

# How to 'Be Italian'

“Everybody Wants to Be Italian,” insists the romantic comedy that opens Friday — and Hollywood couldn’t agree more. In the movie, two would-be lovers pretend to be Italian in order to woo one another. Hollywood does the same with audiences: Whenever it needs someone warmhearted, loud and willing to make hand gestures at the drop of a hat, it turns to an Italian character — though not always an Italian actor. Here are some of Hollywood’s most lovable Italians and whether they’re distinctive or just stereotypes.

## MOONSTRUCK (1987)

**Now that’s Italian:** Loretta (Cher, in her Oscar-winning role) is a widow who wants a nice, safe, quiet marriage ... until she meets her fiancé’s moody, passionate, frustrating younger brother (a never-better Nicolas Cage).

**Believability:** When Cage says, “I love you,” Cher slaps him and says, “Snap out of it!” Stereotype? You bet — and all the more hilarious for it.

## SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER (1977)

**Now that’s Italian:** Always grittier than you remember, this look at Tony Manero (a magnetic John Travolta) can’t get enough of his swagger, his strut and his carefully coiffed hair.

**Believability:** Tony is as self-satisfied as a peacock, and it’s awfully appealing. It’s a

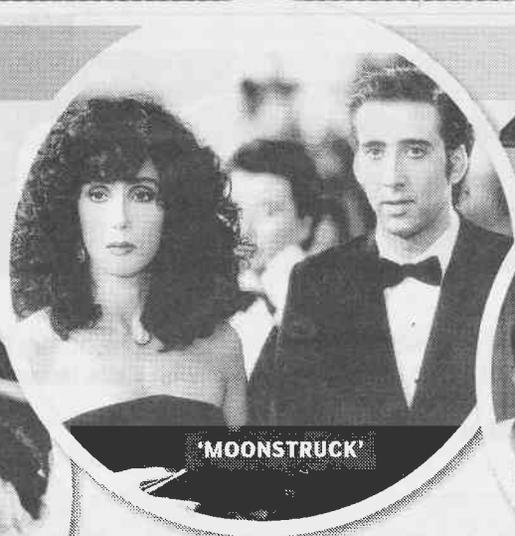


knowing, spot-on portrait that gives the Italian dandy a modern, New York twist.

## MARTY (1955)

**Now that’s Italian:** Marty (Ernest Borgnine) is a butcher whose Italian family is always badgering him to get married (of course). Clara is a plain-Jane schoolteacher. They’ve both been alone so long they can’t imagine anyone wanting to be with them.

**Believability:** Marty is a sweetheart. But he’s so passive and insecure, we never think of him as “Italian,” but as a specific, genuine guy.



## THINGS CHANGE (1988)

**Now that’s Italian:** Gino (Don Ameche) is a shoeshiner who, because he looks remarkably like a Mafia don, gets paid to take a murder rap. In this gentle David Mamet fairy tale of a comedy, Gino takes to the luxury and power quite easily.

**Believability:** Ameche is so dignified and reserved (with just a tiny twinkle in his eye), you don’t doubt for a second that people would buy him as a man of power. And his simple delight in the good life is adorable. Doesn’t come within a mile of a stereotype.

## DO THE RIGHT THING (1989)

**Now that’s Italian:** Spike Lee’s landmark, furiously funny drama about a very hot summer day in New York City deserves more credit for the rounded portrait of a pizzeria owner (Danny Aiello) who puts pictures of Frank Sinatra on the

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wall and can barely contain his discomfort and prejudice over his mostly black clientele.

**Believability:** Aiello isn’t lovable, but Lee doesn’t make him a monster, either. He’s a genuine, flawed human being. Aiello is allowed to reveal the frightened, uncertain human behind a bigoted, stereotyped front.

## BREAKING AWAY (1979)

**Now that’s Italian:** Dennis Christopher had the role of a lifetime playing Dave Stoller, a small-town kid obsessed with cycling long before Lance Armstrong made it cool.

**Believability:** Dave eats Italian food, rides an Italian bike and says, “Buongiorno, papa!” (Dad, the grumpy Paul Dooley, snaps, “I’m not ‘papa!’”) And he’s not even Italian — he just wants to be. Now that’s Italian!

Michael Giltz