

Identity in a Dish of Pasta: the Role of Food in the Filmic Representation of Italian-Americanness¹

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Food is one of the hubs around which all cultures, and all social and individual life in general, revolve. Eating and cooking play an essential role in shaping entire civilizations and *Weltanschauungs* (Lévi-Strauss 291-305). Food also takes on strong symbolic meanings as meals play an important role in the definition of the cultural location of ‘the home’, the creation of family identities and the negotiation of gender relationships (Valentine 491-492).

Besides contributing to the definition of social identities in general, food and foodways are one of the most powerful means of ethnic self-identification in the USA, and particularly so in the Italian-American community. According to data collected by Richard Alba (79 and 86), eating ethnic food seems to be the ethnic experience white Americans are most aware of: 47% of native-born whites living in New York State² reported eating “special foods or dishes of [their] ethnic background” in the preceding five years. This figure reaches 85% among respondents with an Italian ancestry, and over 60% of American-born respondents of Italian background indicated eating Italian food at least once a week. Similar results emerge from John R. Mitrano’s survey of ‘Generation X’ Italian-Americans³: almost invariably, his respondents indicated food as an important part of their ethnic identity, with recurrent references to the importance of eating ‘authentic’ Italian-American food (not ready-made convenience dishes or food from restaurant chains) and to traditional meals as occasions for family gatherings⁴. Food actually tends to over-

shadow other ethnic signifiers such as religion and sense of community in Generation X Italian Americans' self-perceived ethnic identity, thus fostering a dangerously one-dimensional and stereotypical view of Italian-Americanness (Mitrano 23-27). For instance, the original religious or historical significance of festivals brought to the USA by Italian immigrants is often completely lost in the preparation and consumption of the dishes prepared specifically for the feasts (Vivian 92-93). This is not, however, entirely unexpected, since

for immigrants, food is a primary means by which they socialize, worship, shop and do business - in short, by how they live their lives daily as ethnics coping with the alien culture that surrounds them. It is through their foodways, then, that immigrants retain aspects of their old world culture, adapt them to new world realities and thus develop an ethnic group identity (Pennacchio 111).

It goes without saying that such an attachment to Italian(-American) food did not go unnoticed by mainstream American society, but became one of the main components of the Italian-American stereotype. This is evident in ethnic slurs: the food-related epithets 'macaroni' or 'spaghetti (eater)' are some of the earliest derogatory designation of Italian-Americans. Just as

a word like 'slant', [...] abbreviated for 'slant-eyed', [...] erases nation-ness by reducing the adversary to his biological physiognomy [and] stirs 'Vietnamese' into a nameless sludge along with 'Korean', 'Chinese', 'Filipino', and so on (Anderson 148),

the simplifying term 'macaroni' reduced Italian immigrants to a feature - the habit of eating pasta - which, in the eyes of the rest of America, set them furthest apart from other ethnic groups, thus erasing other more complex aspects of their Italianness. One such aspect was the Italian immigrants' strong self-identification with regional identities rather than a single national, or ethnic, identity. Derogatory epithets referring to Italians' alleged universal love for pasta could be used against people from Southern and Northern Italy alike, the latter being more familiar with *polenta* than with spaghetti, at least at the time of the first immigration waves from Italy. Thus, the early denigration of Italian foodways, not unlike other forms of discrimination or xenophobia, can be said to have contributed to the formation of a shared ethnic identity among the Italian-American community.

The stigmatization of the early immigrants' eating habits as a sign of cultural difference and alleged inferiority was by no means limited to ethnic slurs. LaGumina (117-119 and 123) quotes a lengthy article from a 1901 newspaper⁵ which pointed out how poor the Italian immigrants' diet was, given that it included little meat and was based on staples such as bread, macaroni, vegetables, milk and wine. The perceived superiority attached to mainstream American foodways in comparison with those of low-class immigrants even tended to influence the scientific evaluation of Italian eating habits. Malpezzi and Clements (222 and 225) mention the attempts made by early twentieth-century American nutritionists and social workers to Americanize the diet of immigrant families, whom they thought to be malnourished, and substantial pressure was put on Italian-American women to forgo long-standing traditions - such as baking their own bread - in favor of canned or readymade food.

