JAST, **2023; 60: 43-60**
Submitted: 19.11.2022
Accepted: 26.01.2023
ORCID# 0009-0005-4078-2945

Dining with the Authors:

Food and Cultural Identity in Italian American Literature

Giulia Tarantino

Abstract

This manuscript explores the connection between cultural identity and food in relation to the Italian American experience, placing a particular emphasis on the metamorphosis underwent by the latter, from comforting element to stigma and vice versa. The peculiarity of this work lies in considering the topic from a literary perspective. Through the analysis of the literary works produced by authors like Helen Barolini, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Jerry Mangione, this work reconstructs the way in which the perception of food has changed from the first to the latest generations. As the works cited suggest, the complex relationship between Italian Americans and food is not a newly discovered subject of interest. Nevertheless, the studies around the changes that this relationship has undergone are not exactly extensive. For this reason, the manuscript aims to provide valuable evidence on the crucial role played by food in defining Italian American identity.

Keywords: Diasporic food, food and stigma, generational gap, hyphenated community, identity

Giulia Tarantino

Yazarlarla Yemekte:

İtalyan Amerikalı Edebiyatında Yemek ve Kültürel Kimlik

Öz

Bu çalışma, İtalyan Amerikalı tecrübesiyle ilişkili olarak, kültürel kimlik ve yemek arasındaki bağlantıyı inceler ve özellikle yemeğin rahatlatıcı bir unsur olmaktan damgaya dönüştüğü başkalaşım sürecini vurgular. Çalışmanın farklılığı, konuyu edebi bir bakış açısıyla ele almasında yatmaktadır. Helen Barolini, Maria Mazziotti Gillan ve Jerry Mangione gibi yazarların edebi eserlerinin incelenmesi yoluyla, ilk nesilden son nesile kadar yemek algısının nasıl değiştiği tartışılmaktadır. Kaynakçanın ortaya koyduğu üzere, İtalyan Amerikalılar ve yemek arasındaki karmaşık bağ yeni keşfedilmiş bir ilgi alanı değildir. Ancak bu bağın geçirdiği değişimleri ele alan çalışmalar pek de kapsamlı değildir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma İtalyan Amerikalı kimliğinin tanımlanmasında yemeğin oynadığı önemli rol üzerine kanıt sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Diasporik yemek, yemek ve damga, kuşak farkı, tireli topluluk, kimlik

Introduction

As the aphorism of the famous French lawyer and gastronomist Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin underscores in his *Physiology of Taste* by saying "tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are" (3), there is a symbiotic relationship between people and the food they eat. Since the preparation and consumption of food widely varies amongst countries, over time it has come to be regarded as a significant factor characterizing a specific culture or, more precisely, an ethnicity. Therefore, food is not only fundamental to survival but it is also integrally connected with social function and identity (De Angelis and Anderson 48). As reaffirmed by Sarah Sceats, "it is essential to self-identity and it is instrumental in the definition of family, class, and ethnicity" (1). This assertion reveals itself to be true for those who migrate, too, in that it provides a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Although the settlement of the migrant populations in a new land is usually followed by the clash of cultures, often resulting in a phenomenon of identity loss, some aspects of their original custom stand firm. This argument is supported by the words of the journalist Ryszard Kapuściński affirming that "People from one culture find it hard to get rid of it and adapt a new one. People wish to preserve their own roots and identity even after changing their place of living" (qtd. in Bodziany 76). Clearly, it is necessary to analyze each case in order to provide a more complete overview but, overall, it can be suggested that one of the most important elements that shaped the identity of migrants has quite possibly been food. The latter, in fact, has always remained a hallmark of where they came from, limiting thus the effects caused by the process of assimilation that marked their transplantation experience on the whole. But how does this general statement apply to the specific case of Italian Americans and what role did food play in the battle between assimilation and distinctiveness?

In order to tackle this issue, the literary works, produced by several generations of Italian Americans, represent the best means to reconstruct the process that has led to the metamorphosis of the concept of food, translating its meaning from nourishment to identity. Considering what Louise De Salvo and Edvige Giunta have argued, "food-writing and life-writing in Italian American culture are interconnected" (8). For this reason, food is to be considered central to defining the Italian American identity. Furthermore, through the astonishing variety of written texts, from fiction literature and cookbooks to autobiographies, diaries and personal correspondence, it is possible to recreate and investigate the way in which the perception of food has changed across the generations, from comforting element to stigma and vice versa.

