

Food and Ethnic Identity in Italian-American Narrative

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A passion for food and alleged Mafia connections have long been the main stereotypes in the representation of Italian Americans in the United States. In the early 1890s, Adolfo Rossi - a journalist for the New York City-based Italian-language daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* - listed *maccheroni* and *brigante* in his autobiography among the code words for Italian immigrants in the eyes of their host society across the Atlantic (171). Roughly a century later, pasta and violence still came hand in hand in Sandra Mortola Gilbert's bitter rejection of the depiction of her own fellow ethnics as criminal macaroni-eaters:

Frank Costello eating spaghetti in a cell at San Quintin
Lucky Luciano mixing up a mess of bullets and
calling for parmesan cheese
Al Capone baking a sawed-off shot gun into a
huge lasagna –
are you my uncles, my
only uncles? (229)

The culinary cliché, however, is much less controversial than the other commonplace in Italian-American communities. According to Regina Barreca, orientation toward food is a stereotypical but truthful component of the portrait of Italian Americans that very few members of this national minority itself would challenge (xvii). Indeed, poet Joseph Tusiani agrees in his autobiography that Italian Americans would not be

Italian without macaroni (169) and Angelo Pellegrini stresses the inclusion of recipes and “discussion of wines” in the autobiographical sketches of six immigrants to the United States as an introduction to the Italian contents of the collection (4).

In the last few years, studies in the social sciences, history and literature have highlighted the centrality of food to the Italian-American experience in the United States (Deschamps “Cuisine;” Gabaccia et al.; Del Giudice; Cinotto; De Angelis and Anderson). In this view, cooking, eating, and gathering at mealtime are all ways to express the sense of self, social status, and economic standing as well as to negotiate one’s place both in the immigrant community and within the broader U.S. society as a whole. Especially in the case of Italian Americans, as Donna R. Gabaccia has colorfully contended, “we are what we eat.”

Narrative - both fictional and autobiographical - is a proper field to analyze the inner meanings encoded in Italian Americans’ food-related behavior. As Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta have argued, “food-writing and life-writing in Italian American culture are interconnected, for to examine our relationship to food is to examine ourselves, as well as the relationship between these selves and the family, the community, and society at large” (8). The purpose of this essay is to explore the transformations of the ethnic identity of Americans from Italian backgrounds as such reelaborations emerge from Italian Americans’ writings. In particular, this essay focuses on examples of the stages in the development of Italian Americans’ self-perception from a localistic sense of allegiance and the construction of an identity based on the national extraction of the immigrants and their offspring to the longing for assimilation into the host society and the rediscovery of one’s ancestral roots.

Author Helen Barolini remarks that “*Mangiando, ricordo*. [...] Food is the medium of my remembrance - of my memory of Italy” (*Festa* 13). Specifically, she points to her mother as an instance of how culinary tastes and practices show the ties connecting Italian Americans to their native land and, thereby, reveal one’s identity. As she recalls, “starting in her kitchen, my mother found her way back to her heritage, and this, I suspect, happened for many Italian-American families” (*Festa* 52). Actually, in the recollections of many Italian Americans, sharing meals, in particular the Sunday dinners, is a means to strengthen family and community links in “Little Italies” as well as to revive the reminiscences of the native land.

For instance, in Jerre Mangione's *An Ethnic at Large*, banquet gatherings provide an opportunity to tell stories about Sicily and, thereby, to commit eaters further to their ethnic heritage (15).

Nancy Verde Barr argues that "when my father was living we had to have Sunday dinner and supper. It was a must. We had to be there and had to sit throughout the meal" (308). Food is the fabric that holds Italian-American traditions together. It has its rituals like the "secret formula for making alcohol out of the grape stems" in Mari Tomasi's novel *Like Lesser Gods* (115). When the preparation of dishes is disrupted, so are the ethnic values that underlie foodways. Allegorically, for instance, this happens in Lynne Vannucci's "An Accidental Murder." Interference with the Christmas Eve dinner ritual results in the killing of Bennie by her husband Emilio, who thereby violates the sacredness of the family, namely one of the most persistent traits of Italian-American culture (Gambino 1-41).

