

Chapter

1

Who Are These Guys?

In This Chapter

- ◆ Identifying the different Mafia groups
- ◆ La Cosa Nostra was American bred
- ◆ Explaining the structure of La Cosa Nostra

The word “Mafia” has led to more confusion than the 2000 presidential election. Some scholars claim it’s a Sicilian-Arabic word indicating a proud, self-sufficient way of life. Others say it’s an acronym for a Sicilian resistance cry that was used against the French invaders of the thirteenth century. Whatever its origin, today the word is used to refer to a wide variety of ethnic organized criminals from the Chinese to the Russians to the so-called Jewish Mafia. The term also has less serious applications. The party animal buddies of Elvis Presley were called the Memphis Mafia. The groupies around President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert were often labeled the Irish Mafia. In this book, the term “Mafia” refers to Italian or Italian-American organized crime.

In this chapter, I give a brief outline of the four criminal groups commonly called Mafia. Furthermore, you’ll get a description of the various positions in a Mafia family as well as examples.

Which Mafia?

America's La Cosa Nostra and Italy's three major organized crime groups—the Sicilian Mafia, the Camorra, and the Calabrian Mafia—are distinct entities despite their similar structures, the rules they follow, and the illegal activities they pursue.

The Sicilian Mafia

Sicily has had a long and violent history. At various times, armed resistance groups formed to battle the invaders of the moment. Some clans were noble patriots, but others were gangs of criminals. In the mid- to late 1800s, larger groups called “families,” often composed of many relatives by blood or marriage, sprang up. These families were linked more by their common structure and regulations than by fact. Yet, because of these similarities, outsiders believed that those who followed this way of life, Cosa Nostra, were all one group. Furthermore, it was clearly understood by all that a Mafioso would kill to get his way. The fear factor was a powerful weapon. Few dared to resist. To justify this regular use of force, the Mafia bosses spun the illusion that Mafia members were men of honor, acting only to help others. The creation of monopolies, both legal and illegal, became standard fare. This control of the population led to alliances with the major political party, giving the more than 100 families a collective stranglehold on the island.

Slammer Time

Sicilian Mafia boss Salvatore “Totò” Riina was able to avoid capture for more than 20 years despite directing a campaign of terror against honest government officials and Mafia rivals. He was finally arrested in January of 1993, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison in June of 1999.

The last 50 years of the twentieth century brought major changes to the Sicilian Mafia. Having learned how to produce heroin, the Mafiosi were no longer dependent on the skills of French chemists who worked for the Corsican underworld. As the heroin trade exploded around the world, more Sicilian Mafia members began dealing directly with American counterparts and their associates. Eventually, some Sicilian hoods took up permanent residency in the United States and Canada to facilitate the movement of the drugs and the mountains of money it created. These newcomers were responsible to their bosses in Sicily and were often confused with members of the American La Cosa Nostra.

The expanding heroin wealth brought an increase in violence. The more ambitious bosses formed alliances in order to dominate rivals. This led to rounds of killings that periodically roared out of control from the 1960s into the 1990s. Attempts by government forces to crack down had only mediocre political support. The lack of will was obvious to all, and some bosses escalated murderous attacks on anti-Mafia officials, hoping to break the government's will. By the end of the twentieth century, the wanton killings had the reverse effect. Following an outcry from the people after two anti-Mafia crusaders were

killed in bombings that also took the lives of innocent bystanders, politicians became serious in their fight against the Mafia. As the century ended, the authorities finally seemed to be making progress. Public pressure, new legislation, and cooperation with law enforcement officials from the United States and other countries were key factors. The Sicilian Mafia remains a serious concern, however.

The Camorra

With roots going back centuries, the Camorra is believed to have solidified during the 1800s in the prisons of the Italian city of Naples. Gradually, as prisoners were released, the gangs' reach extended into the city itself. Today, authorities estimate that there are more than 100 families, the majority based on the Italian mainland. Each has a hierarchical structure with a boss at the apex. He is assisted by various capos who oversee crews of members and associates.

Gambling, loansharking, extortion, tobacco smuggling, and political corruption were the main rackets of the Camorra until around 1970, when many Camorra families moved heavily into the international drug trade and its companion, money-laundering. Many got rich very quickly, but many others perished.