Italian-Americans, however, resisted culinary assimilation in two ways. On one hand, they tended to remain loyal to Italian products and certain staples (such as different shapes of pasta, *polenta*, olive oil) which were uncommon in mainstream American cooking. On the other hand, the development of a distinctive Italian-American (as opposed to Italian) cuisine, with a rich repertoire of recipes and product brands unknown in the Italian motherland but better recognized and accepted by the rest of the American society, became the very key to the economic success and cultural approval of Italian-American food.

The first form of resistance to culinary integration - loyalty to Italian products - is witnessed by the large quantities of wine, pasta, olive oil, cheese and tomato products which were imported from Italy in the first decade of the twentieth century, and up until World War I (Cinotto 169-170). These products, with the exception of luxury goods such as liqueurs, were usually unbranded and relatively low-priced. A major change came during the war years, when the Italian government was forced to cut exports and the Italian-American market needed substitutes for the temporary loss of its sole provider of 'ethnic' food. In fact, World War I marked the creation of a strong Italian-American food industry, producing brands such as 'Tomato Paste Mariuccia' or 'Salsa di Pomodoro Campania' (Cinotto 170-177). By the end of the war, when Italian exports were resumed, Italian-American consumers had learnt that they could have products such as canned tomato preserves or ready-made pasta in

hygienically sealed packages which were not only more up-to-date and easier to use, but were also marketed as no less traditional than the foodstuffs imported from Italy. Thus, though buying foodstuffs produced in America, they were able to retain their distinctive Italianness, a value from the past, while adopting the American contemporary values of time-saving convenience foods, neat packages and long-life products. Another American innovation which was rapidly adopted by Italian-American food manufacturers was radio advertising, which never failed to highlight the Italianness of the products and their faithfulness to the Italian culinary tradition (Luconi, "Not Only 'A Tavola'")⁶. From the point of view of the Italian-American consumer living in the interwar years, therefore, buying canned 'Italian' tomatoes grown in California could be more or less equivalent, in terms of maintaining his or her ethnic identity, to making one's own preserves from fresh tomatoes. In this sense, loyalty to Italian(-American) food was handed down across the generations; in the mid-1970s, for example, Italian Americans living in suburban Philadelphia continued to buy their meat and vegetables in the local downtown Little Italy (Luconi, "From *Paesani*", 139). At the same time, since the Italian-style foodstuffs manufactured in the USA complied with contemporary American standards and expectations concerning food packaging and processing, and were less prone to the side-effects of international politics and World Wars, they became seen as fit for consumption by mainstream American society. It was the start of the transformation of the 'poor', 'unbalanced' Italian diet into one of the most appreciated ethnic cuisines in the USA - which brings us to the second form of culinary resistance, the development of Italian-American cuisine.

It is widely acknowledged that the eating habits of most Italian immigrants changed quite rapidly in the New World. On the one hand, first-generation immigrants tended to adjust their diet to their American salaries and to the increased availability of certain foods, for instance buying more meat than they used to have in Italy (Mangione and Morreale 136). On the other hand, in addition to the production of Italian-style packaged foodstuffs suitable for the contemporary American lifestyle, which I have already mentioned, there were other ways to combine the flavors and the picturesque traditions of Italy with the needs of modern American life. For instance, even in the early 1990s, the traditional dishes sold on the occasion of *festas* (religious festivals imported from Italian towns) were

no longer prepared on the street by local restaurateurs or food vendors, but precooked and reheated in stands styled after American market stands, following the 'fast food' model (Mangieri DiCarlo 110-111). These changes helped pave the way for Italian-American cuisine to enter the broader American market, with two main consequences: first, following the laws of supply and demand, traditional foodways were adjusted to prevailing taste; and second, the success of Italian-American cooking among mainstream American society denied Italian-Americans "exclusive claim to their own cuisine [...] reducing its symbolic value" (Steinberg 64).