Italian Americans' ethnic identity usually takes shape through a metaphoric association with Italian food. In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's evocation of her Italian roots, espresso is a distinguishing characteristic of her Italian-American family (60-61). Similarly, Edward Albert Maruggi looks back at his formative years in an Italian-American neighborhood in Rochester through the lens of the pivotal role of food in growing up Italian. To Maria Laurino, her Italian descent has "the tastes and aromas" of "the sweet scent of tomato sauce simmering on the stove [...]; the paper-thin slices of prosciutto, salty and smooth on the tongue; and my own madeleine, oil-laden frying peppers, light green in color with long, curvaceous bodies that effortlessly glide down the throat" (24). In particular, Italian food becomes a topos whenever the immigrants' children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren travel to Italy to rediscover their national origins as in the case of Maria Troia's "Food, Women, and Love." Her aunt's recipes are Maria's "greatest heirloom" upon return to the United States from Sicily because they are the means by which heritage, culture, and traditions are bequeathed from a generation to the following one (73).

Sticking to Italian culinary practices also reveals Italian Americans' ethnic pride in spite of pressures toward Americanization. Italianness and food are so strictly intertwined in the eyes of Joe Vergara's mother that she thinks that pizzerias serving junk spaghetti and meatballs do "more damage to the Italian honor than all the combined membership of the Mafia" (47). In Helen Barolini's novel *Umbertina*, immigrant women make fun of

U.S. foodways in a display of allegiance to the Italian traditions. As one of them puts it in her claim to her Italian heritage,

These American *femmine* know nothing. My Vito comes home and says his teacher told the class they should have meat, potatoes, and a vegetable on their plates every night, all together. Like pigs eating from a trough, I tell him. In my house I have a *minestra*, a second dish, and a third dish. And beans if I want to! Madonna, that skinny American telling us what to eat! (69)

Amy Bernardy remembers in her travel reminiscences of the 1920s and early 1930s that familial Italian-style cuisine was a channel to galvanize patriotic sentiments among the members of the “Little Italies” abroad. In her recollections, gatherings around *risotto* and *polenta* fortified community ties and nourished the immigrants’ devotion toward their fatherland (186).

However, Italian Americans were latecomers to the conception of an ethnic identity based on their common national ancestry and elaborated such a self-image out of pre-existing subnational self-perceptions. Due to the belated achievement of political unification in their native country, Italians long retained a parochial sense of regional, provincial, or even local attachment (Dickie 19-20). Immigrants from different geographical backgrounds in Italy, too, were unable to think of themselves as members of the same nationality group upon arrival in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the decades of mass transatlantic migration (Rose 61).

Consequently, retention of ties to the ancestral land initially occurred along subnational lines. This is the case of *cannoli* for Jerre Mangione’s immigrant father in *Mount Allegro*. A newcomer from Sicily, he carries his Sicilian identity to Rochester and cherishes it by means of this traditional regional dessert (128-30). Eating *cannoli* also offers Vincent Donitella an opportunity to revitalize his Sicilian ties in Camille Cusumano’s *The Last Cannoli*.

The power of food to let immigrants keep alive their subnational identities, however, is not confined to Italian newcomers from Sicilian or southern extraction only. Adelia Rosasco-Soule’s mother in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Florida provides another example. Although she lives in a wooden house in the wilderness out of Pensacola, this immigrant woman from Genoa holds to the flavors of her hometown. *Pan dolce, pesto, mine-*

strone genovese, *zuppa di ceci*, and *bourrida* are available to satisfy the demands of her husband's "Genovese stomach" (102). Likewise, Celeste A. Morello's aunt contrasts her Neapolitan-style "tomato sauce with the consistency and flow of a gravy" with its "extremely thin, almost watery" Genoese counterpart (6, 20). Similarly, Umbertina - Barolini's fictional family matriarch from a small Calabrian village - makes her husband's pizzas "with onions, or with potatoes and rosemary, or with pieces of scamorza cheese, or olives and anchovies - but never with tomato sauce as the Neapolitans did, for that disguised the good taste of fresh dough and turned it soggy and soft." A full-fledged Calabrian, she also refrains from following the *Abruzzesi's* recipe and does not make ravioli mixing cheese and spinach (Barolini, *Umbertina* 93-94, 95). By the same token, Joe Vergara's immigrant mother from Campania turns any recipe she prepares into a Neapolitan dish: "if she started out to make corned beef and cabbages - a most unlikely choice - it would end up tasting like a Neapolitan specialty" (89).