Like the Sicilian Mafia, the Camorra is quick to resort to savage outbursts of violence. The expansion into the drug trade escalated killings of rivals and law enforcement officials. This has increased the Italian government's pressure against the Camorra, leading to more cooperating members who have caused some damage to numerous members. Nevertheless, the Camorra continues to thrive, although it is the least active of all Italian organized crime groups in the United States.

The Calabrian Mafia

This version of the Italian Mafia takes its name from its base in the southern province of Calabria. More accurately called the Honored Society, it also goes by the name of 'Ndrangheta. Like its Sicilian cousin, the Calabrian Mafia claims to have roots based on resistance to government oppression. Men of similar thinking merged into what eventually became families with a hierarchical structure, strict rules of behavior, and a vow of secrecy.

Members have been engaged in the regular gamut of criminal activities, including tobacco smuggling, gambling, kidnapping, and extortion. By

Fuhgeddaboutit

American oil billionaire John Paul Getty was a victim of a Calabrian Mafia plot in 1973. Members of a clan kidnapped a grandson who lived in Italy, J. Paul Getty III. The elder Getty refused to pay their ransom demand, but when he received delivery of his grandson's ear in the mail, he approved the payoff. No one was ever prosecuted, and none of the \$2 million ransom was recovered.

the 1970s, families were active in the world-wide drug trade, moving both heroin and cocaine. Money-laundering became a specialty of some of its members as well. Rather than deal with other drug gangs, many Calabrian Mafia members set up shop in the United States, Canada, and other countries.

More wealth and more rackets exacerbated the normally high level of paranoia in Calabrian wiseguys. The end result was more dead bodies and more negative publicity. In the 1990s, the government finally generated the political will to mount offenses against the drug kingpins. Nevertheless, the Calabrian Mafia remains a major force.

La Cosa Nostra

From wiretaps and bugs of Italian-American criminals around 1960, the FBI learned that the term “Cosa Nostra” was used to indicate a particular lifestyle these men had sworn to follow. Eventually, the FBI coined the phrase “La Cosa Nostra” to distinguish Italian-American organized crime from its Mafia cousins in Italy. It is grammatically incorrect when translated into Italian, but the label has survived and is commonly used to refer to the American brand of the Mafia. For our purposes in this book, the terms “La Cosa Nostra” (or “LCN”) and “Mafia” are interchangeable.

La Cosa Nostra didn’t just appear. It evolved in the new circumstances of America and continues to evolve. Initially, in the 1890–1920 era, there were American carbon copies of Camorra and Sicilian Mafia families as well as numerous Calabrian Mafia cells. Eventually, the purity of each began to fade into the melting pot of America as new friendships and criminal liaisons developed. Violence also played a role in the blending. For example, in New York City, a prominent Camorra group was decimated by murder convictions and faded from contention. In Chicago, the Camorra group of Johnny Torrio and Al Capone overpowered their Sicilian-American rivals. Eventually, what emerged by the 1930s was La Cosa Nostra, a unique, powerful, Italian-American organized crime group—the American Mafia.



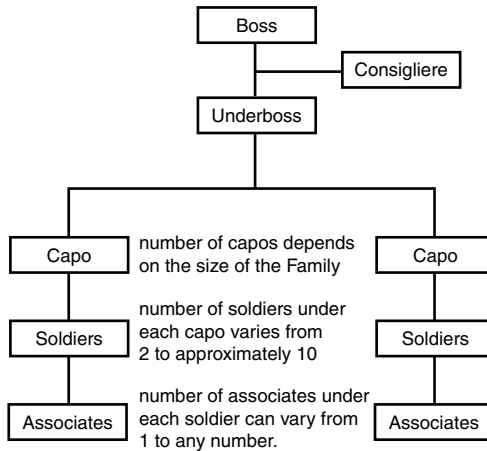
Mafia Speak

The American Mafia has been known by many names. Prior to 1920, it was called the Black Hand because of a popular extortion scheme used by Italian criminals, or *Unione Siciliana*, an organization conceived to aid new Italian immigrants that was eventually corrupted by Mafia members. Neither term is an accurate description of La Cosa Nostra.