A new, stronger "symbolic value" is provided today by a culinary trend which acquired prominence in the 1990s, which is the return to, or, for many, the discovery of the regional cuisines of Italy. In some ways, this was supposed to have been an attempt to restore a sense of authenticity to Italian(-American) food, otherwise affected by "the corporate-dictated blandness of a McFood culture" (Cauti 15), but this 'ethnic revival' led to a certain disdain for American-born Italian-style dishes and eating styles, as is evident in certain Italian cookbooks marketed in the USA as the 'authentic' alternative to Italian-American food. According to Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, "for many Italian culinary writers, an exported Italian cuisine is an abased cuisine"; and such writers must indeed think that Italian-American cuisine was "exported" from Italy only to be spoiled by "American vulgarity" (Wheeler Cafarelli 38-39). Italian-American cookbooks emerged as a separate genre only around the mid-1990s, when American-born chefs and culinary writers of Italian ancestry began claiming the authenticity of Italian-American food as an original creation⁷; while Paola Casella (415) still assures us that the residents of the largest American cities favor typical Italian specialties such as water buffalo milk mozzarella, olive oil from Tuscany, balsamic vinegar, Parma ham and Lavazza or Illy coffee, which are regarded as symbols of a refined lifestyle, as opposed to Italian-American classics such as spaghetti with meatballs and veal parmigiana.

For some Italian-Americans, however, becoming aware that Italian-American cuisine is not just the perpetuation of invariable Italian traditions can have disruptive effects on one's identity and sense of memory. For instance, in Suzanne Branciforte's experience, the realization of the profound difference between Italian-American and Italian food was a painful process. Branciforte chose to discover her Italian roots, going

'beyond' her Italian-American background, but to do so she had to sacrifice something of her cultural heritage, to re-negotiate and re-define her very identity:

Once I learned *prosciutto* was *prosciutto* and not *broshjut*, *gaboladina* was *caponata* (or *caponatina*), *gobbagol* was *capicolla*, that *manigot* was *manicotti*, and *brajol* was *braciole*, there was no going back. (Can we ever go home again?) [...] My faith had been eroded. I was paradoxically assimilated into Italian culture, bypassing my Italian-American heritage, and surrendering tradition in the process (Branciforte 7).

The reason of Branciforte's disillusionment at discovering the difference not only between Italian and Italian-American names of dishes, but more generally between Italian traditions and Italian-American recollections and new interpretations of such traditions, can be found in the false presupposition that Italian-American food, perhaps prepared following family recipes handed down the generations (as in Branciforte's case), *is* Italian food. Once this impression is dispelled, one is left with the choice of "going back home" to the Italian-American tradition, often rich with personal and family memories, or view one's culinary background as a sort of fraud and trace back one's Italian roots.

Whatever the final choice, however, all this talking and writing about the kind of food which best represents Italian-Americans is a clear sign that the Italian-American community is very much aware of the role of food in their ethnic identity and image. Italian-American eating habits, loyalty to typical recipes and ingredients, and the centrality of food in family or social gatherings - from Sunday meals to religious festivals - have become a powerful stereotype, which, though at first a negative one, is today one of the most positive images associated with Italian-Americans, and is therefore often willingly adopted by Italian-Americans themselves (Malpezzi and Clements 223; Mitrano 23). In fact, while some writers may reject oversimplifying "pasta/pizza/*paesano*" folkloric depictions (Laurino 31), others are willing to accept and highlight the centrality of food for Italian-American ethnic identity. This is certainly the case of Stanley Tucci and Joseph Tropiano, the scriptwriters of *Big Night*⁸.

1. *Big Night*

Big Night is the story of two Southern Italian brothers, Primo and Secondo Pilaggi (a chef and a maître, respectively), who in the 1950s come Keyport, New Jersey, to open a small but authentic Italian restaurant called *Paradise*, which does not seem to be appreciated by the local clientele: the spartan establishment is almost deserted, and the few occasional customers complain about waiting too long and being served meager portions. This is largely due to Primo's refusal to adjust his original regional Italian recipes (like *timpàno*), which he sees as a religion and a way of life, to "Philistine" American taste. This is how he reacts to a lady who has already received risotto and orders a side dish of spaghetti, in one of the first scenes of the film:

Primo: How can she want? They both are starch! Maybe I should make mashed potato for on the other side! [...] She's a criminal, I want to talk to her.

Secondo: You wanna talk to her? [...] Go talk to her (holding the kitchen door open).

Primo: (long pause) No. She's a Philistine. I'm no gonna talk to her. She no understand anyway.

