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Food as a Terrain for Identity Construction and Ethnic Confrontation among Italian Americans in the United States

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Abstract

This article investigates the representation of foodways in autobiographies, memoirs, and semiautobiographical – albeit fictional – works by Italian Americans since the age of mass immigration as a lens that can help cast light to examine the ethnic identity of the newcomers from Italy and their offspring in the United States. It argues that the initial local and regional tastes in cuisine yielded to a preference for Italian-style recipes without subnational characterizations. The latter inclination was then rejected to embrace an American gastronomy that, in turn, ultimately gave in to the revitalization of an interest in Italian dishes. That trajectory is a symbol for Italian Americans' early retention, subsequent disavowal, and final rediscovery of their ethnic identity.

Keywords: Foodways, regional cuisine, ethnic identity, Americanization, Italian Americans

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki İtalyan Amerikalılar arasında Kimlik Yapılandırması ve Etnik Yüzleşme için Alan olarak Yemek

Öz

Bu makale, İtalyan Amerikalı yazarların, kitlesel göç döneminden bu yana yazılan otobiyografi, anı ve (kurgusal olmasına karşın) yarı-otobiyografik eserlerinde yemek kültürlerinin temsilini

sorgular ve İtalya'dan yeni gelenlerin ve çocuklarının Amerika'daki etnik kimliklerinin incelenmesini sağlar. Başlangıçtaki yerel ve bölgesel damak tatlarının daha sonra alt sınıflandırmalar olmaksızın İtalyan tarzı yemek tariflerinin tercih edilmesine dönüştüğünü vurgular. Bu sonradan şekillenen tercih, daha da sonrasında reddedilmiş ve yerine Amerikan gastronomisi benimsenerek İtalyan yemeklerine olan ilginin yeniden canlandırılmasına olanak tanımıştır. Gözlemlenen bu adımlar, İtalyan Amerikalıların etnik kimliklerinin önce korunmasının, ardından reddedilmesinin ve son olarak tekrar keşfedilmesinin bir sembolüdür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yemek kültürleri, bölgesel mutfak, etnik kimlik, Amerikanlaşma, İtalyan Amerikalılar

Introduction

Linguist Cornelia Gerhardt maintains that "food is not only sustenance," because it fulfills more than "bare necessities" for physical survival (4). Indeed, echoing the aphorism *dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es* by the late French epicure and gourmet Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (3), historian Donna R. Gabaccia suggests, starting from the title of a 1998 volume, that "we are what we eat," namely that preparing and consuming meals are a reflection of people's self-perception. Many scholars share her view. For instance, according to social scientist Claude Fischler, "food is central to our sense of identity" (275). Likewise, anthropologist Carole Counihan argues that "every coherent social group has its own unique foodways" (6).

Such observations are particularly pertinent in the case of immigrant minorities. On the one hand, ethnic cuisine is much easier to reproduce and to retain than the mother language and other cultural traits over the generations in the adoptive country (Alba 4; Waters 116). On the other, newcomers and their progeny tend to recognize themselves by means of their eating habits (Diner 413). Since gastronomic practices operate as tools for inclusion and exclusion, shopping for ingredients, cooking them, and consuming meals symbolically express identity. Donna Caruso, for instance, recalls about her immigrant mother and aunt that "memories of Italy come fill their hearts while they stand at the stove, stirring, tasting" with "their hands forming the meatballs or handling the pizza dough" (114). Helen Barolini similarly revived her ethnic identity through a cookbook project after endeavoring to

"dissolve my Italian ties of more than twenty-five years" (*Chiaroscuro* 70). Indeed, according to historian Luigi G. Pennacchio, "for immigrants, food is a primary means by which they socialize, worship, shop and do business – in short, by how they live their lives as ethnics coping with the alien culture that surrounds them" (111). Against this backdrop, scholarship has repeatedly stressed the relevance of culinary choices to define, to contest, and to negotiate the sense of belonging, the boundaries of the community, the social standing, and the connections to the broader host society in the experience of Americans from Italian background (Chiaricati, "The Transnational Food Network;" Cinotto, *The Italian American Table*; Cozzi; Tebben; Chiaricati, *Identità da consumare*).