Food as the Missing Ingredient in the New World: From Humble Meal to Worldwide Fame

The Italian American condition has always been strictly interconnected with its past of migration. From the time of their settlement in America, Italians have always strived to reproduce an environment where they could feel at home. Since the so-called Great Wave of 1880, immigrants have re-created the elements of the old

paese (Laurino 64) giving birth to what was known as Little Italy, namely a totally Italian enclave. The rise of these ethnic neighborhoods fostered awareness of the need to replicate what may have been the ingredient missing most in their lives: the food of their regions. As a result, Italian immigrants embedded their distinctive eating habits onto the spirit and life of the Little Italies themselves. As Laurino points out, "the Italians believed that American salt was not as flavorful as its Mediterranean counterpart, its tomatoes not as sweet, and its bread not as crusty, and they wanted food from the Old World in the New World" (64). Compared to the mass-produced American cuisine, which lacked both distinctiveness and flavor, the *homemade* Italian one was highly regarded in terms of value and authenticity. This meaningful comparison can be detected in Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979), a novel that dramatizes the journey food takes through the generations, in which immigrant women ridicule the American eating habits in a display of allegiance to the Italian traditions: "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!" (69).

In order to respond to this new need, Italians settling in America began to grow their own food and tried to make a living by it. The tendency to cultivate a food garden is underlined in the poem "My Father's Fig Tree Grew in Hawthorne, New Jersey" by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, award-winning Italian American writer: "Each winter, my father wrapped his fig trees in burlap and buried them; / each spring / he lifted them out of the earth and unwrapped them. How they turned / toward the sun / in their flowering, grew hundreds of fat purple fruit that my father picked / each day, / washing them off and presenting them to me as though they were diamonds / or pearls" (*All that Lies* 20). What emerges in this poem, beside the cultivation process, is the dedication and care that her father puts into this practice that are interweaved with the memories cherished by the author.

For what concerns the work resulting from the agricultural activities, it has experienced several changes over the years. Selling food, especially to one's own people, has traditionally been an inroad for new immigrants trying to find work. Their intention of making a living by it soon manifested through the presence of Italian pushcarts cramming the dusty, unpaved streets of America with products like

bread, vegetables, and wild greens. It was just the beginning of a successful business. During the 1920s and 1930s, in fact, Italian American cooking became codified, and Italian food and cooking were increasingly recognized as unified and coherent patterns that differed from other foods and cuisine. A further growth was achieved when, saving money, Italians began to afford commercial space and elevated pushcart businesses into fruit and vegetable stores. They opened bakeries, live poultry markets, cheese shops, and pasta stores (Laurino 64). Therefore, the peasant instinct to preserve the tastes of Italy has not extinguished over the years but has evolved and expanded by being refined from the early pushcarts to fruit and produce shops to specialty stores to contemporary temples of gastronomy like Eataly.

In light of the great change undergone by the selling of food and its worldwide fame, it can be argued that for Italians and Italian Americans food is the most common example of what Herbert J. Gans calls "symbolic ethnicity"[1] (9) and, as Gardaphé points out, "although the Italian's relationship to food has been trivialized and reduced to the point of absurd media stereotyping, cooking and eating are important identity-creating acts" (92). For first-generation Italian Americans, food is not only a symbol of affection that protects their *Italianness* in American life and solidifies their ties, but a language that reinforces the projection of the Italian identity (De Angelis and Anderson 51). The diasporic food, eaten by the migrants as a strategy to preserve their territorial roots, represents the source from which the stereotype of Italian identity is produced. It has the power to let immigrants keep alive their national identity and even if, as Regina Barreca argues, "orientation toward food has now become a stereotype it represents a truthful component of the portrait of Italian Americans" (xvii).