The difficulties experienced by the Pilaggis seem to be unknown to their friend and rival Pascal, the owner of the successful *Italian Grotto*. Pascal's philosophy and key to success is "give to people what they want" (*sic*), which translates into beautiful hostesses, red-and-white checkered tablecloths, dim red lights, mispronounced and re-arranged popular Italian songs like *O sole mio*, and tacky but 'picturesque' details like a large scale reproduction of the Tower of Pisa looking somewhat out of place beside the pictures of Roman ruins hanging from the walls (Fig. 1). And of course, it entails a cuisine which is miles away from the plain macaroni with tomato and basil sauce and the white risotto at the *Paradise*: huge servings of spaghetti with meatballs the size of tennis balls, salads full of black olives, plenty of wine, and eye-catching flambé dishes. The noisy atmosphere of the *Italian Grotto* contrasts sharply with the silence usually lingering over the tables at the *Paradise*, not only during ordinary days but even on the 'big night' - the dinner which is meant to give the Pilaggis' business some publicity - when the guests are spellbound by Primo's works of culinary art.



Fig. 1. One of the rooms at Pascal's *Italian Grotto* (*Big Night*).

In this context, the contrast between the Italian and Italian-American values is metonymically depicted through the different approaches to cuisine; on one side we find the Pilaggi brothers and their purist attitude towards Italian food and foodways, on the other side Italian-Americanness is championed by more 'integrated' Pascal. Pascal's Italian-Americanness, however, is not presented as the result of the hybridization and mutual enrichment of two cultures, but as the product of cultural colonization, a betrayal of genuine Italian identity in favor of the cheapest American clichés of Italianness. Such clichés do not include only spaghetti with meatballs and picturesque ambience: unlike the Pilaggis, Pascal has loud manners, uses bulk quantities of foul language, wears gold jewelry, likes expensive clothes and cars, and courts women in explicit ways. There is one cliché, however, that he does not abide by - loyalty to fellow Italians, as it conflicts with his personal American dream. In the end, Pascal consciously leads his naive friends to financial ruin, providing further evidence of his deceitful nature and attaching more negative connotations to the portrayal of Italian-Americanness as opposed to Italianness.

It is curious to note that the screenplay of *Big Night* - which won a Sundance Festival Award - was written by two Italian-American (not Italian) cousins, Stanley Tucci and Joseph Tropiano. The film seems to be

generally thought to convey a *non*-stereotypical image of Italian-Americans - probably assuming the term 'stereotype' to apply only to negative representations, such as the clichés of the *mafioso* or mobster⁹. No doubt *Big Night* is a step away from the conventional representation of Italian-American cuisine - whose main features are depicted as the very negation of genuine Italian cooking - thus revealing the inappropriateness of calling Italian-American restaurants and cuisine 'Italian'. But the 'real' Italian characters do stereotypically 'live to eat', or rather, to cook, thus reinforcing "the sense of devotion to and love for food that a majority of writers continually attribute to Italians and Italian Americans" (Cauti 18). In the leaflet enclosed with the American version of the DVD - and meant to resemble a wine list - Tucci explicitly confirms the central role of food in his and his cousin's ethnic experience, which seems to prove an "old saying" true:

Food was a huge part of our lives growing up [...]. There's an old saying that Italians live to eat, while other people eat to live. When we sat down to dinner, the food itself was usually the only topic of conversation.

It is not my intention to dispute that what is represented in *Big Night* stems from Tropiano's and Tucci's real-life experience as Italian-Americans. The film, however, does seem to fall into the tradition of depicting Italians and Italian-Americans as gourmands devoted to food, or rather, their own kind of food - a tradition which is well-established in the American cinema of the 1990s and recurs across very different genres, from the most tragic drama to exhilarating comedy, as shown in the following sections.

2. The Godfather Part III and Analyze This

The Godfather Part III and *Analyze This* share the main theme of the Italian-American mafia, but develop it along dramatically different lines. The first movie is the last part of the famous *Godfather* saga, adapted from the novels of an Italian-American writer - Mario Puzo - by an Italian-American director (F.F. Coppola). The second film is an American-produced mafia comedy directed by a Briton, Harold Ramis; its main purpose is to elicit laughter, which accounts for the abundance of popular clichés of Italian-Americanness, contrasted with equally popular clichés about American-Jewishness.

