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### **Eating Heritage: Foodways and Ethnic Identity in Italian Americans' Writing**

Second-generation Italian-American writer Barolini (1988, p. 13) remarks that “*Mangiando, ricordo*. [...] Food is the medium of my remembrance – of my memory of Italy.” Specifically, she points to her mother’s experience with food as an instance of how culinary tastes and practices show the ties connecting Italian Americans to their native land and, thereby, help reveal one’s sense of belonging. As Barolini (1988, p. 52) observes, “starting in her kitchen, my mother found her way back to her heritage, and this, I suspect, happened for many Italian-American families.”

Following in Barolini’s footsteps, scholarship usually emphasizes the centrality of food to the Italian-American experience in the United States. In particular, it suggests that cooking, eating, and gathering at mealtime are ways to cherish ethnic roots, to express the sense of self and social status, to reclaim their ancestral traditions against the dominant culture in the adoptive land, and to negotiate one’s place both in the immigrant community and within the broader U.S. society. According to Marinaccio (2012, p. 3), for instance, food is “a marker of Italian ethnicity.”

Novels, short stories, memoirs, and autobiographies offer valuable sources to highlight the ethnic significance and implications underlying the behavior of Italian Americans while they prepare or consume food. Indeed, DeSalvo and Giunta (2002, p. 8) argue that “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.”

This paper briefly explores the representation of food in a sample of works by Italian-American authors as a lens through which it is possible to analyze the ethnic identity of Americans of Italian ancestry and the reshaping of their sense of belonging over time. To this end, it draws

upon a situational notion of ethnicity as an ever-changing social and cultural construction that is subjected to hybridization and negotiations in dialectic situations of confrontation, competition, and conflicts among the diverse cohorts of any given society (Ferrante & Brown, 2001).

In works by authors of Italian extraction, cooking food and sharing meals stand out as means to strengthen family and community ties as well as to revive the reminiscences of the native land within a transnational perspective bridging the Atlantic divide. According to Laurino (2015, p. 2), even today “Italian foodstuffs continue to link past and present for many Italian Americans.” Actually, Mangione (1978, p. 15) recalls that ancestral recipes and banquet gatherings provide opportunities to keep Sicilian tastes alive and to tell stories about Sicily, thereby, committing eaters to their ethnic heritage. Likewise preparing *cuscuszu*, a Sicilian variation of the north African couscous, offers first-generation immigrant Leonarda Cicala a chance to recall her past and to hold her family together by means of culinary regional roots (Cicala, 2011).

Italian Americans’ ethnic identity usually takes shape through a metaphoric association with Italian food. Maruggi (1997) looks back at his formative years in Rochester’s “Little Italy” through the lens of the pivotal role of food in growing up Italian. Likewise, to Laurino (2000, p. 24), her Italian heritage 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.

Sticking to Italian culinary practices also reveals Italian Americans’ ethnic pride notwithstanding pressures toward Americanization. In the pages of her son’s memoirs, Italianness and food are so strictly intertwined in the eyes of Vergara’s (1968, p. 47) 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.” In *Umbertina*, Barolini’s (1999, p. 69) semi-autobiographical bildungsroman, immigrant women make fun of U.S. foodways in a display of allegiance to their 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!

Especially at the time of the mass exodus to the United States, most Italian newcomers were destitute laborers who struggled daily at the bottom of the social ladder. Yet, the consumption of ethnic food also offered them a sense of pride that helped them offset marginalization and poverty as well as reclaim their dignity in the adoptive country in the face of a hostile and nativist environment. For instance, novelist Puzo (1971, p. 39) remembers that

During 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.

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. Immigrants from different geographical backgrounds in Italy 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.

Consequently, the retention of ties to the ancestral land initially occurred along subnational lines. This is the case of *cannoli*, a typical Sicilian pastry filled with sweetened cheese, for immigrant Peppino in Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1981, pp. 128-130). A native of Sicily, he carries his regional identity to Rochester and cherishes it by eating this traditional regional dessert. Rosasco-Soule's (1987, p. 102) mother in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Florida also resorts to food to keep alive her subnational identity. An immigrant from Genoa, she holds to the flavors of her hometown by preparing *pan dolce*, *pesto*, *minestrone genovese*, and *zuppa di ceci* to satisfy her

husband's "Genovese stomach." By the same token, Vergara's (1968, p. 89) previously-mentioned 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." Likewise, Morello's (1999, pp. 6, 20) aunt extols her Neapolitan-style "tomato sauce with the consistency and flow of a gravy," as opposed to its Genoese counterpart "extremely thin, almost watery." Similarly, Umbertina – Barolini's fictional family matriarch – 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* recipes and does not make ravioli mixing cheese and spinach (Barolini, 1999, pp. 93-95).