Conviviality and Rituality: Food as Social Glue

Food and the rituality related to its consumption are some of the elements that most characterize the identity of the Italians around the world. But, as Frances Malpezzi and William Clements noticed, "while a reflector of group identity on the general Italian level, food has had its most important symbolic value in the context of the family" (224). It is in fact in the realm of domesticity and family intimacy that Italian American identity has been forged. Family, considered the key

to survival in a foreign land, represents the core of Italian-American experience. In a moment of crisis and transition, the ideology of the Italian family was imbued with concrete meaning through the importation of food practices. Ethnic food and all food-sharing rituals were, in fact, very influential in the conceptual creation of an Italian American identity, both socially and symbolically. It is therefore not surprising that the sense of belonging, along with warmth and loyalty, is often associated with food and family meals.

The consumption of food has been traditionally regarded by the Italians living in the United States of America as an element of conviviality with family members, as well as friends and fellow citizens. Paraphrasing what the anthropologist Mary Douglas says, meals are for family, close friends and honored guests. To share food has been the consummate act of hospitality, and very often it has served as the mediating force between personal and social relationships in and outside the home. The most significant symbol of family cohesion was, in fact, the gathering of all family members around the table. In the literary field, one example can be drawn from the poem "What I Always Wanted," where Maria Mazziotti Gillan underlines how the kitchen was a gathering place "full of noise and laughter" in which "there was always room for one more" (*Winter* 31-2). Cooking and eating together represented and remained, thus, an irreplaceable pillar for the Italians living abroad.

The fact that conviviality was a cornerstone of Italian ethnicity is supported by the Italian American narrative, which is, according to Luconi, "a proper field to analyze the inner meanings encoded in Italian Americans' food-related behavior" (206). As Cinotto notes in his article on Leonard Covello's papers, "immigrants drew heavily on symbols of food and conviviality as they forged collective self-representations of their being Italian in America" (498). Italian American writers use food, in fact, not only as a means of support but also to illustrate socio-economic ties, cultural identity, group affiliation and emotional expressions as nostalgia, grief and desire. Food has the power to ensure an apparent continuity with an idealized Italian past. As Michele Fazio argues, "eating ethnic foods helps diminish the geographical and temporal distance caused by immigration and assimilation" (115). In *Mount Allegro*, for instance, Mangione's father creates a social network of familial and affinal ties and underlines how, for first-generation Italian Americans, the passionate faith in food was an expression of their philosophy. Even if in Mangione's work "if you ate well, you felt

well" (131), food was not only about its nutritional values, but had the power to form strong bonds and fortify community ties. Offering food, the act of hospitality par excellence, may be seen, therefore, as a way to gain social dignity, reputation and respect. Moreover, domestic food-sharing events functioned to express, organize and manage conflicts. As Amy Bernardy remembers in her travel reminiscences of the 1920s, familial Italian-style cuisine was a channel to galvanize patriotic sentiments among the members of the Little Italies abroad (qtd. in Luconi 208). Although travel diaries are not recognized as complete evidence, in this case they provide a number of valuable observations on the topic under scrutiny.

Produced by the labor of both father and mother and representing the cooperative efforts of an integrated family, food has had almost a sacramental significance. In "Learning Grace," Maria Mazziotti Gillan describes her mother while she makes bread, while she reproduces with her hands the miracle of creation, the miracle of an imminent grace, stating that "When you do something with your hands you have to put your love into it, and then it will be sacred" (*Talismans* 64). Traditions, thus, revived through simple and daily gestures, are perceived as sacred. The banquet, moreover, concretizes the ties of extended families and, as Boelhower says, "changes linear time into rite and ceremony and individuals into a community" (201). The meals consumed on feast days, gathering all together around a table, represent an important feature in the lives of Italian American authors, like Helen Barolini or Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and are pervaded by an atmosphere of sacredness. Sharing and cooking food is the love language that shaped relationships as it is highlighted in the first lines of the prose poem "Sunday Dinners at My Mother's House":

> After I was grown up and had a house and a family of my own, my mother cooked and served dinner for all of us, her children and grandchildren, at least sixteen people each Sunday in her basement kitchen. My mother was an artist of food, and we gathered around three tables lined up, end to end, macaroni and meatballs, *braciola*, salad and roasted chicken, potatoes and stuffed artichokes, fruit and nuts with their own silvery nutcrackers, apple pies and turnovers, espresso and anisette … I'd see her smiling, happy that we were all together, willing to cook for all of us, week after week, to make sure we'd stay that way. (*All that Lies* 24)