In the first half of the twentieth century, some thought Italian crime groups had sent emissaries to establish branches in the new world. However, despite similarity in structure and rules, it appears that American families formed gradually and were not part of a global plan, even though some Sicilian Mafia members, when they emigrated to America—like Salvatore Maranzano, a major player in Mafia affairs around 1930—were often inducted into an American family.

Top Dogs

Despite being spread across America, each La Cosa Nostra family has a similar hierarchical structure. This format was adopted from the Sicilian Mafia and has lasted for more than 100 years. The following diagram shows the pyramid-type formation.



A theoretical model of a La Cosa Nostra family.

The Boss

The boss sits at the apex of the food chain of a La Cosa Nostra family. In 1931, a show of hands by all the members of Joseph Bonanno's family elevated him to the top position. However, by 1958, circumstances made this type of meeting too susceptible to detection by law enforcement, especially in the larger families. Consequently, when John Gotti was elected leader of the Gambino family in 1986, only the capos voted. No matter what system is used, the man with the most perceived power wins.

There are three basic ways to become boss. When a boss dies of natural causes, the second-in-command—the underboss—often moves to the top. This is what happened in 1959 when a heart attack felled Pittston boss Joseph Barbara. Underboss Russell Bufalino took over. Two years earlier, Carlo Gambino used another system. He formed alliances with other family leaders and ensured his own elevation by having boss Albert Anastasia killed. After receiving a long prison sentence, many bosses—John Gotti is an exception—will step down, for the sake of the crime family as well as their own sake. In 1987, Luchese boss Anthony “Tony Ducks” Corallo stepped down after receiving a 100-year sentence. Capo Victor Amuso was elected the new leader.



Big Shot

Family boss is a powerful position, but there are limits, as John Bazzano Sr. learned in 1932. After taking over the Pittsburgh mob, he tried to solidify his power by whacking the Volpe brothers. He picked off John, Arthur, and James on July 29, 1932. But brothers Louis and Joseph survived, and soon after, Bazzano was invited to dinner, murdered, and left in the street in a burlap bag.

A boss spends much of his working time settling disputes. Although a boss is, for all intents and purposes, a dictator, he has to know how to pick his spots, how to play politics. Ruling against a powerful mobster may come back to haunt a boss. Only a very foolish one tries to use only pure muscle. In 1979, Bonanno boss Carmine Galante forgot this golden rule and was executed while dining at a Brooklyn restaurant. When a boss is wise and keeps his men faithful, he reaps tremendous benefits through regular tributes from all his capos, who pass a portion of their crew's income up to him. In a 200-member family, that can total millions of dollars a year. And most bosses have been smart enough to invest in legitimate businesses. This allows for a very comfortable lifestyle without problems with the taxman.

The income, prestige, and power make the boss position a much-coveted one. It also makes him a target of ambitious underlings as well as ambitious law enforcement officials.

The Underboss

It is the prerogative of the boss to select an underboss. In Dallas in 1921, Carlo Piranio named his brother Joe as his second in command. In the larger outfits, the choice is more political. Certain strong factions of the family often need to be recognized to maintain some semblance of unity. Salvatore Maranzano, of the Bonanno family, followed this strategy in picking Angelo Caruso in 1930. Carlo Gambino rewarded Joseph Biondo with the underboss seat after they successfully plotted the 1957 murder of boss Albert Anastasia.

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Underboss Joe Biondo angered boss Carlo Gambino with his constant womanizing. Gambino felt this openly adulterous behavior reflected badly on the family administration. To make matters worse, Gambino caught Biondo muscling in on a garbage racket in New Jersey without seeking the boss's approval. In June of 1965, Biondo was demoted to soldier, a huge embarrassment, but when weighed against the penalty they meted out to Anastasia, Biondo got off pretty easy.

Not all underbosses have the same power. In 1964, Stefano La Salle, second-in-command of the 150-member Luchese family, obviously wielded more influence than the underboss

of the 12-man San Francisco clan. When the legendary Anthony Accardo was underboss of the Chicago outfit in the mid-1940s, he had tremendous strength. This was due not only to his own considerable abilities but to his closeness to boss Paul Ricca and the fact he was seen as a future boss.