Warren Belasco suggests that "the connection between identity and consumption gives food a central role in the creation of community. [...] To eat is to distinguish and discriminate, include and exclude. Food choices establish boundaries and borders" (2). In particular, Vivian Nun Halloran shows that recollections about cooking and eating offer insights about the ethnic identity of immigrants and their offspring. Although those phenomena are hardly unique to Italian expatriates and their descendants, the latter experience such phenomena in a relevant way because Italy is a land where eating has always held a central cultural function (Parasecoli, *Food Culture*). Along such lines, this article examines the representations of foodways in a few autobiographies, memoirs, and semiautobiographical – albeit formally fictional – narratives by Italian Americans since the age of mass immigration to explore the latter's changing attitude toward their native or ancestral heritage in the United States[1]. It focuses primarily on differences and conflicts over cuisine, since ethnicity is a relational identity that does not stem from social isolation from outsiders and is often constructed by drawing boundaries with and in opposition to other groups (Barth).

Other sources could reasonably be explored for this kind of analysis, most notably movies and television serials that address directly or indirectly the relevance of food for Italian Americans' identity[2]. Yet, an imaginary dimension generally bulks large in such works, while this article intends to offer a historically-grounded reconstruction. For this reason, for example, it takes into account novels and short stories only if they reveal autobiographical contents, namely if realism prevails over invention. In addition, Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta emphasize

the importance of written texts to examine Italian Americans' relation to food and the ensuing implications for their self-perception and sense of community (8). After all, when he wished to delve into how gastronomy reflected his ethnic identity, even Italian-America movie director Stanley Tucci resorted to printed words and published a recipe book and an autobiography (*The Tucci Cookbook*; *Taste*). Specifically, he contends that the recipes of the Calabrian dishes he has "grown with" have "been so significant in shaping who I am" and, for this very reason, he wants them to be "documented for me, my children, and future generations" (Tucci, *The Tucci Cookbook* xiii).

The Transposition of Regional Culinary Tastes

Italians landed en masse in the United States between the late 1870s and the early 1920s, when more than four million people settled in this country (Daniels 188-9). At that time, notwithstanding their common national origin, few newcomers thought of themselves as Italians because the belated political unification of their native country had caused the survival of regional, provincial, and even localistic senses of belonging among the inhabitants of the peninsula and its islands (Rose 38-9). Separated by diverse dialects, traditions, and antipathies, migrants from different areas in Italy shied away from one another in the United States (Candeloro 238).

Foodways were no exception. Pellegrino Artusi's cooking book *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* was the first attempt to create a national cuisine among middle-class Italians. The volume, however, was published as late as 1891, namely thirty years after the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, and failed to reach illiterate laborers, who made up the great bulk of the expatriates in the United States. Here, in the decades of the mass European inflow, the widespread assumption was that all Italian immigrants shared the same eating habits of their fellow citizens from Campania and Sicily simply because the latter predominated among newcomers from Italy. For instance, while polenta – a subsistence staple resulting from maize – was the basis of the everyday diet in the northern Italy, Americans believed that pasta was the main dish in that area, too (Levenstein 76).

Yet, as author Laura Schenone acknowledges, when her great-grandparents, Salvatore and Adalgiza, left Recco – a village close to

Genoa in Liguria – for America in the early twentieth century, "there was no 'Italian food'" in the United States (49). Therefore, their diet in the host society continued to be based on Genoese ravioli, not on macaroni. Actually, Italian-American writings contribute to highlighting that homogeneity in cooking was not the case. For example, Ines Cassettari – aka Rosa Cavalleri – reports in her memoirs that she had to learn how to prepare spaghetti and ravioli when she was asked to cook for a group of southern immigrants in a mining camp in Missouri to which she had moved with her husband in the mid-1880s (Ets 172). A native of Cuggiono – aka Bugiarno – in Lombardy, Cassettari was familiar with polenta but unaware of macaroni (Ets 12, 16, 34, 55, 58, 77, 84, 89, 91, 172). Conversely, spaghetti was the daily dish for the Griecos, who had arrived from Brindisi di Montagna in the southern region of Lucania (Grieco 187). Ann Federici-Martin, born of an immigrant couple from the province of Massa Carrara in 1914, recalls that she usually ate "huge bowls of minestrone," but each family in her neighborhood "brought its special way of cooking and seasoning food" (6, 63).