Regional varieties in tastes easily lead to regional pride. For instance, uncle Mario in Vincent Panella's *The Other Side* contends that "Sicilian olives were bigger and tastier than those further north" and that "Sicilian table salt was superior" (123). Likewise, in "Cavadduzzo of Cicero," Tony Ardizzone's Chicago baker of Sicilian extraction thinks that "there's no bread on earth as good or sweat as Sicilian" (239). To Jerre Mangione, too, Sicilian bread is "finer and tastier than any other Italian bread" (Mangione, *Mount Allegro* 133). In turn, regional pride can also yield to the exploitation of differences in culinary habits to elaborate derogatory epithets. For example, Joseph Tusiani's father - an immigrant from Apulia who cannot stand northerners - calls his son's prospective family-in-law from San Vito al Tagliamento *polentoni*, with reference to the widespread consumption of *polenta* in northern Italy. Tusiani himself sadly remarks that "not even at table do North and South manage to agree" (323, 325).

However, members of other ethnic groups usually failed to realize the difference among Italian immigrants from various regional milieux and ended up pigeonholing all newcomers from Italy and their children under the same national minority, often in derogatory terms (Deschamps, "Le racisme"). This kind of ethnic discrimination contributed to make Italian Americans aware that they had something in common despite their

different geographical backgrounds and helped them develop a mutual identity rooted in their national ancestry (Viscusi 26).

Such an experience, too, emerges from narratives of Italian Americans and food. For example, Fred Gardaphe remembers that his mother associated Italian identity with food-related stereotypes resulting from the anti-Italian American bias of the U.S. society. Her self-image and perception of her son linked traditional Italian dishes with disparaging terms Italian newcomers and their offspring were usually referred to: "I'm a dago, you're a wop; I eat spaghetti, you eat slop" (13).

As a result, the major ethnic divide concerning Italian Americans is not among the various subnational groups within the single "Little Italies" but between the different regional components of the broader Italian-American community as a whole, on one side, and the larger host society, on the other. In John Fante's "My Dog Stupid," for instance, noisy mastication at table distinguishes Henry J. Molise, the protagonist of Italian extraction, from Harriet, his wife of Anglo-Saxon descent, although they share wine and *lasagne* for dinner (65-66).

Italian Americans faced bigotry in the United States because of their national descent and, therefore, often turned their backs on their native country in the pursuit of assimilation. Food choices, too, reflect this attitude. As Barolini recalls about herself and her relatives, "We didn't want to be identified with the backward Italian families who lived on the North Side and did their shopping in grocery stores that smelled of strong cheese and salami" ("Circular Journey" 111).

Newcomers are more likely to resist the lure of the Americanization process in foodways as well. Italian-born Umbertina, for example, "had never taken to the American Thanksgiving and its strange food." She also grows beans and tomatoes in her backyard to keep alive the tradition of a Summer picnic that was the annual family reunion with her married daughters (Barolini, *Umbertina* 142). Conversely, alienation from their ancestral roots characterized especially the immigrants' children. In their struggle to distance themselves from their Italian extraction to prevent discrimination, second-generation Italian Americans even clashed with their own parents (Child). Hasia R. Diner has contrasted "the harmony in Italian homes in America over food" with "a deep generational chasm between immigrant parents and American children over much else in their cultural repertoire." Some writings do emphasize the role of cuisine as a pacifier.

One of Rose Quiello's short stories, for example, contends that "food is a resolution to controversy" (471). Yet a closer scrutiny of Italian-American narratives shows that foodways are not a conflict-free sphere as for generational relations (82). Michael Dante, Joseph Tusiani's younger brother, seeks accommodation within U.S. society by declining to eat Italian-style food. After his neighbors refuse to play with him because he is Italian, he calls the traditional Apulian bread with aromatic herbs and olive oil "junk" and asks for a sandwich (Tusiani, *La parola difficile* 199, 221-22).

Michael Dante's actual case, as reported in his brother's autobiography, is not different from the fictional experience of Arturo Bandini. In John Fante's novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Arturo dissociates himself from his Italian heritage by stigmatizing his father's behavior at breakfast:

What kind of people were these Wops? Look at his father, there. Look at him smashing eggs with a fork to show how angry he was. Look at the egg yellow on his father's chin! An on his moustache. Oh sure, he was a Wop, so he had to have moustache, but did he have to pour those eggs through his ears? Couldn't he find his mouth? Oh God, these Italians! (37)

Likewise, in her autobiographical *Vertigo*, Louise DeSalvo makes her mother's traditional dishes the symbol of an Italian heritage and identity she rejects. She argues that "I don't like anything my mother cooks" (201). DeSalvo adds that "for years, my mother cooked things that I believed no one should eat, things that I certainly couldn't eat, Old World things, cheap things, low-class things, [...] things I was ashamed to say I ate, and that I certainly couldn't invite my friends over to eat" (204).