The act of cooking for the relatives was, for the Italian immigrant women, the most common way to communicate love. This peculiar feature is pointed out in the last stanza of another poem of hers, namely "My Mother Was a Brilliant Cook," in which Mazziotti Gillan says that her mother "was content to offer platter after platter / of food to her family gathered / in her basement kitchen, and to watch them / laughing and talking together, / while she stood behind them / and smiled" (*Winter* 41). Therefore, it is evident once again how the everyday practice of preparing and enjoying a meal becomes socially and culturally significant. As La Trecchia argues, "it not only shapes our identity but also connects us to other people" (46). Therefore, food traditions provide, as Cinotto underlines, "a language with which to articulate affective relationships" (*Una famiglia* 431).

Stigmatization and Fracture:

From Rejection to Acceptance

Although food serves as a source of ethnic identity, it can also become a site for conflict between Italians and Americans as well as between generations (Gardaphé 147). To the immigrants born Italian and emigrated across the Ocean, eating habits represented a form of preservation of their identity that opposed to the excesses of Americanization. The label *Americanization* was originally applied to the assimilation of immigrants and racial minorities into the dominant culture (Elteren 51). As the contemporary analyst of this movement, Hill, better explains, it was "a process by which an alien acquires our language, citizenship, customs and ideals" (612). It is for this reason that since the vast influx of migrants, between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War, the anti-Italian American bias of the U.S. society has set in motion the complex cultural dynamic that has resulted in the phenomena of uprooting, assimilation and generational conflicts. As Luconi points out, "Italian Americans faced bigotry in the United States because of their national descent" (210), and the stereotypes caused by it began to modify the value of the material culture and transformed food not only into a distinctive mark of *Italianness*, but also into a motive of hatred. Many Anglo-Saxon social workers, indeed, in their attempts to assimilate the newcomers, tried to convince Italians to abandon their eating habits which were considered not *American* and

unhealthy. In particular, they used to attribute to Italians the excessive use of garlic, whose pungent smell was used to denigrate their personal hygiene. An example of one of the many epithets that were hurled against the Italian Americans is food-related and can be detected in the fourth stanza of the poem "Growing Up Italian" by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, in which she writes that "almost everyday / Mr. Landgraf called Joey / a 'spaghetti bender'" (*From* 54). Italians were forced to confront a wave of deep-rooted prejudice and nativist hostility in which food has likewise been connected with stereotypes and marginalization.

The hostility felt against the foreigners played a crucial role in molding the Italian cultural identity. The policies based on assimilation carried out by the American government inevitably led to the denial and abjuration of the Italian ethnic origins and, consequently, to the break with family affections. The proud cultural identity, that lied at the base of *Italianness*, made of traditions and values, has been completely rejected by the second-generation and replaced by a deep sense of shame and inadequacy. In *Cutting the Bread* by Louise De Salvo, for example, lies a "fascinating portrait of three generations of women," as Kathy Curto argues, that underlines "how the bread one eats serves as an indicator light for acceptance and belonging" (204). While the grandmother makes her brown Italian bread, her daughter is disgusted by this practice because she sees in it an obstacle that interferes with her acceptance into the white-breaded American community. Food or, in this case, bread becomes a measuring device that establishes a separation line between those who are American and those who are not.

Ethnic food had great significance for the generational conflict. Food rituals, not limited to Sunday dinners, served to counteract exposure of the children of immigrants to American culture through schools and other social institutions. As Cinotto underlines, Italian domesticity "was the answer to the importing of modern American values, in the immigrants' perception, that destabilized the family and the community" ("Covello Papers" 515). Despite all the attempts made by the Italian parents, the displacement from one culture to another provoked a real crisis of identity where the children, unwilling to give themselves completely to the transmitted old ways, ended up with shame. As stated by De Angelis and Anderson, food can be seen "as the focal point of the inter-generational tensions of Italians in America" (48). The offspring went through the painful process of Americanization and this meant, as Maria Laurino argues, "rejecting