In most families, the underboss arbitrates many of the disputes that arise. Depending on the seriousness of the problem, he may or may not consult with the boss. Some conflicts are immediately bucked up to the boss. In those cases, the underboss usually sits in and offers his opinion. In either event, everyone knows that the ultimate authority rests at the boss level. This sometimes chafes the ego of an ambitious underboss and can lead to problems.

Monetary compensation lands in the underboss's lap in various ways. For example, he may be involved as a partner in some rackets and thus get a cut. In addition, certain capos may pass their envelopes through the underboss on their way to the top. He takes a piece before visiting the boss with the rest. Additionally, the boss may give a slice of some of the family rackets to his underboss. However he makes his illegal money, it is a significant enough amount to make his position one of envy, especially when prestige and the possibility of additional advancement are weighed.

The Consigliere

Most theoretical descriptions of a consigliere tell of an aged, respected, Mafia veteran who is consulted on a variety of matters. Supposedly, the consigliere is devoid of ambition and thus bases his advice on what is "right" rather than what is in his or the boss's best interest. It is further claimed that this position was created to protect the ordinary member from a capricious boss. Therefore, a consigliere was elected by the membership rather than being appointed by the boss.

Reality is another matter. For the first half of the twentieth century, the names of the consigliere of most families were hard to come by. It wasn't until about 1959 that serious intelligence gathering about La Cosa Nostra really began. During that era, there were some families with an identified consigliere who fit the theoretical description previously outlined. In 1971, however, Colombo family consigliere Joseph Yacovelli was directing a murder campaign against renegade mobster Joseph "Crazy Joe" Gallo. Two decades later, a Yacovelli successor, Carmine Sessa, was part of a hit team poised outside the home of the acting boss looking to kill him. There are



Big Shot

In 1976, Frank "Bomp" Bompensiero was appointed consigliere of the Los Angeles family. This ploy was dreamed up by his boss, who felt that if Bompensiero were promoted, he would relax his guard and be easier to kill. Bompensiero was shot to death on February 10, 1977, after he was lured to a public phone booth where his killers were waiting.

enough examples of an active, biased consigliere to bring the theoretical model of the more passive role into question. Additionally, electronic surveillance in 1979 caught New England boss Ray Patriarca Jr. talking about appointing his consigliere. So much for an election!

Capos

The boss appoints the capos. The number depends on the size of the family. New York's Gambino family has had more than 20; St Louis had but a handful. Each capo is in charge of a mini-gang or crew of soldiers and associates that can range greatly in size. These men may or may not be based in close proximity. Capo Joe Notaro of the 1960s-era Bonanno family had crewmembers spread throughout New York's five boroughs and some in New Jersey.

Capos have varying degrees of power. Some are relatives or close friends of the boss, which gives them more influence. A capo with an active crew, producing lots of money, is always respected. On the other hand, capo Joe Sferra of the New Jersey family was demoted to soldier and removed from his lucrative union post in June of 1965 after a series of blunders. In 1984, a more severe loss of power happened to Salvatore "Salvie" Testa, a once rising Philadelphia capo. He ended up with a head full of bullets after boss Nicodemo "Little Nicky" Scarfo became suspicious of his loyalty.



Mafia Speak

During a court hearing in January of 1998, aging Detroit capo Vito "Billy Jack" Giacalone admitted that the Detroit La Cosa Nostra family existed and that he was a member. Giacalone pleaded guilty to a charge related to illegal gambling. The Detroit capo and his brother Anthony "Tony Jack" Giacalone were suspects in the 1975 disappearance of former Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa.

A slice of the rackets of his soldiers and associates provides the capo with illegal income. He, in turn, kicks a portion up to the boss at regular intervals. Accurate estimates of the income of an average capo vary greatly and are difficult to quantify. It's always in a state of flux, depending on the success and size of his crew. However, it's safe to say that capo is a much-coveted, more lucrative position than soldier or associate.

The Puppies

All organizations need people to do the grunt work. In La Cosa Nostra, the soldiers and associates carry out these tasks. Not surprisingly, they are required to pay tribute to their capo for the privilege of being able to operate.