Given the dissimilarities in diet, eating regional specialties was a way of maintaining some tie with the native land. Consuming cannoli, for instance, helped revive a Sicilian identity in the case of both Jerre Mangione's father in *Mount Allegro* (128-30) and Vincent Donitella in Camille Cusumano's *The Last Cannoli. Cassatelle*, a typical desert, played a similar role for another immigrant from Sicily, Francesca Morale's maternal grandmother, who managed to find the proper ricotta to prepare them in a neighborhood store that a *paesano* operated in Boston's Little Italy in the 1930s (84, 89). In the same decade, the figs from a tree in her backyard were "a reminder of Sicily" for John D'Emilio's grandmother (6). Lucania-style dishes also offered an opportunity to "gather family stories, memories of old customs" for people from this region (Herman, *When I Am Italian* 72). Likewise, at the turn of the twentieth-century, Adelia Rosasco-Soule's mother took care of her husband "Genovese stomach" in Florida by preparing *pan dolce*, *pesto*, *minestrone genovese*, *zuppa di ceci*, and *bourrida* (102). Actually, Italian journalist Amy Bernardy, who made several inquiries into the migrants' conditions in the United States in the late 1900s (Tirabassi 2005), pointed out that "the Genoese do not renounce the *taglierini* with pesto, and the Neapolitans remain loyal to *maccheroni*" in America (175).

The retention of local foodways also contributed to consolidating subnational communities among immigrants. For example, the ability to prepare "an *Aviglianese* soup that sets souls straight when the world is all wrong" with "golden broth and floating pieces of rich green *cicoria* and *scarole*" was a worthwhile criterion to select a wife for Joanna Clapps Herman's grandfather, a newcomer from Avigliano, a village in Lucania (*The Anarchist Bastard* 29-30).

Expressing loyalty to one's native region and taking pride in its cuisine led immigrants to re-elaborate dishes created in other areas according to the cooking standards of their homeland. For instance, Joe Vergara reports that his mother, who had arrived from the hinterland of Naples, turned any recipe into a plate of her native area: "if she started out to make corned beef and cabbages – a most unlikely choice – it would end up tasting like a Neapolitan specialty" (89). This attitude also reflected rivalries with people from other Italian regions and often involved competitions with their gastronomy. Such dynamics implied extolling one's ancestral food and ingredients while conveying criticism, if not even revulsion, for dishes and staples that were associated with different places. Mangione confined himself to boasting that Sicilian bread was "finer and tastier than any other Italian bread" (133) and Vincent Panella's uncle Mario, who had moved to the United States from the same region, similarly bragged that "Sicilian olives were bigger and tastier than those further north" (123). But Celeste A. Morello's aunt, an immigrant from Campania, took on Genoese tomato sauce in order to praise her Neapolitan version. In her opinion, the former was "extremely thin, almost watery" as opposed to the latter, that had "the consistency and flow of a gravy" (Morello 6, 20). To a lesser extent, Calabrian fictional family matriarch Umbertina, in Barolini's eponymous semiautobiographical *bildungsroman*, prepared 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" (*Umbertina* 93-4).

Different food preferences were also exploited to forge derogatory slurs. For instance, poet Joseph Tusiani's father, an immigrant from the southern region of Apulia, designated his prospective in-laws from the northern town of San Vito al Tagliamento as *polentoni*, namely polenta eaters, to express his disdain. In this case, regional gastronomic pride yielded to the misuse of differences in culinary habits to elaborate stereotypes. As Tusiani desolately

concluded about sectional rivalries splitting the residents of Italian-American settlements along geographical lines, "not even at table North and South manage to agree" (323, 325).

The Establishment of a National Identity

To immigrants, the most significant divide in the adoptive country was not the southern-versus-northern cleavage, but the conflict that pitted Italian newcomers against the larger host society. Foodways helped the former define a common sense of belonging beyond the diverse geographical origins in the homeland and contributed to asserting their Italianness as opposed to pressures toward Americanization that were often exerted by attempts at reshaping gastronomic practices and everyday diet, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century (Veit 125-40). In the eyes of many social workers operating in the Little Italies in the 1910s, assimilation equaled the adoption of US culinary habits to such an extent that, after visiting an Italian family, one of them remarked in a report: "Not yet Americanized; still eating Italian food" (Santorio 57).