one of the two worlds" (102). The necessity of distancing themselves, felt by the generations born on American soil, is displayed in the poem "Cafeteria" of Maria Mazziotti Gillan (Dougherty 42). In the lunchroom scene, the speaker is ashamed to be eating an escarole and garlic sandwich while the traditionally American middle-class kids are lining up for boiled hot dogs and greasy hamburgers. The gaze of the other kids turns her homemade escarole sandwich rancid making it impossible for her to swallow it. What the author shows in this work is how Italian food, together with her appearance and family, falls short of the American norm. This belief holds true also for Stefana in Barolini's "Greener Grass" who, sitting with the American girls at lunchtime, finds the courage to take her homemade lunch. But thinking "I hope [her friends] wouldn't notice my sandwich made with Italian bread" (40), she shows how food brings her discomfort and creates a further obstacle to surmount if she wants to become an American. As De Angelis and Anderson pointed out, "her homemade lunch on Italian bread classifies her as a member of the working class" (54). Food, once again, deepens the rift between one's cultural identity and who they want to be.

Lunchtime, as evident in the last two works, became just one more occasion where children would become ashamed of who they were, and food would be the source of that shame. For fear of having to invite them home and show their lifestyle and their family's foodways, some youth even hesitated to make friends outside their ethnic neighborhood. The resentment toward food and all its symbolism is evident in what Louise De Salvo writes in her autobiographical novel *Vertigo*: "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). As underlined by De Angelis and Anderson, "instead of providing the security and comfort usually associated with communal eating, the family gathering at mealtime intensifies the differences in personal identities and socioeconomic standings" (53). Sometimes, even families were not willing to invite people outside their circle of trust. This is evident in the words of Covello's parents when they say "We do not want stranger knowing the business of our family" ("Covello Papers" 514). The creation of an area of private conviviality, in this case, undermined the immigrant community and critically hindered the integration process.

The lesson that Italian Americans had to learn was, in fact, that until they conformed, they would never succeed. A further example of the consequences of the process of separation caused by the generational conflict is provided by Umbertina's children, in the homonymous novel of Helen Barolini, who are influenced by the lure of Americanization process and leave the *Italianness* behind, including food. That food could create havoc in social and familial relations is made quite clear in the episode told by Maria Mazziotti Gillan in her "Betrayals": "At thirteen, I screamed, / 'You're disgusting,' / drinking your coffee from a saucer. / Your startled eyes darkened with shame" (*Talismans* 12). The author reveals the disgust and shame she felt at her father, unable to fit into the Anglo-Saxon standards, and, since she sees in him everything that is wrong with herself, she decides to humiliate him trying in vain to draw a line between them. Therefore, in their struggle to distance themselves from their Italian extraction to prevent discrimination, second-generation Italian Americans even clashed with their own parents. Food, the symbol of ethnic identity par excellence, fails as the vehicle for unification and communication and becomes the one through which the revulsion with *Italianness* manifests itself and is reinforced (De Angelis and Anderson 53). The repulsion and shame felt towards their Italian parents take shape in the words of Arturo, the protagonist of John Fante's novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, when he stigmatizes his father's behavior at breakfast saying "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 … Oh God, these Italians!" (47). As evident, Arturo not only insults his own parents but speaks of his people in the third person, attempting a separation from his ethnic peers.

New generations perceived spaghetti and other Italian dishes as the legacy of their parents' culture from which they wanted to distance themselves, consequently preferring to eat American dishes like their peers. In another poem of Maria Mazziotti Gillan, namely "Arthur," she associates the typical Italian dishes with a feeling of affliction, perceiving them as the cause of her marginalization: "the anguish of sandwiches / made from spinach and oil; / the roasted peppers on homemade bread, / the rice pies of Easter" (22). The same unpleasant sensation is experienced by Michael Dante in *La parola difficile*, who declines eating Italian food and calls the traditional Apulian bread "junk" after his neighbors refused to play with him