Soldiers

The soldier is the lowest level of formal La Cosa Nostra membership. Becoming a “made man,” however, is a tremendous step up from the associate level. A soldier’s responsibility is to make money and kick a portion up to his capo. Everything else, including murder, is a means to that end. Most of his illegal schemes fall through, but enough had better succeed for him to remain in favor long. Some are rewarded with induction for strong-arm work but end up being incompetent when it comes to hustling money. A few lucky ones inherit successful rackets, but for most, it is a daily grind to generate income.

Not all soldiers are created equal. A boss’s son, like Alphonse Persico of the Colombo family, may be a soldier, but all family members and wiseguys from other families know early on that he is being groomed for bigger things. Another soldier might be a strong money earner and report directly to the boss, like Robert “DeeBee” DiBernardo did in the 1980s when Paul Castellano was boss. Others, like Chicago’s Phil Alderisio in the 1950s, are respected for their crafty ruthlessness. On the flip side is Colombo soldier Tony “The Gawk” Augello. He blew his brains out when he feared boss Carmine “Junior” Persico was going to kill him for involving son Alphonse in a busted drug deal. Others react to their loss of power by becoming informers.

Fuhgeddaboutit

Long-time Philadelphia La Cosa Nostra member Harry “The Hunchback” Riccobene claimed he was made a formal member of that family when he was only 17 years old.

Soldiers can be virtual brokesters, scrambling to earn enough cash to pay the rent. Far too often, they live high and flirt with the poverty line as they borrow money from other mobsters at usurious or loanshark interest rates as lawyers eat away at their money while their earning ability is thwarted by incarceration or surveillance.

They can also be multimillionaires, either through their own prowess or because they have inherited their fathers’ well-established rackets along with their fathers’ substantial “legitimate” enterprises.

Associates

Associates are the worker ants of La Cosa Nostra. They engage in regular criminal activity with the blessing of a made member of the Mafia. The key word is “regular” because there are hundreds of others who have brief criminal partnerships with a soldier but then move on.

Associates come in all shapes, sizes, nationalities, and religions. One may simply be a street guy who hangs around doing odd jobs such as unloading hijacked trucks and

shuffling stolen cars to a wrecking yard. Another might be a union delegate who secretly cooperates with the wishes of a particular mob family. Another could be a multimillionaire construction magnate who has allied himself with a mob family because it controls the unions that can make or break his projects. Yet another may have more power than most capos. Murray “The Camel” Humphreys was one of the leaders of the Chicago outfit in the 1950s and ’60s even though he wasn’t even eligible to be a formal member. Joseph Watts, a close associate of three successive bosses of the Gambino family from the 1970s through the twenty-first century, made \$30,000 a week from his loan-sharking business for the eight years from 1986 through 1994, according to testimony at his July 2001 trial, at which he was convicted of tax fraud. Watts was scheduled for trial on money-laundering charges in March 2002. Associates also make up a large number of mob rubout victims because their loyalty is always first to be suspect.

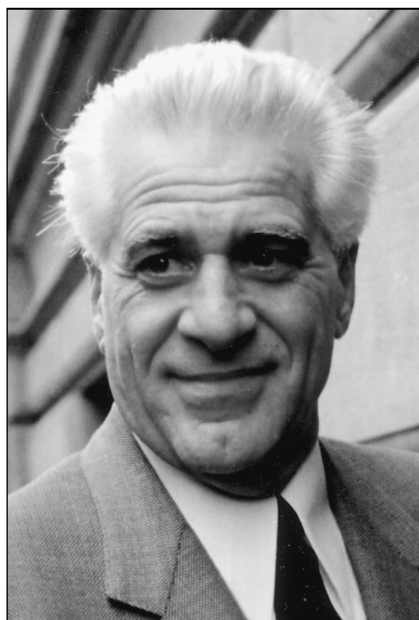


Mafia Speak

There are lawyers who defend mobsters and then there are mob lawyers. The former are respected as vital defenders of the principle of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. The latter are basically mob groupies who, for some reason, love to bask in glow of the media spotlight shining on their clients. A number of these advocates have crossed the legal line. Some end up behind bars, while a few end up in the street with bullet holes in their heads.