Immigrants, however, resisted those efforts to influence their behavior. For instance, Robert Ferrari's childhood memoir reports that his fellow ethnics "ate Italian food" and retained their "agricultural habits" in preparing meals in the late 1910s and early 1920s. His father, who had been a shepherd in Roccanova in Lucania, even made his own goat cheese and preserves, while her mother prepared *zeppelli* along with *ciceri* and *baccalà*[3]. Peter Carusone, the grandson of a couple who landed from Naples in 1928, similarly states that "my grandmother never changed the family recipes" (23). By the same token, Chery Burke's Italian mother "used only fresh ingredients and shopped at Cangiano, an Italian specialty store in Staten Island. She forbade me to eat junk food but had no problem when I helped myself to a large plate of lasagna with sausage" (106). Likewise, Umbertina "had never taken to the American Thanksgiving and its strange food" (Barolini, *Umbertina* 42), while the family of Denise Calvetti Michaels ate polenta as part of that traditional US festivity and took that opportunity to evoke places and people in native Piedmont, keeping alive memories of and ties to the native land (296-8). Specifically, Barolini's Italian-born women made fun of US culinary habits in a display of ethnic attachment to

their native traditions. As one of them pointed out while claiming 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! (Barolini, *Umbertina* 69)

The initial part of the quotation seems to have taken a leaf from what an Italian-American student told educator Leonard Covello, the principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in the heart of East Harlem's Little Italy in New York City from 1934 to 1956 (Cantore; Johanek and Puckett; Petruzzi, *Frammenti* 15-116; Petruzzi, *La scuola* 67-152):

> My mother showed opposition to the teacher's recommendation about food. She began ridiculing all my teachers for their ideas. […] I felt that I needed milk in the morning more than anything else. But my mother, and so my father, insisted that this was not according to the good [Italian] customs; that American milk was poison. (Covello, *The Social Background* 341)

Covello was an eyewitness to Italian immigrants' rejection of US food, too. When he was a student and brought home a box of oat flakes that he had received from his teacher, his Italian-born father showed his disapproval: "To him it was the kind of bran that was fed to pigs in Avigliano. 'What kind of school is this?' he shouted. 'They give us the food of animals to eat and send it home to us with our children!'" (Covello, *The Heart Is the Teacher* 25). Covello also collected testimonies about the migrants' surviving attachment to Italian cuisine. One of his informants stressed that he was "glad to see families gather together on Sundays" at dinner with "their preference for the good old Italian cooking." Another stated as late as 1943 that she was "delighted at the sight of her children and grandchildren eating good and healthy Italian food, and being brought up in the good Italian tradition" as opposed to American ways. Remarkably, their references were no longer to regional dishes but to Italian gastronomy[4]. Likewise, in Tina

DeRosa's autobiographical *Paper Fish*, which is set in Chicago's Little Italy during the 1940s and 1950s, it is Italian food without any regional feature that makes Carmolina, the protagonist, aware of Italy's beauty and her grandmother offers samples of edible identity by means of her recipes (15).

Criticism of US foodways was not confined to turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italian newcomers, but it characterized more recent expatriates, too. For example, in journalist and screenwriter Chiara Barzini's semiautobiographical novel *Things that Happened Before the Earthquake*, Eugenia's mother, who moved to Los Angeles in 1992, resented the fact that American women did not know how to cook with garlic because they fried it (227).

A few immigrants eventually contributed to the creation of syncretic dishes. The most notorious example is spaghetti with meatballs. This culinary invention had no equivalent in Italian gastronomy (MacAllen 78). Nevertheless, it stands out in New Yorker Joe Famularo's recollections about his mother's Sunday dinners (271) and in San Franciscan Christopher P. Delorenzo's similar reminiscences (4). The daughter of actor Dean Martin, the English-sounding name de plume of Dino Paul Crocetti, was convinced that the Italian menu did include such a dish and wrote that her father had been "raised on traditional Italian cuisine such as spaghetti and meatballs" (Martin 8). There were, however, other specious Italian dishes. The alleged ethnic specialty of journalist Tony Barbieri's grandmother, for instance, was tuna casserole, an unlikely Italian delicacy with baked canned fish, cheese, and tomato sauce as its main ingredients (Zucconi 138-9). Nonetheless, while boasting their Italianness, many newcomers also pursued the defense of authenticity in ethnic food and stigmatized hybridized dishes. For example, Joe Vergara's mother contended that pizzerias serving junk spaghetti with meatballs did "more damage to the Italian honor than all the combined membership of the Mafia" (47)[5]. Vincenzo Campora, who moved from Naples to New York in 1914, similarly criticized drugstores selling pre-cooked spaghetti, contrary to the Italian tradition of eating them *al dente*, in a 1935 poem (453).