because he was Italian (Tusiani 221-2). At the heart of being a second-generation American lied the feeling of shame at your heritage and the sting of family betrayal, creating an inner turmoil from which one never fully escaped (Laurino 103) and in which food has always played an extremely important role. The acknowledgement of one's own behavior, displayed through the rejection of traditions and the betrayal of one's family, represents a significant feature pointed out in several literary works. In the last lines of the poem "I Come From," for example, Mazziotti Gillan underlines the feeling of powerlessness in the face of what she did during her adolescence, saying "I didn't understand all that I had / till it was gone" (*Winter* 89). This aspect is further explored in "The Italian Pilgrim"'s last stanza, in which the author states "it would be years before I'd recognize all I'd lost / in trying to leave behind the Italian that was / in my blood, electric and necessary, / and a part of me / I could never change" (91). The "inner turmoil" mentioned by Laurino is, thus, corroborated by the words of the poet and many others like her.

Fortunately, during the years of the Ethnic Revival, which occurred between the mid-sixties and the mid-seventies, the Italianness of food has reassumed a central role. By rediscovering the roots that were being severed, third and fourth generations recognized the importance of the Italian way of eating. In fiction, the reconnection with the cultural heritage is shown in *Umbertina* through the character of the fourth-generation Tina, who acknowledges the value of the hyphenated identity and prompts the rapprochement that brings food back to the commensality of its past. The gradual acceptance of the Italian traditions by the second and third generations is evident also in the prose poem "Christmas Eve at Our House." In this work, Mazziotti Gillan recalls the moments spent with her entire family during what is considered to be the most important holiday, underlying once again the conviviality of eating: "For years, we gathered at my house for Christmas Eve, the entire / family and their assorted spouses and children / and grandchildren, extra friends who had nowhere to go" (*Winter* 79). What she adds to this description is her and her daughter taking part in the preparations for the dinner, side by side with her mother: "My daughter and I would cook and bake and set the tables … and my mother would bring meatballs / and sausages to go with the *lasagna* we made, she'd bring fish, / five varieties, and *sfogliatelle* and *struffoli*, covered in honey / and sprinkles, the house so full of laughter and talk, / all of us happy and together" (79). If the abovementioned

behavior of the author during her adolescence, her impatience with the Italian culture, and her disgust towards her family's eating habits are compared with the extract of this last poem the difference is clear. Therefore, food changes from a breaking to a unifying element.

Food as Catalyst of Memories

There is a strong link between memory, emotional dimension and food (Lupton 56). The last offers to those who are living an experience of separation the possibility to temporarily break down the space-time barriers, allowing the memories to replenish with the places of origin and the loved ones. "Consuming familiar foods," as La Trecchia underlines, "brings back the comfort of home" (45). Therefore, food appears, as Ortoleva said, "as an element of recovery and remembrance, more than an act of creation" (31). As the author Helen Barolini remarks in her *Festa*, "starting in her kitchen, my mother found her way back to her heritage, and this, I suspect, happened for many Italian-American families" (52). Cooking and sharing meals are, in fact, a way through which it is possible to revive the reminiscences of the native land. In *Mount Allegro*, for instance, Jerry Mangione's immigrant father carries his Sicilian identity by means of *cannoli*, the traditional regional dessert, that is considered a symbol of affection as well as a language that revitalizes the ties to his land (128-30).

The power of food to keep alive one's identity is not confined to Italian newcomers only but it also applies to the generations born on American soil. In the stories told by the Italian American authors, the familiar cooking smells often recall moments from their childhood. To Barolini, the instruments of cooking, the ingredients, whether seen in the wild or on a grocer's shelf, the aroma of a spice, a ragu, or the sweet bite of a pastry, have, according to Gardaphé's view, the power to evoke endless streams of memories (92). By saying "*Mangiando, ricordo*" (*Festa* 13), Barolini shows how food is the medium of her remembrance. Another example is provided by Mazziotti Gillan in her "This is How Memory Works." In this poem, the author mentions a variety of apparently simple elements through which memories flood back. Among the vivid images she presents, what stands out the most is the evocative power of food highlighted by the mention of "the aroma of garlic and peppers / on a Sunday morning / in my mother's basement kitchen" (*Winter* 58).

