

ITALIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FOOD: A MATCH MADE IN THE KITCHEN
A HANDBOOK

by
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ABSTRACT
Italian American Literature and Food: A Match Made in Heaven
A Handbook

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Food is a recurrent theme in Italian American literature and authors have used it to highlight the importance of family, women, and the community at large and to teach about Italian customs to the U.S. public. Oftentimes, for the older Italian immigrants, food triggers fond memories of the Old country, while, for the younger generations, it might cause shame that leads to clashes with the older generations. Characters use food as a tool to express power and, later, status and to communicate. Food also defines relationships, gives an identity to the Italian immigrants on foreign soil, and allows them to resist acculturation and assimilation. Oddly, not much has been written on food in Italian American literature and this dissertation is meant to fill this void in the study of ethnic literatures. The entries offer a plethora of major themes found in many Italian American texts, such as the kitchen, women, husbands, and nostalgia. The manuscript also allows for a recovery of some texts that have now fallen into oblivion and are very hard to find.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my Italian and American families, the Marchis, the Anismans, and the Jacksons. Without their help, support, love, and encouragement, this chapter in my life would not have been possible.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	I
Acknowledgements	III
Dedication	IV
Introduction	1
Abundance	32
Abuse in the Kitchen	33
Acculturation	36
Acquiring a Taste	37
Addiction	38
Agency	39
Approval	40
Assimilation	40
Autobiography	42
Backyards	42
Bakery	45
Banquets	46
Barthes, Ronald	51
Biasin, Gian-Carlo	53
Bildungsroman	56
Bread	59
Bribery, Food as	63
The Brotherhood of the Grapes by John Fante (1975)	66
<i>Bruculinu, America</i> by Vincent Schiavelli (1988)	67
Cannoli	68
Catholicism	69
Characters' Features	73
Chitarra	74
<i>Christ in Concrete</i> by Pietro di Donato (1939)	76
Coexisting	76
Coffee	77
<i>Come Back to Sorrento</i> by Joseph Petracca (1948)	81
Connection, Food as	81

Contractual Marriage	82
Cooking as Panacea	82
Cooking “Classes”	83
“Il Cortile”	85
Crazy in the Kitchen: Food, Feuds, Forgiveness in an Italian American Family by Louise DeSalvo (2004)	85
Courtship.....	86
Culturalism.....	87
Culture, Food as	88
Dago Red	91
Dandelions	92
Domesticity.....	94
Economic Status.....	95
Emotions, Food and	96
<i>The End</i> by Salvatore Scibona (2008).....	98
Enterprise Spirit	99
Edible Heritage and Culture.....	103
Emasculation at the Table.....	103
Euphoria.....	105
Family, Food and	105
“ <i>Fare bella figura</i> ” (to look good).....	106
Farming.....	107
Fathers.....	108
Food	110
Food and Sex.....	112
Foraging	113
<i>The Fortunate Pilgrim</i> by Mario Puzo (1964).....	114
Friends and Neighbors	114
Garlic.....	115
Gathering with the “Paisani”	116
Generational Gap	116
<i>The Godfather</i> by Mario Puzo (1969).....	120
Government Help.....	120

Gramsci, Antonio	121
Grandfathers	122
Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers	125
Grappa.....	129
Hoarding Food	130
Homemakers	130
Humor	132
Hunger.....	133
Husbands.....	134
<i>I Love You Like a Tomato</i> by Marie Giordano (2003).....	137
Industrializing Italian Food.....	137
Immigrant Angst	139
Inability to Coexist.....	140
Job.....	141
Kitchen	142
Kitchen Floor	156
La via vecchia	157
Lamb	158
<i>Like Lesser Gods</i> by Mari Tomasi (1949).....	159
Liver	160
Mafia	160
Manhood	161
<i>Memoirs of a Beatnik</i> by Diana Di Prima (1969).....	162
Memory.....	163
Mixing Food.....	164
Mothers and Wives	165
Mining Camps.....	170
Mothers-in-Law	171
<i>Mount Allegro</i> by Jerre Mangione (1942).....	173
Moving Out.....	174
Mushrooms	175
Neighborhoods.....	175

<i>No Steady Job for Papa</i> by Marion Benasutti (1966).....	176
Nostalgia	176
Nursery Rhyme	178
Olive Oil.....	178
<i>Paper Fish</i> by Tina De Rosa (1980).....	179
The Patron Saint of Ugly by Marie Manilla (2014).....	179
Pasta	180
Passing the Cooking Torch.....	182
Patriarchal Society	183
Pedagogical Intent.....	184
Picnic.....	185
Pizza.....	187
Polenta.....	187
Prejudice	188
Production Techniques.....	189
Processed Food	189
Relationships.....	190
Regional Differences	192
<i>The Right Thing to Do</i> by Josephine Gattuso Hendlin (1988)	194
Rosa, The Life of an Italian Immigrant by Marie Hall Ets (1970)	194
Roseto, PA	195
De Saussure, Ferdinand	195
Sex, Food as	196
Shopping	197
Sickness.....	199
<i>The Skin Between Us</i> by Kym Ragusa (2006).....	200
Smell	201
Socialization.....	202
Sometimes I Dream in Italian, by Rita Ciresi (2000)	203
Sunday Dinner	204
Table	205
Table Cloth.....	205