A similar attitude affects Italian Americans' assessment of the ethnic authenticity of US restaurant chains, such as Olive Garden, boasting recipes that are only nominally Italian[6]. Author Thomas J. Ferraro (181), for instance, argues that "My grandmother would

have made an immediate about-face at the smell of half cooked garlic wafting from the Olive Garden door."

The abundance of foodstuff available to immigrants was another way of claiming one's ethnic identity at the table while asserting the superiority of Italian-style eating habits. As scholarship has remarked, resettlement to the United States implied escaping a life of hunger in the native land (Del Giudice 246; Mangione and Morreale 136). Yet, although they left behind a gastronomy of scarcity for one of copiousness at a low cost, newcomers and their offspring initially portrayed access to plenty of food in US society in Italian overtones underlying criticism of American cuisine-related practices. Peter Corona, for example, points out that "The Italians may have been short of money, but they ate like Kings" (159). Novelist Mario Puzo follows suit and observes that

> [d]uring the great Depression of the 1930s, though we were the poorest of the poor, I never remember not dining well. … our poor family on home relief ate better than some of the richest people in America. My mother would never dream of using anything but the finest imported olive oil, the best Italian cheeses. (39)

Foodways brought Italian immigrants together beyond their initial regional division and separated them from the white Anglo-Saxon protestant (WASP) establishment and the members of other national minorities. Frank Montimurro distinguished his fellow-ethnic comrades from the other schoolmates on the basis of their respective meals:

> Other kids' lunches were in nice, clean brown paper bags. Our lunch bags were covered with oil on the outside and had a fine aroma of olive oil or provolone or whatever was in there. […] We'd sit on some old desks on the way to the cafeteria, where they'd allow us to eat, and you'd see a row of lunch bags – greasy bag (Italian), clean bag (Wasp). (23-4)

A contrast emerges from the description of an outdoor meal in a public park in Mangione's *Mount Allegro*, too. The author stresses that

"spaghetti, chicken, and wine were consumed with pagan abundance" by his relatives. Conversely, the members of a nearby American family ate "quietly munching neatly cut sandwiches that came out of neatly packed baskets – and drinking, not wine of course but iced tea with trim slices of lemon stuck into the brims of their glasses to make them look pretty" (Mangione 222).

Foodways, therefore, contributed to divisions, too. Writing about the Italian and Irish branches of her family, Dianne Aprile recalls that "there was [...] a certain competition between the two heritages. This rivalry, however masked or muted in daily life, surfaced blatantly in the kitchen" (3). Even when all dining companions shared Italian-style dishes, behavior at the table separated those of Italian descent from the others. In John Fante's semiautobiographical short story "My Dog Stupid," for example, noisy mastication sets Henry Molise, the protagonist of Italian origin, apart from Harriet, his wife of Anglo-Saxon descent, although they both eat *lasagna* and drink wine (65-6).

The selection of bread was often the litmus test of Italianness beyond regional differences in recipes because, as in the case of the mother of author Alfred DiGiacomo, immigrants and their descendants contrasted the American kind with the Italian type, overlooking possible local variances in the motherland (1)[7]. Regard for one's ancestral roots in foodways implied making bread at home or buying it in neighborhood ethnic bakery instead of consuming the industrial brands – such as the iconic Wonder Bread made with enriched white flour (Houshofer 1-6) – that were sold in chain stores and achieved national recognition on US shelves. As scholar Anthony Julian Tamburri argues, "Wonder Bread is that proverbial icon used to differentiate between the two cultures," the Italian and the American (*Re-reading* 97). Indeed, an academician such as Mario B. Mignone recalls that "at lunchtime most of the people took out their own sandwiches with Wonder Bread and sat at their benches. I pulled out my two long sandwiches with Italian bread" (49). Similarly, Antonella DeMasi remembers that, in her schooldays, "When we went to lunch everybody had Wonder bread and I had homemade bread with tomatoes, ham and hard cheese" (qtd. in DeMasi 91). According to Peter Corona's reminiscences about San Diego's Little Italy, too, "the people in the neighborhood preferred Italian bread. [...] First they grew up on Italian bread and secondly, the wider Italian bread made for better sandwiches" (159). Likewise, Nicole Scarcella emphasizes that, as late as 1940, in Brooklyn, New York, "No Italian would dare

eat Wonder Bread. There were many bakeries in the neighborhood, and every Italian family patronized their favorite establishment" (54).