Food does not only evoke memories, but lies at the base of one of the most important scenarios for the lives of the Italian Americans. The kitchen is the place where magic happens; it acquires an enormous significance for the immigrants because inside it they can truly feel at home. As shown several times in her works, Maria Mazziotti Gillan in "I Come From," underlines once again the immense value this area of the house had for her: "The kitchen was where we did everything, / surrounded always by the aroma of baking bread / or sugar cookies and boiling soup" (*Winter* 89). It is around its table that families reunite and share stories that often offer images of food and family meals as the symbol of cohesion and commonality. Food becomes, as previously affirmed, a powerful symbol of cultural identity, as well as a fundamental element for remembering. In the poem "My Grandmother's Hand," the author Mazziotti Gillan traces back her distant past, even if she did not experience it directly, recalling the stories told by her mother about her grandmother. She underlines the importance of that "tenement kitchen" in which she could feel safe, filled with "the old stories weaving connections between ourselves and the past" (*From* 65).

Memories that revolve around food preparation and consumption are not to be seen only as moments of nostalgic recollection but also, as La Trecchia argues, "as critical acts that bear crucial implications for the immigrants' exploration of their identities" (54). Food itself, so central to the sustenance of lives, affirms one's cultural identity and ethnicity and becomes part and parcel of one's material culture. Italian Americans' ethnic identity, in fact, usually takes shape through a metaphoric association with Italian food. This evident relation is detectable in the words of Maria Nardell who, in her article, says that "being Italian American meant my grandma's famous meat sauce for the holidays, my mother's *biscotti* at Christmas time and the trips to our favorite *pizzeria*" (208). Among Italian Americans, as Gabaccia and Helstosky argue, food and cooking are powerful expressions of their ties to the past and current identities (5). A totally different point of view on this matter is offered by Maria Russo who says that this oft-paralyzing nostalgia for a romanticized past is "a psychological trap, a vague longing for connection to an immigrant culture that no longer exists and a motherland that has moved on" ("Fuhgeddaboudit"). Yet the Italian American culture need not to be denigrated and dismissed as "vague longing" for bygone days. The interest in this culture for many Italian Americans who grew up among immigrant parents and grandparents represents, as Christine De Lucia says, "a desire to sustain part of a lifestyle they once knew" (205).

Conclusion

On the basis of what has been previously exposed, it can be reasonably argued that the role of food within the complex process of separation and transplant, that took place after the great wave of migration, has been fundamental. Its unquestionable importance is demonstrated by the copious amount of narrative works and articles that revolve around this topic. As exposed in the first section, the works of the Italian American authors provide valuable evidence to the notion that food represents a powerful means by which Italian Americans celebrate their culture in their relationship to Italy. Food, adopting the *rhetoric of nostalgia*, is a thin thread of memory that leads Italian immigrants home but whose power is not limited to this. Its central role in reinforcing familiar and external ties is illustrated through the works cited in the second section, where sharing food does not only represent an act of hospitality but it acquires a dimension of sacrality. In the third section, food changes once again its face turning into a motive of marginalization and stigmatization. The literary production reconstructs the way through which the hostility felt against the foreigners manifests itself through stereotypes that were related to food, too. This disruptive behavior led to the rejection and abjuration of the Italian ethnic roots, ripping apart the familiar ties and widening the generational gap. It is only after several years, when the urge to rediscover the roots is felt, that food returns to be a feature to embrace to feel truly Italian American. The path towards self-acceptance and cultural recovery is pursued by the Italian American authors, and it is made possible by the resilience of the cultural ties that were, fortunately, not completely cut. The multi-faced aspect of food is reaffirmed in the last section where its ability to catalyze memories does not only serve to provoke an emotional response but, most of all, to forge the Italian American ultimate identity.

Since food has obviously undergone a certain degree of change throughout the years, it is difficult to define Italian American cuisine as authentically Italian. The history of Italian food in the United States is one of cross-cultural pollination, being the dishes influenced by the possibilities offered by an unfamiliar territory. Even if the techniques and ingredients are neither entirely Italian nor entirely American, food remains an essential element in the construction of identity, becoming a distinctly Italian-American hybrid. Reconnecting with the aphorism of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the relation between food and identity also applies to the Italian Americans, who have successfully created their own hallmark.