In *The Godfather-Part III*, food takes on a powerful symbolic value. Here, the classic combination of *Èros kài Thàntos* becomes the equally sensual *Trophè kài Thàntos*: death and food, or rather, death through food. In filmic fiction, Pope John Paul I is killed by a poisoned cup of tea, which he takes before going to bed; and poisoned Sicilian *cannoli* are also the way chosen by Costanza to get rid of Don Altobello, a traitor to the Corleones. On his way to kill another traitor, Archbishop Gilday, Michael's man Al Neri hides his gun inside a box of tea biscuits, which he eats on his train. It is important to note, however, that strictly speaking it would be inappropriate to take those three events as part of the filmic representation of Italian-Americanness, as the events take place in Italy, not the United States, and the food actually involved is either non-ethnic (the Pope's tea) or Italian (Costanza's Sicilian *cannoli* or Al Neri's biscuits, which bear a popular Italian trademark). Moreover, the three killings are underscored by *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Altobello actually dies during the performance at the Opera in Palermo), which is a double cliché of Italianness: not only because it is a piece of opera, but also because of its portrayal of jealous, quick-tempered Italian peasants. Thus, the metonymical conglomerate of food, mafia and opera becomes highly evocative, if not of Italian-Americanness, at least of Italianness or Sicilianness¹⁰: on the screen, the ethnicity of a mafia boss eating *cannoli* in a box of a baroque opera house is virtually unmistakable.

The association of food with violent death is present in *Analyze This* as well, as emerges particularly clearly from one of the key moments of the film. Very briefly, *Analyze This* is the story of Brooklyn mafia boss Paul Vitti, who is forced to see a psychiatrist - Dr. Sobel, rather stereotypically an American Jew - by recurrent panic attacks. When Vitti becomes convinced that Dr. Sobel is passing information to the FBI, he takes the doctor to the Italian restaurant where his father was killed when he was a boy gangster, and seats Sobel in the very chair his father was shot in. This brings back echoes of Costanza's *cannoli* or Al Neri's box of biscuits, although in this case death is not hidden *within* food, but *behind* it, the invitation to dinner being an excuse to lure Sobel into Vitti's trap. What seems more interesting here, however, is the extremely stereotypical depiction of the restaurant, which is clearly Italian-American (not just Italian), not only because it is geographically situated in the United States: the walls are decorated with paintings of the Gulf of Naples, a red lantern is placed on each

table, and Sobel and Vitti are having red wine, fettuccine and lasagna topped with a leaf of basil (which might seem incongruous to an Italian viewer; Fig. 2). Soon after dinner, Sobel tries to find out the roots of Vitti's panic attacks by asking the boss whether he remembers what food was served on the night when his father was shot. It turns out that Vitti does remember the orders (ravioli for himself and penne for his father), and this culinary memory becomes the key to his identity as a person, a son, and a mafia boss. Thus, just as in *The Godfather Part III* food was a part of a more complex metonymy also involving opera and the mafia, stirred together to convey a distinctive flavour of Italianness, in the simplified view of *Analyze This* Italian-American identity is summarized by a mix of food (and typical restaurants), family and the mafia. Interestingly, the coupling of food and family life also recurs in the last film discussed here, *Jungle Fever*, although with very different implications.



Fig. 2. The Italian (American) restaurant in *Analyze This*.

3. *Jungle Fever*

In *Jungle Fever*, Spike Lee explores the relationship between the Italian-American and African-American communities through the story of a love affair between Flipper, an upper middle-class architect from Harlem, and his working-class temp Angie (Angela Tucci), from Bensonhurst. It is not possible here to provide a full account of the com-

plex ways in which Angie's and Flipper's ethnic and social backgrounds are contrasted; food and the kind of family life taking place in the kitchen and around the dining table, however, are prominent features of such a contrast.

