Sartori and Sarto (tailor), Molinari and Molinaro (miller), Pastore (shepherd), Fabbri (smith), Barbieri (barber).

The same trade takes a different shape from one region to the next:

the smith *who worked iron*	→	Ferrari Emilia and Lombardy	Ferraro the South	Ferrero Piedmont

TWO FAMOUS SURNAMES

Ferrari and Ferrero

Enzo Ferrari of Modena and the Ferrero family of Alba, the makers of Nutella, carry two surnames born from the same trade. Both names point to an ancestor who, centuries ago, worked iron.

THE THIRD WAY

From a place

newcomers brought their hometown with them



People who moved to a new town were often named after the place they came from: Messina, Genovese (from Genoa), Calabrese (from Calabria), Romano, Pisano (from Pisa). In the Middle Ages, in the South, a “Lombard” was anyone from the North, which is why many families are called Lombardo and Lombardi.

A FAMOUS NAME

da Vinci

Leonardo had no surname as we understand it today. His full name was Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci: “son of ser Piero,” the notary who was his father, and “from Vinci,” his family’s town. Two of the ways in this guide meet in a single name.

And your surname, where did it start?

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THE FOURTH WAY

From a nickname

hair, height, a flaw, a temper



A nickname was the quickest way to point someone out: the redhead, the fair one, the short one, the left-handed one. That's how Rossi and Russo (red), Bianchi (fair), Basso (short), Grasso (stout), Mancini and Mancuso (left-handed) came about. Sometimes it was a joke: Pappalardo, according to the most common explanation, was the man who ate lard even on fast days.

A FAMOUS SURNAME

Rossi

It's the most common surname in Italy, carried by the motorcycle champion Valentino Rossi, born in Urbino in 1979. It usually goes back to an ancestor with red hair or a red beard. In the South the same nickname became Russo.

THE FIFTH WAY

From wishes and foundlings

when someone else chose the surname

Some surnames are a wish placed over the cradle: Bonanno (usually "good year"), Benvenuto (welcome), Amato (beloved), Diotallevi ("may God raise you"). Others were chosen by the institutions that took in abandoned babies, the foundlings.

The most common of these is **Esposito**, from *esposto*, "exposed": a baby left in the wheel, the revolving hatch of the foundling hospitals. In Naples the most famous wheel was at the Annunziata. In Lazio and Umbria a foundling was a *proietto*, from the Latin *proiectus*, one "cast out": that's where the surname Proietti comes from.

A FAMOUS SURNAME

Proietti

Gigi Proietti, the Roman actor and comedian born in 1940 to a father from Umbria, carried one of the surnames given to foundlings in Lazio and Umbria. Behind these names are families who started over with nothing, often many generations ago.

Did you know? In many cities every foundling received the same surname. That's why two Espositos from the same town may not be related at all.

Which of the five ways gave your family its name?

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AN ARCHIVIST'S TRICK

The ending of a surname tells you where it began

not always, but often

-u · -as · -is
SARDINIA
Porcu, Piras, Melis

Lo · La · Li
SICILY
Lo Presti, La Rosa, Li Causi

final stress
CALABRIA AND SICILY
Calì, Laganà, Macrì

Di · De
SOUTH AND ABRUZZO
Di Stefano, De Luca

-ucci · -etti
CENTRAL ITALY
Mariucci, Paoletti

-i
TUSCANY, EMILIA, LOMBARDY
Rossi, Ferrari, Martini

-ero · -asco
PIEDMONT AND LIGURIA
Ferrero, Bergamasco

-on · -in
VENETO
Zanon, Marin, Bortolin

-ich
FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA
Covacich, Petrovich

Keep in mind. The ending usually shows where the surname took shape, not where your family lived in recent times. Italians moved a great deal, at home and abroad: today there are plenty of families named Piras in Turin and Esposito in Milan, New York and Buenos Aires.

YOUR TURN

How did your surname begin?

follow the questions in order: the first "yes" is the most likely path

Is it a person's name, with or without *Di* or *De* in front?	**From the father's name** Di Stefano, De Luca
Is it a trade, even an old one?	**From a trade** Ferrari, Sartori, Fabbri
Does it recall a city, a region or a place?	**From a place** Lombardi, Calabrese, Della Valle
Does it describe a look or a character?	**From a nickname** Rossi, Basso, Allegri
Is it a wish, or a name given to foundlings?	**A wish or foundlings** Esposito, Benvenuto, Proietti

> None of the five? That happens often: many surnames have a less obvious story, and some have more than one. The tricky cases below show why.

Tricky cases

Ferrara
the city in Emilia, or in the South *ferraria*, the forge

PLACE OR TRADE

Romano
"from Rome," or the first name Romano

PLACE OR FATHER

Greco
someone from Greece, or in the South a follower of the Greek rite

PLACE OR FAITH

Basile
not basil: the name Basilio or the Greek *basileus*, "king"

FATHER OR TITLE

That's why the sure answer can't be guessed. You find it in surname dictionaries, in distribution maps and in old records. It's the work we do in the booklet on your surname.

IF YOU WANT TO GO FURTHER

The whole story of your surname

a booklet of about fourteen pages devoted entirely to your surname



This guide has shown you how surnames are born. The booklet on your surname tells the story of yours, in English and in Italian:

- **origin and meaning**, with the scholars' theories when they disagree
- **the map**, region by region, and the towns where it is most common
- **the variants**, the notable people who carried it and where it is found around the world
- **how to trace your ancestors**, with a family tree and a parchment-style certificate to fill in

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