One of them was Battaglini's. In the view of John Lanuti, "Battaglini's Italian bread was not only king, but the only acceptable choice. It was the perfect bread – crusty on the outside, yet soft and fluffy on the inside. My mom brought over Wonder Bread one evening, and received such a mocking we laughed for hours" (3). Further North, in Detroit, Maria Frances Bruno's mother made a similar mistake by the standards of ethnic loyalty in terms of foodways. She "served self-processed Wonder Bread every night instead of making the daily trek to the Italian bakery," a pick that was included among her infidelities (Bruno 11).

Other mothers, however, stuck to ethnic bread. Alfred DiGiacomo, for instance, remembers that his "lunch consisted of thick Italian sandwiches" (64). Italian-American sociologist Michael Parenti did not yield to the store-bought white bread resulting from a combination of bleached flour and preservatives either and ironically contended that "the reason they call it Wonder bread is because, after tasting it, you wonder if it's bread" (166). Covello, too, expressed his dislike for American-style bread, contending that the "white soft bread" served at school "made better spitballs than eating in comparison with the substantial and solid homemade bread to which I was accustomed" (*The Heart Is the Teacher* 24). Filomena Abys-Smith even felt "sorry for our classmates that had to consume such prefab foods" as "fluffy white bread" (59).

Rejecting Italian Foodways, Seeking Americanization

Cultural anthropologist Lola Romanucci-Ross, the daughter of an Italian-born couple from the area surrounding Ascoli Piceno in the Marche region, recalls her schooldays in Hersey, Pennsylvania, in the late 1920s, when she was the only pupil who ate large sandwiches with Italian-style bread, contrary to her playmates who had American sliced bread (43). She felt lonely because her mother's ethnic choice for her lunch contributed to separating her from the other boys and girls. The fear of a similar lot affected Covello as well and influenced his and his Italian-American schoolmates' eating habits. As he writes,

> we were always ashamed of the bulky sandwiches of crusty Italian bread heaped with salami, cheese, or Italian sausage. We used to keep them hidden or eat them even before we got to school, so that our friends of the white-bread-and-ham upbringing would not laugh at us. (*The Heart Is the Teacher* 70)

Not all the American-born children of Italian parents resorted to such a compromise to reconcile their family's eating practices with the habits of the larger US society. To the members of a second generation pursuing accommodation within the host country, Italian foodways often became a source of discomfort. Carol Falvo Heffernan remembers that, during her schooldays, "I usually had sandwiches made out of leftover eggplant parmigiana or asparagus (sometimes mushroom) frittata. I was embarrassed by my lunches; they were like nobody else's." In fact, Kathy Kamen, her best friend, "tended to bring liverwurst, baloney, or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches" (Heffernan 81). Similarly, Stefana Pietrofesso hoped that her US schoolmates would not pay attention to her "sandwich made with Italian bread" because she wanted to "become *American*" (Barolini, "Greener Grass" 40). In the effort to dodge xenophobia during her childhood in Syracuse, New York State, Barolini herself made a point of keeping Italian products at a safe distance:

> Once in a while my mother would have me accompany her to get cheese in an important store which I hated to enter because of the smells – smells that were Italian and which intensified my own determination not to be. I hated the fish store because of the revolting un-American eels and squid that were displayed there. ("Heritage Lost" 127)

Actually, the rejection of the ancestral cuisine was tantamount to the embracement of an American identity and sense of belonging along with a symbol of the disavowal of one's ethnic roots. Covello easily realized that "Italian food" was a leading feature of the ancestral culture that his students of Italian descent refused in the hope of being welcome in the United States (*The Social Background* 342). Indeed,

Joseph Tusiani's younger brother, Michael Dante, discarded Italian-style food to overcome social ostracism. After other boys in the neighborhood declined to play with him on the grounds of his ethnicity, he called the traditional Italian bread "junk" and asked for an American sandwich (Tusiani 199, 221-2). Likewise, during his school years, Joseph Luzzi did not want to eat "fried peppers and eggs," the main ingredients of the Italian-style meal that he carried from home: "by my teenage years I was obsessed with eating American. [...] I begged my mother to give me a bland lunch like that of the other kids" (67).

