

## The breadwinner

As a member of the Italian Senate, Renato Turano shifts careers from baker to lawmaker.

**W**hen Renato Turano, MBA'91, began his term as a senator of the Italian Republic in 2006, he naturally thought about the American dream. Decades before, his father had reluctantly left Italy for America, to provide opportunities for his three sons. Now his oldest had returned, elected to *il Senato* to represent "Italians living abroad."

Turano was emotional when the stewards showed him around Palazzo Madama, the Renaissance palace near Rome's Piazza Navona, where the Senate meets. They opened the doors to the majestic chambers, and the new member from Chicago thought sweet thoughts of his father.

"Then the sanctity of the moment perished," says Turano. Phones rang madly on the Senate floor. People were talking; some were shouting, as the Senate president hammered his gavel, trying without success to bring the members to order. One lesson was clear: Turano, also president and CEO of Turano Baking Company in Berwyn, Illinois, had landed in the thick of the cacophony that is Italian politics. In fact, political anxiety marked most of his first year in office, and then in January came a suspense-filled, no-confidence vote in that same Senate chamber. It caused the fall of Prime Minister Romano Prodi—the 61st change of government in Italy since World War II.

The way the government is run also seems to be constantly shifting: the 2006 election marked the first time Italians from abroad would have representation; the move amplified a 1991 initiative to encourage dual citizenship. Turano, elected to represent Italian citizens in North and Central

America, has a 400,000-member constituency that, noted the November 6, 2006, *Chicago Tribune*, extends "from Alaska to Panama." He ran against 20 others from Italian communities in New York, Vancouver, and elsewhere, winning a plurality with roughly 11,000 votes; his closest rival got about 8,000. Turano's affiliation with the center-left *Unione* party made him a part of Prodi's razor-thin majority coalition. With Prodi's resignation Turano planned to join a new center-left majority.

One thing that won't change, however, is Turano's monstrous commute, which has him flying between Italy and America almost weekly. He spends part of each week in Rome, the other part with his close-knit family outside Chicago and meeting with constituents throughout his vast legislative district.

Transatlantic travel was more formidable for Turano's father, Mariano, especially his first voyage in 1955, when he sailed from Naples to New York on the *Andrea Doria*. Mariano had been a coffee salesman in Cosenza, near the toe of the boot on the Italian peninsula. He had agreed to join his brother, who owned a small grocery in Chicago. Mariano wanted to start a business in America too, but his English wasn't up to it. He spent 14 months digging ditches on the West Side, then went home. "He felt he



had lost his dignity," Turano says.

Southern Italy was no economic paradise in the mid-1950s. "My father knew his three sons would have trouble finding any kind of work," Turano explains. "He knew he'd have trouble keeping the family together." So he returned to America and to his shovel. But this time he spent weekends and spare time baking bread. It was a hobby at first, but he soon found that Italian locals longed for the thick crust and yeasty flavor of the Turano family recipe, developed in an outdoor stone oven in Calabria.

When Mariano sent for his sons—Renato, 15, Umberto, 12, and Giancarlo, 6—in 1958, they were enlisted to help. The family was soon turning out 200 loaves every weekend, and Mariano delivered them in a used Chevrolet to Taylor Street, Hollywood, and other Italian communities where he had regular customers. They got about 46 cents for a two-pound loaf. It was the beginning of Turano Baking, which now has five plants in three states and employs 1,200 people.

Renato was not thrilled to leave his cousins and friends for the United States—Chicago was a rougher environment and a lot colder than the Southern Italian hills. But he quickly got into the swing of things at St. Mel's Catholic high school, now closed, at Madison Avenue and Kostner Street. He was busy, usually with two jobs—one for the growing family bakery, others at a large grocery on Pulaski and at West Side banquet halls. He learned the value of hard work, not to mention the bread business. He also learned the ways of American teenagers and met his future wife, Patricia, a third-generation Italian American, at a high-school basketball game.

Turano later went to the University of Illinois—Circle Campus (now UIC). Electrical engineering

interested him because he was good in science and math. But he quickly realized that the required lab hours would not square with his work schedule. So he majored in accounting, a sensible move because the Turano-Campagna Bread Company, as it was then called, was beginning to take off. In 1965 it moved to a 3,000 square-foot bakery in Berwyn.

Others had their eye on the same market. In the 1980s a small explosion of Italian bread makers, many on Chicago's West Side, competed for the growing business from restaurants and groceries. Some have survived and flourished, but none has the size and power of Turano. The company recently opened bakeries in Atlanta and Florida, and it has grown a distribution network to get its "par-baked" product—which can be finished in the oven at a supermarket or other point of sale—to a nationwide market.

Turano Baking was flourishing in the late 1980s, when Turano enrolled in the weekend program at the Graduate School of Business. When he introduced himself to his class the first day, he recalls, they listened to his background and were mystified by their 40-something classmate. "You're already doing what I want to do," said one—running his own thriving business.

Graduate school sharpened his skills in team building and negotiation. He also learned to step back from a problem for a clearer view. "It reminded me of when my father would come back after a visit to Italy," he says. "After being away, he could see the things that weren't quite right."

Politics wasn't necessarily part of Turano's plan. He had been involved in public-service groups for a long time, most of them dedicated to strengthening Chicago's Italian community. He joined the Chicago Italian-American Chamber of Commerce, which promotes trade opportunities between the U.S. and Italy. It was more of a social organization, Turano says, before he was made president in the mid-1990s. He is Consulatore of Calabria in the United States, an honorary consul who helps resolve problems that Calabrese have while living in America.

But senator? "I had been asked by friends to run for various offices in the past," he says, "but I always turned the opportunities down." Yet this time, running for the Senate offered the opportunity to be part of a historic first for the Italian American

community. He joined the Unione party ticket partly because he had met Prodi and liked him when he visited Chicago in 1998, during Prodi's first brief term as prime minister.

As a senator, Turano has a set of objectives that include strengthening services at Italian consulates, which he has sponsored a bill to do. Turano's convinced that the ministry should send fewer consulate officers from Italy and hire more dual citizens as staffers. "It would be far less expensive," he says, eliminating the huge expense accounts Italy's foreign-service officers receive. "It would also strengthen ties between Italy and the communities abroad."

He's also working on aspects of a high-profile election-reform bill, adding measures that would make legislators more accountable to voters. Lawmakers currently run on national tickets but then are selected for seats by party chieftains. "What happens now is that legislators are loyal to their party and not to the voters," he explains. The immediate result is 32 parties in two houses—Senate and House of Deputies—vying for power. Useful legislative work comes second.

Turano knows that Italians of all political persuasions want less political talk—not to mention corruption—and more positive programs. But obstacles are everywhere. While he has been part of a majority coalition usually sympathetic to labor, he's also mystified when unions disrupt the country over futile issues, as they did in December when truck drivers struck for several days to protest gas prices. The crisis paralyzed Italy, sparked speeches and tirades galore, then changed nothing. "Yet people tolerate this," says Turano, frustrated by yet another example of politics Italian-style.

Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, are discouraged from starting businesses by reams of red tape. Many businesses that do emerge don't grow because tax and paperwork burdens get worse as they grow larger. "It's not that other countries don't have problems too," he says, but with his American perspective he sees the Italian ones more clearly.

With more than three years of a five-year term left, Turano, one of 315 senators, hopes to bring new thinking to Italian politics. Maybe he'll pour a few notes of the American dream back into the country where he was born.—Jay Pridmore

Illustration by Richard Thompson