In *Jungle Fever*'s Bensonhurst, cooking for the family becomes a means of oppression, a way to establish and reiterate a hierarchical structure: whereas Flipper is seen actively helping his elegantly dressed wife prepare dinner while discussing his career opportunities with her, the situation is very different in Angie's family, whose members interpret Italian-American 'tradition' in a highly restrictive way. Angie's mother is dead; she is the only woman in a family of three men. The fact that she works full-time far from home, and that the oldest member of the family - her father - would be physically able to help with the chores, does not prevent her from being the only cook. We see her coming home late in the evening carrying large bags full of groceries, only to be greeted by her brothers' and father's reproachful comments about her 'starving' them. Quite obviously, in this context cooking is 'a woman's business'¹¹. In fact, Angie is the only member of the family we see enter the kitchen; she serves her father and brothers at the dinner table, who do not wait for her to sit and eat (Fig. 3); one of her brothers even deliberately tries to diminish her by saying "I like[d] Mommy's cooking better".



Fig. 3. Angie serving her family in *Jungle Fever*.

In *Jungle Fever*, then, food is used as an argument in favor of certain stereotypes concerning Italian Americans, or at least, Italian-American New Yorkers living in Bensonhurst. A first stereotype is strictly related to food itself and to Italian-Americans' loyalty to foodstuffs like DeCecco pasta and peeled tomatoes (which we see in Angie's kitchen), and to typical dishes such as spaghetti and lasagne (which she mentions while speaking with Flipper). This is an important, though not blatant, element in the general mosaic of the film, helping depict Bensonhurst as a place for Italian-Americans who want to be with 'their own kind', and therefore strictly preserve ethnic traditions. Having her ungrateful and unhelpful family "eat McDonald's" instead of a home-made Italian dinner - the consequence of her coming home late at night - is devised as a punishment by Angie; and a Chinese takeout meal is a way for her to escape her usual family life, at least for a night.

Another stereotype expressed through food is the prevarication inherent in the Italian-American family structure: cooking, though it might be perceived as a pleasant occupation, is *imposed* as a *duty* upon the weakest member of the family, usually the mother/wife, or failing her, another female member or a son. The Italian-American families depicted here are strictly patriarchal, with little care or respect for women and with an obsession for hierarchy and power in the sense of the right of imposing duties upon other members of the family. Just like the representation of loyalty to ethnic food, this "demeaning stereotype of women" (Aste 229) is of vital importance in the broader context of the film. In fact, under the peculiar social structure of Angie's family and neighborhood, women are perceived as property, as their only social role is to nurture the men in their family. Thus, the love affair between an Italian-American woman like Angie and a representative of another ethnic group becomes a theft in the eyes of the entire neighborhood, and triggers 'territorial' fights like the one which led to the killing of Yusuf Hawkins in real-life Bensonhurst in 1989.

4. Conclusion

The analysis presented here, partly due to space restraints, is too limited and has been carried out on a sample of sources which is far too small to be an exhaustive account of the role of food in the representation of Italian-Americans in the American cinema of the 1990s. It is interesting to see, however, that in spite of the fact that the films we took into consideration belong

to very different cinematic genres and were aimed at diverse audiences, a common trait seems to have emerged nonetheless. In the four movies discussed in this paper, Italian-American foodways, such as the adoption of typical recipes and ingredients, or the central role of food in family gatherings, are used as a powerful metonymy, capable of bringing immediately to the viewer's mind the whole of Italian-American ethnic identity and all its complex implications. It is not a coincidence, then, that in several of the films discussed here food is intertwined with other strongly stereotypical traits of Italian-Americanness, such as the mafia, patriarchal family values, and opera, thus forming even stronger metonymical conglomerates.

Before I conclude, a short explanation is due on my use of the terms 'stereotype/ical' in connection with the importance of food for the screen representation of Italian-Americanness. As stated in the introduction, in real life, food *is* - and is widely recognized to be within the Italian-American community itself - a fundamental component of Italian-American ethnic identity. If we accept the connotation of falsity which is commonly attached to the term 'stereotype', it would seem inappropriate to use this term with reference to the metonymical use of food to signify Italian-Americanness. The focus of this paper, however, is not what happens in real life, but on the screen, which, like literature, is a form of *mediated representation*, implying one or more encoders and several receivers. As a result of the encoding and decoding processes, the representation is mediated both by the encoders' choices and the receivers' encyclopedic knowledge, the latter being influenced by other mediated representations of the same phenomenon. Thus, the common traits shared by most past representations of Italian-Americanness operate like a filter through which the viewer - or reader - sees new depictions of Italian-Americanness, a filter that enables us to immediately identify a character on the screen or on the pages of a book as an Italian-American, but at the same time detaches the representation from reality, making void any judgment on its truth or falsity. The shared traits that make up the filter become stratified over time, and tend to be reiterated by new mediated representations: they become fixed, and in this sense, *stereotyped*¹². The association of certain kinds of food and foodways with Italian-Americanness can be said to be one of such stereotyped traits, as it recurs across different genres (and also across several mediated representations, see Luconi's and Coccopalmeri's essays in this book). From the point of view of this paper, its compliance, or non-compliance, with the real state of things is just not relevant.