DeSalvo further reelaborates such a generational conflict over food in her most recent *Crazy in the Kitchen*. In this volume, cooking becomes the battleground between her step grandmother and her mother, as the former struggles to recreate an Italian-style cuisine - making, for example, a "thick-crust, coarse-crumbed" "peasant bread" - and the latter resorts to convenience food such as gristly meat for hamburgers and fatty sausages that she covers with Worcestershire sauce (9-10).

Overeating is one of the commonplace components of Italian Americans' relation with food. As Vincent Panella writes in his memoirs, "the consistent custom of an Italian family is to feed its guest and overfeed itself. [...] A scarcity of food produces an obsession with eating. In America this obsession could be satisfied" (123). This behavior is widespread in

“Little Italies.” “Being on a weight loss diet was considered sacrilegious” in the family of Anthony Sciolino and Marian Pellegrino, in which “mealtimes lasted approximately four hours” and their father’s favorite expression was “one doesn’t age while eating a meal” (167). Hours spent at table even become five in Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* (248). In *Mount Allegro*, too, Mangione’s father encourages family members and guests to overeat by arguing that “food is the only thing you can take with you when you die.” Large meals characterize the Mangiones’ weekdays. “But on Sundays and holidays it was assumed that your appetite became gargantuan and, besides soup and salad, you were expected to stow away at least three different courses of meat, four or five vegetables, along with celery and fennel, all topped off with pastry, fruits, and nuts” (131). Therefore, lack of a frame for eating or cooking denotes Americanization. In *The Soul of an Immigrant*, Constantine M. Panunzio describes his participation in feast banquets while he was a boy in native Molfetta. But, after he lands in the United States, references to any meal gathering disappear from an autobiographical account that was written to provide a case study of successful assimilation on the part of an Italian-born individual and to confute nativist theories that Italian newcomers could not be integrated within U.S. society. Abstention from food is further dramatized in DeSalvo’s *Vertigo*. Here the rejection of the Italian heritage in a culinary perspective passes through the celebration of anorexia as the refusal to eat food is an escape from Italian roots (200-18).

However, as David Riesman has contended, “the Italian immigrant has to go through a gastronomically bleach and bland period before he can publicly eat garlic and spaghetti” (xv). The denial of Italianness is a step toward the fulfillment of an Italian self-perception. In the end, even Louise DeSalvo becomes reconciled with the Italian cuisine and her ancestral heritage. Food is key to her personal journey in search of her Italian background. When she makes up her mind to “explore” her “ethnic roots,” she purchases “a pasta machine” and begins to prepare macaroni, the quintessential Italian dish. Learning “how to combine the ingredients for pasta, to roll out the dough, and cut it” becomes a symbolic initiation to her Italian identity (DeSalvo, “Portrait” 94).

Similarly, unlike her own mother, Marguerite, who experiences a “feeling of alienation and [...] anxiety as to whether you are American, Italian or Italo-American,” Tina - Umbertina’s great-granddaughter - eventually acknowledges her Italianness. Food is once again the vehicle for the

expression of one's self-perception. A young American feminist of the 1960s when she is introduced to readers, Tina travels to Castagna, Umbertina's native village, in search of her ancestral roots. Subsequently, she would also barter an "expensive dinner at the top of the World Trade Center" "for any number of little *trattorie* in Rome or Florence or Venice" (406). But she does not achieve a full-fledged Italian-American consciousness until she plants rosemary in her home garden, the same herb her great-grandmother used for the pizzas and *panini* upon which she built up her successful grocery business (Barolini, *Umbertina* 16-17, 372-87, 406, 423).

Werner Sollors has repeatedly suggested that ethnic writings reveal the nature of ethnicity as a social and cultural construction (*Beyond Ethnicity; The Invention of Ethnicity*). In this perspective, rather than being a set of immutable values and attitudes bequeathed from one generation to the other without significant changes, one's sense of ethnicity is the ongoing outcome of a continuous process of redefinition. Though not exhaustive because of space constraints, the overview of Italian-American narrative in this essay makes a contribution to highlight how Italian Americans' self-perception through foodways is not stable either, but undergoes a number of transformations that include attachment to the local roots of the native or ancestral place of origin, the elaboration of a consciousness based on one's national descent, the rejection of national heritage in the pursuit of accommodation within U.S. society, and the rediscovery of one's Italian extraction.



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