The latest couple of examples suggests that sub-national varieties in tastes easily led to regional pride. Indeed, Panella's (1979, p. 123) uncle Mario contends that "Sicilian olives were bigger and tastier than those further north" and that "Sicilian table salt was superior." Likewise, to Mangione (1981, p. 133), Sicilian bread is "finer and tastier than any other Italian bread." In turn, regional glorification could also yield to the exploitation of differences in culinary habits so as to elaborate disparaging 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 del Tagliamento by the slur *polentoni*, with reference to the widespread consumption of polenta in northern Italy. Joseph Tusiani (1988, pp. 323, 325) himself sadly remarks that "not even at table do North and South manage to agree."

Yet, the members of both the Wasp establishment and the other ethnic groups usually failed to realize the differences among Italian immigrants of various regional extractions and ended up pigeonholing all newcomers from Italy and their children under the same national minority, often in derogatory terms. This kind of ethnic discrimination contributed to making 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.

Food culture and culinary-related behaviors highlight that the major ethnic divide concerning Italian Americans is not among the various subnational groups within the single “Little Italies” but between the Italian-American community as a whole, on one side, and the larger adoptive society, on the other. In a semiautobiographical short story, for instance, Fante (1986, pp. 66-67), stresses that noisy mastication at table separates Henry Molise, the protagonist of Italian extraction, from Harriet, his wife of Anglo-Saxon descent, although they share the same wine and *lasagne* for dinner. Montimurro (2001, pp. 23-24) distinguishes his fellow-ethnic comrades from other-than-Italian 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 (W.A.S.P.).

As Italian Americans faced bigotry in the United States because of their national descent, they often turned their backs on their native country in the pursuit of assimilation. Food choices, too, reflect this attitude. Barolini (1978, p. 111) recalls about her family that, in an attempt at dodging xenophobia, “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.” Italian food is similarly a source of embarrassment for third-generation Stefana Pietrofesso, who wants to “become *American*” and hopes that her U.S. schoolmates would not pay attention to her “sandwich made with Italian bread” (Barolini 1991, p. 40).

However, unlike U.S.-born individuals of Italian ancestry, immigrants are more likely to resist the lure of the Americanization process in foodways as well. Barolini (1999, p. 142), for example, writes that Italian-born Umbertina “had never taken to the American Thanksgiving and its strange food.” The latter 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. Indeed, alienation from their ancestral roots characterized especially the immigrants' children in the interwar years. In their struggle to distance themselves from their Italian extraction to prevent discrimination, second-generation Italian Americans even clashed with their own parents. Diner (2001, p. 82) contrasts "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." Nonetheless, a close scrutiny of Italian-American narratives shows that foodways are not a conflict-free sphere as for generational relations. 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 "junk" and asks for a sandwich (Tusiani, 1988, 199, 221-222).

Michael Dante's actual case is not different from Arturo Bandini's fictional experience. Bandini 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! (Fante, 1989, p. 37)

In *Vertigo*, DeSalvo makes her mother's traditional dishes the symbol of an Italian heritage and identity she rejects. DeSalvo (1996, pp. 201, 204) argues that "I don't like anything my mother cooks." She 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."

DeSalvo further re-elaborates the generational conflict over food in a subsequent volume. In *Crazy in the kitchen* cooking becomes the battleground between her step grandmother and her mother. The former struggles to recreate an Italian-style cuisine – making, for example, a "thick-crusted, 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. Specifically, bread is the epitome of the conflict between the retention and the rejection of ethnic roots. The author's step grandmother makes bread following an Italian recipe. Conversely, DeSalvo's mother buys American bread from the Dugan store. The Italian-style bread is "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." She also assumes that consuming U.S. bread "will change her, that eating this bread will erase the embarrassment of a stepmother – all black dresses and headscarves" (DeSalvo, 2004, pp. 9-10).

Even when they do not reach the level of generational conflicts, foodways rise to the symbol of cultural differences and lack of understanding between the immigrants and the newcomers' progeny on an ethnic ground. For instance, hinting at her incompetence about traditional Italian recipes as the epitome for the distance from her immigrant mother-in-law's native roots, U.S.-born Bea Tusiani (2017, p. 176) admits that she was unable to "understand the significance of a bread-backing ritual that carried this very poor and independent woman through the Depression and two World Wars."

In *Verigo* DeSalvo (1996, pp. 200-218) disavows her ancestral heritage in a culinary perspective by celebrating anorexia as the refusal to eat food is an escape from her Italian roots. However, the rejection of their forebears' cuisine is not the final stage in Italian Americans' complex behavior in the kitchen and at the dinner table. Riesman (1953, p. xv) suggests that "the Italian immigrants has to go through a gastronomically bleach and bland period before he can publicly eat garlic and spaghetti." The denial of Italianness is a step toward the fulfillment of an Italian self-perception. In the end, even DeSalvo (1985, p. 94) becomes reconciled with the Italian cuisine and, therefore, with her ancestral heritage. When she decides 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.

Though obviously not exhaustive because of space constraints, this overview of narratives about foodways has outlined the transformations of Italian Americans' ethnic attachment over the decades, highlighting a trajectory that immigrants and their progeny followed while redefining their sense of belonging. Such changes have comprised an initially localistic allegiance, the subsequent elaboration of an identity based on national extraction, the later longing for assimilation within U.S. society, and the eventual rediscovery of the ancestral roots.

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