- 1 The author wishes to thank Sam Whitsitt for his input.
- 2 Alba's study was based on a sample of 524 randomly chosen residents of the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area, interviewed in 1984 and 1985 (Alba 30).
- 3 In 1996, Mitrano interviewed fifteen Italian-Americans born between 1965 and 1980. The interviews started with an open-ended question, "What does it mean to be Italian American?"; on the basis of the respondent's initial answer, a semi-structured series of questions followed (Mitrano 22). Although very interesting, Mitrano's results should be taken *cum grano salis* due to the limited number of respondents.
- 4 A historical reason for the high importance attached to the social function of meals among the Italian-American community may be the centrality of the kitchen in early immigrants' homes, mainly due to the presence of the only source of heat in the house - the cooking stove - and of the long dining table, which was used for playing cards, storytelling etc., thus substituting for traditional Italian outdoor places of aggregation such as the town square (Lucchino 50-51).
- 5 Armstrong, Regina. "Startling Facts About Our Pauper Italian Immigrants". *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 23 March 1901: 270 et seq. Quoted in LaGumina 115-123.
- 6 The technique of stressing the ethnicity of products such as pasta or pizza is still heavily used today: Mitrano and Mitrano (132) argue that "no other ethnic or racial group comes close to Italian-Americans in the sheer volume of goods that are [...] *ethno-labeled*, *ethno-packaged*, and *ethno-marketed*" (italics in the original).
- 7 In search of higher profits and wider audiences, a parallel wave of 'picture-sque' Italian-American cookbooks relies on celebrities and stereotyped images of Italian-Americans, from Sophia Loren to Frank Sinatra, from real-life mobsters to Martin Scorsese (Wheeler Cafarelli 39-45); cf. for instance *The Sopranos Family Cookbook* (Rucker and Scicolone) and *The Wiseguy Cookbook* (Hill and Davis).
- 8 *Big Night* and the other films cited were part of a corpus selected for my PhD project in English for Special Purposes at University of Naples Federico II (in cooperation with University of Bologna at Forlì). The original project was to analyze the "Stereotypical Traits of Italian-Americanness in the American Cinema of the 1990s"; only a few of the films analyzed in the dissertation - the ones where food and foodways were central - will be cited here.

- 9 See for instance <http://www.24framespersecond.com/writings/writing.php?writing=ital-amer>, <http://www.geocities.com/secinaroclubusa/Stereotypes.html>.
- 10 These ethnicities, however, are hardly distinguishable in *The Godfather Part III*, as in the second half of the film Sicily ceases to be the place of Michael's and Altobello's roots and becomes the place where they choose to live and operate, as had already happened earlier in the saga. They are shown speaking fluently the Sicilian dialect, making contact with several Sicilians, doing business at the Vatican, taking part in the local family and social life, thus implying an almost seamless continuity between their Italian-American identity and their identity as Italians/Sicilians.
- 11 In the only other Italian-American family we meet in the film, the Carbones, it is the son Paulie who cooks for his old father; in this case, however, there are no women in the house. Paulie, too, however, seems to think that cooking and caring for a man is 'a woman's business': when he argues with his father, he points out that he is tired of playing the role of the nurturer, on the grounds that he isn't his father's "wife".
- 12 For a more detailed discussion of the term 'stereotype' used without a connotation of falsity, see my essay "Women, Water, and Cleaning Agents: What Advertisements Reveal about the Cultural Stereotype of Cleanliness". *The Translator* 10.2 (2004): 269-289.



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