The repudiation of Italianness in exchange for acceptance by the surrounding society reached a climax in the interwar decades with the emergence of a US-born second generation of Italian Americans with loose emotional and sentimental ties to their parents' native country. The denial of the ethnic extraction to prevent discrimination and to win incorporation in America often pitted the new generation against the immigrant one (Child esp. 76-117).

Gastronomy-related choices and behavior reflected that conflict. As sociologist Irvin L. Child specifically points out, "the Italian American, eating Italian food, feels that that food will give him more right to become an American" (111). A page from John Fante's narrative highlights such generational clashes. In *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Arturo – Fante's alter ego – dissociates himself from his Italian heritage by both stigmatizing his immigrant father's behavior at breakfast and referring to him by an ethnic slur[8]:

> 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! And 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)

Louise DeSalvo similarly turned her unnamed mother's Italian dishes into the symbol of an ethnic identity she initially made a point of refusing, as she points out in her memoir *Vertigo*: "I don't like anything my mother cooks" (201). She also remarks that "for years, my mother cooked things that I believed no one should eat, things that I certainly couldn't eat, Old World things, [...] things I was ashamed to say I

ate, and that I certainly couldn't invite my friends over to eat" (204). Even baseball legend Joe DiMaggio, born in California to Sicilian immigrants, made a point of assuring his fans in 1939 that "he never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti" (qtd. in Busch 69).

DeSalvo further re-elaborates her generational conflict over food in a subsequent autobiographical volume, *Crazy in the Kitchen*. Here, cooking becomes the battleground between her step grandmother, Libera, and her mother. The former struggled to recreate an Italian-style cuisine. For instance, she made a "big bread, a substantial bread … a good bread … A thick-crusted, coarse-crumbed … peasant bread" (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 9). Conversely, the latter relied on convenience food such as gristly meat for hamburgers and fatty sausages that she covered with Worcestershire sauce. Specifically, bread was, once again, the epitome of the conflict between the retention and the rejection of ethnic roots. Libera baked her own bread following an Italian recipe. Conversely, her mother purchased "white bread, sliced bread, American bread" from the Dugan store (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 12). The Italian-style product was "a bread that my mother disdains because it is everything that my grandmother is, and everything that my mother, in 1950s suburban New Jersey, is trying very hard not to be" (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 9). Instead, with reference to her American bread, her mother was convinced that "eating this bread will change her, that eating this bread will erase the embarrassment of a stepmother – all black dresses and headscarves" (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 12).

To a lesser extent, leaving aside overt conflicts, incomprehension about foodways symbolizes Italian Americans' cultural differences between the immigrant generation and the following one. For example, according to US-born Bea Tusiani, her failure to manage traditional Italian recipes was the hallmark of the distance separating her from her immigrant mother-in-law's ethnic roots (176).

By means of her gastronomic choices, DeSalvo's mother looked for a way to be included within the US society and, according to her daughter, assumed that if she ate "enough" of Dugan's bread, "she will stop being Italian American and she will become American American" (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 13). It was hardly a chance that her preference for the US bread emerged after the family had moved from Hoboken's Little Italy to suburban Ridgefield (DeSalvo, *Crazy* 87), namely after it had

left an ethnic enclave for a residential area where dwellers had lost their national-origin characterization. Indeed, as access to consumer culture became a significant component of the fulfillment of the American Dream in the transition from the scarcity of products in the ancestral land to the relative abundance of the host society, shopping for food, including bread, at chain stores was tantamount to achieving success in the new country[9].

Conclusion

DeSalvo eventually overcame her previous refusal of the Italian cuisine and consequently accepted her ancestral background. Food was key to her personal voyage to take back her forebears' heritage as well as a powerful way to reconnect to her cultural inheritance. A self-styled "gourmet chef" (as qtd. in Bona and Kightlinger 193), when she decided to "explore" her "ethnic roots," she bought "a pasta machine" and started to prepare macaroni, the quintessential Italian dish. Learning "how to combine the ingredients for pasta, to roll out the dough, and cut it" equaled a symbolic initiation that enabled her to reclaim an Italian identity (De Salvo, "A Portrait of the *Puttana*" 94).