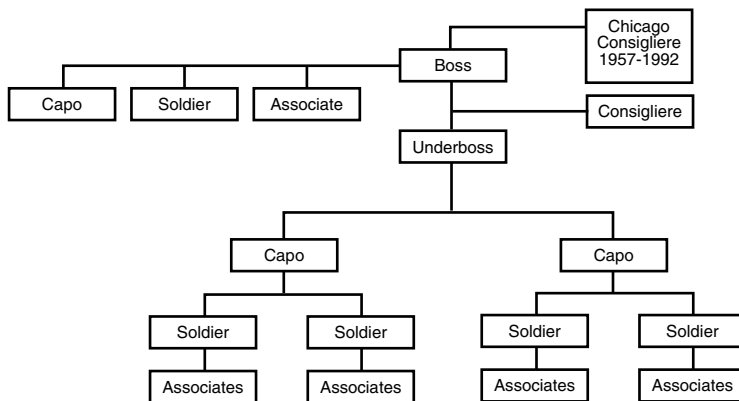
Mob associate Joe Watts made \$30,000 a week from 1986 until at least 1994 as a Gambino family loan shark.

(Photo courtesy of GangLandNews.com)



Real Life

It would be nice if one could diagram the power structure of a La Cosa Nostra family and then everyone involved in that life adhered to the rules. Unfortunately, the Mafia, like life, is more complicated than that. In many families, the formal structure doesn't do justice to who actually has power, as shown in the following figure. The examples in the following figure are drawn from a variety of families.



A realistic model of a La Cosa Nostra family

When Paul Castellano was a capo in the Gambino family, his brother-in-law was the boss. He and Carlo Gambino were also cousins. This gave Castellano unlimited access to Gambino and thus more power than the other capos and perhaps as much as underboss Aniello Dellacroce. On the surface, everyone would have to pretend that Dellacroce was superior to Castellano, but reality raised its head when Gambino named Castellano as his successor, passing over Dellacroce.

In the Chicago family, Gus Alex was not a formal member of La Cosa Nostra. His Greek background eliminated him from consideration. Nevertheless, Alex was at the top of the Chicago outfit for decades. His role was critical. He was in charge of the many political connections maintained by the Chicago family. His success in this role and his personal ties with the other major players gave him more power than most capos.

Colombo soldier Ralph Scopo was a key player in a multimillion-dollar labor racketeering scheme in New York City. He controlled a key District Council of the Laborers Union that helped establish a Mafia-led monopoly on major construction jobs in Manhattan. Scopo met regularly with leaders of his own Colombo family and with the heads of three other families who were involved in a club that took a piece of all Manhattan construction jobs over \$2 million. As such, he wielded more influence than most capos within his family.

When Thomas “Tommy Del” DelGiorno was appointed capo in the Philadelphia family of Nicky Scarfo in March of 1986, his power seemed to be growing greatly. However,

his excessive drinking and critical comments about his boss put his star in a steep decline. While still a capo, everyone knew he was on the way out. Eventually, DelGiorno recognized this reality himself and became a government witness.



Big Shot

Despite his close working relationships with Mafia bosses, Ralph Scopo was well aware of the fragility of Mafia life. In April of 1984, Scopo was overheard explaining to an associate that Gambino soldier Roy DeMeo had been killed by his own family because they merely suspected that he would not be able to stand up to legal charges that resulted from his stolen car ring.

Like DelGiorno, Philadelphia underboss Sal Merlino was a heavy drinker. Although he was a long-time friend of boss Nicky Scarfo, his troubles and perceived treachery led to a decline in his prestige. Finally, Scarfo demoted Merlino to soldier early in 1986.

As these examples show, the power structure of a La Cosa Nostra family is constantly in flux. Every day is a struggle. Each member is trying to hold his position or move up. At the same time, there is always someone coveting his money, position, or influence or a superior who is suspicious of his ambition.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ La Cosa Nostra is America’s home-bred Mafia.
- ◆ Each La Cosa Nostra family has a formal structure.
- ◆ Formal positions in La Cosa Nostra don’t always indicate real power.
- ◆ La Cosa Nostra depends on many nonmembers called associates.