Notes

[1] In sociology, symbolic ethnicity is a nostalgic allegiance to, love for, and pride in a cultural tradition that can be felt and lived without having to be incorporated into the person's everyday behavior (Gans 9).

Works Cited

Barolini, Helen. *Festa: Recipies and Recollections*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

---. *Umbertina*. Feminist Press, 1999.

Barreca, Regina. *Don't Tell Mama! The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*. Penguin, 2002.

Bodziany, Marek. "Clash of Cultures and Identity: Sociological Aspects of Multiculturalism in the Age of Social Changes." *The International Scientific Journal Cultural*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 76-86.

Boelhower, William. *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States*. Essedue edizioni, 1982.

Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. *The Physiology of Taste*. Dover Publications, 2019.

Cinotto, Simone. "Leonard Covello, the Covello Papers, and the History of Eating Habits among Italian Immigrants in New York." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2004, pp. 497521.

---. *Una famiglia che mangia insieme. Cibo ed etnicità nella comunità italoamericana di New York, 1920-1940*. Otto, 2001.

Curto, Kathy. "Bread and Belonging." *Italian Americana*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2015, pp. 200-7.

De Angelis, Rose, and Donald R. Anderson. "Gatronomic Miscuglio: Foodways in Italian-American Narrative." *Italian Americana*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2005, pp. 48-68.

De Lucia, Christine. "'Negotiating the Hyphen': An Evolving Definition of Italian-American Identity." *Italian Americana*, vol. 22, no.2, 2004, pp. 201-7.

De Salvo, Louise. *Vertigo*. Dutton, 1996.

De Salvo, Louise, and Edvige Giunta. "Introduction." *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture*. Feminist Press, 2002.

Dougherty, Sean Thomas. *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Guernica, 2007.

Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Daedalus*, vol. 101, no. 1, 1972, pp. 61-81.

Elteren, Mel van. *Americanism and Americanization: A Critical History of Domestic and Global Influence*. McFarland, 2006.

Fante, John. *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. Black Sparrow, 1989.

Fazio, Michele. "'Vomit Your Poison': Violence, Hunger, and Symbolism in Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*." *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2007, pp. 115-37.

Gabaccia, Donna R., and Carol Helstosky. "Food, Recipes, Cookbooks, and Italian-American Life." *Italian Americana*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1998, pp. 5-23.

Gans, Herbert J. *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1979.

Gardaphé, Fred L., *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture*. State U of New York, 2004.

Gillan, Jennifer. "Spotlight: Two Daughters, One Voice." *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Guernica, 2007.

Hill, Howard C. "The Americanization Movement." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1919, pp. 609-12.

Kaufmann, Frances Gendimenico. "Unlocking my Italian-American History: Reading Pietro Di Donato and Richard Gambino." *OpenEdition Journal*, vol. 19, 2011, pp. 10-117.

La Trecchia, Patrizia. "Identity in the Kitchen: Creation of Taste and Culinary Memories of an Italian-American Identity." *Italian Americana*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2012, pp. 44-56.

Laurino, Maria. *The Italian Americans: A History*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2015.

Lupton, Deborah. *L'anima nel piatto*. Il mulino, 1999.

Malpezzi, Frances, and William Clements. *Italian-American Folklore*. August House Pub Inc, 1992.

Mazziotti Gillan, Maria. *All That Lies Between Us*. Guernica, 2007.

---. *Talismans*. Np, 2006.

---. *What Blooms in Winter*. NYQ Books, 2016.

---. *Where I Come From: Selected and New Poems*. Guernica, 1997.

Nardell, Maria. "My Italian-American Identity." *Italian Americana*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 208-13.

Ortoleva, Peppino. "La tradizione e l'abbondanza: Riflessioni sulla cucina degli italo-americani." *Altreitalie*, vol. 7, 1992, 31-52.

Russo, Maria. "Fuhgeddaboudit: The Sopranos have made being Italian-American seem cool again, but maybe it's time to say arrivederci to all that." *SALON*, 24 August 2000, https://www.salon.com/2000/08/24/italian/. Accessed 28 August 2023.

Sceats Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2000.

Tusiani, Joseph. *La parola difficile. Autobiografia di un italo-americano*. Schena, 1988.