DeSalvo responded to gastronomic culture in intense ways. Her behavior corroborates the theory of Rosalyn M. Meadow and Lillie West that, for contemporary women, "food has become a metaphor for their emotions" (4). Moreover, her struggle over Italian staples confirms Edvige Giunta's thesis that, in terms of identity, "the dinner table" is "a highly politicized site" (106). DeSalvo's narratives, however, also reproduce and exemplify the experience of most first-, second-, and third-generation Italian Americans, respectively assertion, rebuff as well as reconciliation and celebration. Something similar occurred to the children of poetess Rita Ferrarelli, who moved to the United States in 1954 when she was fifteen years old: they shifted from an initial rejection of Italian bread, "afraid to be different," to its final acceptance as they came to embrace their ethnic heritage because "they discovered / that anything Italian / was good, fashionable" (40-1). This was also the case of third-generation Italian-American John D'Emilio, who felt comfortable while eating pizza with his schoolmates in the 1960s (75).

Such encounters with Italian foodways not only reflect the so-called Hansen's Law, by which immigrants stick to their native roots, their children distance themselves from their ancestral baggage, and their grandchildren feel free to identify with their ethnic background

(Hansen)[10]. As generational fights appease, those experiences also reveal a rise in Italy's ranking in the eyes of US public opinion that have encouraged people of Italian extraction to associate themselves with their forebears' homeland in the last few decades (Martellone 741). Actually, as pizza and spaghetti have turned into global food – which is appreciated even by Americans who are not of Italian descent (Jones 17-9) – and more elaborated Italian-style dishes have nowadays reached the level of stylish and trendy cuisine (Helstosky), it is quite easy for present-day Italian Americans to accept their ancestral roots at the table. Indeed, food is currently a leading identifier especially for young Americans of Italian extraction (those aged between 18 and 34) and its consumption is the equivalent of the acceptance of one's Italianness at least in the symbolic dimension of ethnicity (Serra 91-6, 130-1, 197-9, 287)[11].

Notes

[1] Tirri (150-83) has recently reiterated the relevance of autobiographical writings for a deeper understanding of the Italian American experience.

[2] Besides the centrality of Italian cuisine to *Big Night* (1996) by Campbell Scott and Stanley Tucci (Hostert; Tamburri, "Viewing"), one might refer to one of the most quoted lines from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather I* (1972), Peter Clemenza's "leave the gun, take the *cannoli*" (as qtd. in Welsh, Phillips and Hill 150), as the epitome of Italian Americans' devotion to food, or to the words of Arthur "Artie" Bucco, Jr., the fictional restaurateur in the HBO crime television serial *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) by David Chase (whose original family name was DeCesare): "food is not just the fuel for the Italian body. Food is family, tradition, birth, confirmation, marriage, sickness, death – life itself" (as qtd. in Rucker 1). The connections between food and identity also emerge from movies by directors who are not of Italian descent. In *Analyze This* (1999) by Harold Ramis, for example, the recollections of the dishes that mob boss Paul Vitti ate in an Italian-American restaurant on the night his father was murdered are key to the recovery of his identity.

[3] Robert Ferrari, untitled and undated autobiography, pp. 20, 23-4, Robert Ferrari Papers, box 1, Immigration History Research Center

Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

[4] Transcript of an interview with Guido Maglio, n. d., and with R.M., 1943, both in Leonard Covello Papers, box 68, folder 1, Balch Institute Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

[5] In *Big Night*, a movie that addresses the authenticity of Italian-style food in the United States, chef Primo Pilaggi calls spaghetti with meatballs a "rape of cuisine" (as quoted in Gardaphé 149).

[6] For the controversy over the real Italianness of Olive Garden's dishes among Italian Americans, see Parasecoli ("We Are a Family" 253-5).

[7] For actual regional varieties of Italian breads, see Welker (13-8).

[8] *Wop* is a derogatory word to designate people of Italian extraction. See LaGumina.

[9] For the consumeristic implications of the American Dream for the progeny of the Italian immigrants, see Cinotto, *Making Italian America*.

[10] For a critique of Hansen's Law as for specifically Italian Americans, see Sollors.

[11] For the concept of symbolic ethnicity, see Gans.

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