Tackeril	206
Taste	206
Trauma	208
Traveling	208
<i>Umbertina</i> by Helen Barolini (1979)	209
Utensils and Objects	210
<i>Vertigo</i> by Louise DeSalvo (1996)	213
Waste	213
Wine	214
Women	218
Conclusion	222
Works Cited	229
For Further Readings:	236
Media	237

Introduction

Food studies has lately become a popular topic in academia and thanks to its interdisciplinary nature, the food theme has been studied under different lenses, from gender studies to feminist studies, from anthropology to linguistics, even philosophy. However, even outside academia, in the U.S., curiosity about food has also peaked thanks to the affordability of traveling and to a newfound interest in food in the American media. In fact, some TV channels, like the Food Network, are solely dedicated to entertaining their viewers with shows that teach how to cook or with reality shows that show how to start a restaurant. Many celebrities write their own cookbooks and competition shows, such as Master Chef, are teaching America how to eat and how to prepare food.

The American public has also become more aware of what they ingest: when one walks into a grocery store, one has the option to purchase products that are organic, with no gluten, and labeled NO GMO. In more affluent neighborhoods, stores that market themselves as being healthier choices, such as Sprouts Farmers or Whole Foods Markets, are welcome with open arms. Others, like Aldi, are completely going organic. In the U.S., where tons of junk food are consumed every day, this might sound oxymoronic: still fond of junk and fast food and consequently still dealing with staggering figures in obesity, the average American is becoming more and more interested in foods that are healthier, sophisticated, and more global.

Americans, in fact, are not only interested in eating better but they are becoming food connoisseurs. This interest in food is a result of globalization and has been instrumental in whetting the U.S. appetite for ethnic food. Thanks to the availability of authentic products from other countries and of the innumerable eating establishments, the American public is now more demanding. Consequently, many search for the most authentic ethnic restaurants as their palate

are becoming more and more refined. In fact, when one now searches for authentic Italian pizza, for example, the neighborhood pizzeria with the checkered tablecloths, run by Albanians, does not have the qualifications to satisfy a more demanding American palate any longer. Thus, this attention has also been fostered by a change in our global society. In *Global Appetites*, Allyson Carruth posits that “food has become a political mobilizer and cultural buzzword.” In fact, she recognizes how, in the United States this new phenomenon has developed thanks to the ever-growing “protests, activist group, conferences, books, films, art installations, and websites” (4). Globalization has certainly impacted the way we look at food and has opened up a new way to look at societies, ethnicities, and history.

Globalization, though, might not be such a modern phenomenon. Dan Jurafsky argues that food helps us to communicate thanks to our perception and emotions, and that the language of food allows us to recognize how we are all connected. In *The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu*, Jurafsky analyzes how “(t)he language of food helps understand the interconnectness of civilizations and the vast globalization that happened, not recently, as we might think, but centuries or millennia ago, all brought together by the most basic human pursuit: finding something good to eat” (4). His point about globalization is interesting as it claims that globalization is not a new phenomenon, but something that has been going on for centuries. This “interconnectness” would then explain why we might find the same or similar dishes in countries at the opposite sides of the world. For example, in the Hispanic cuisine we have tortillas, but we can also encounter the same idea of flat bread in Italy, in the Modena area (piadina), the pita bread in Greece, or in the Middle East and Asia with the lavash, the naan, and the roti. The same could be said about pasta, as I discussed in the entry titled “Pasta.”

However, globalization is, by some, not considered a “good thing.” In fact, in 1988, Carlo Petrini started the Slow Food movement as a way to protect and safeguard the local food cultures and traditions. The movie *Slow Food* argues that the movement began when Carlo Petrini and his friends were defeated in the city council elections. A communist at heart, Petrini was instrumental for the birth of several food initiatives in his region of Piedmont, such as guides for wines and *trattorias*, family run restaurants, that were meant to safeguard the production of regional products. Out of these initiatives, the Slow Food movement was born. As shown in its manifesto, it has a definite political undertone:

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model.

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.

To be worthy of the name, Homo sapiens should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction.

A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of the Fast Life.

May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment reserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency.

Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food.

In the name of productivity, Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer.

That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it. And what better way to set about this than an international exchange of experiences, knowledge, and projects?

Slow Food guarantees a better future.

Slow Food is an idea that needs plenty of qualified supporters who can help turn this (slow) motion into an international movement, with a little snail as its symbol (xxiii-xxvi).

Although political, this manifesto highlights the importance of enjoying food at a slower pace and of tasting and relishing the food, in a quasi-goliardic fashion. The movie *Slow Food*, in fact, shows how Petrini and his friends would frequent rural restaurants and how these meals would turn into theatrical performances. This is also captured in the preface of his book, *Slow Food*, where Petrini states that “alimentation is an essential part of life and that quality of life is therefore inevitably linked to the pleasure of eating in healthy, flavor, and varied ways” (1). The Slow Food movement also argues for “giving the act of nourishing oneself the importance it deserves, learning to take pleasure in the diversity of recipes and flavors, recognizing the variety of places where food is produced and the people who produce it, and respecting the rhythm of the seasons and of human gatherings” (1). The movement’s nostalgic wish is to return to the origins, a return to producing genuine food while emphasizing the importance of local farming and products. Most importantly, it stands opposite to the idea of fast food: food needs to be relished and enjoyed, slowly, with friends, and with a little entertainment. As Alison Leitch points out, in her essay “Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat,” Petrini is not entirely against globalization, but he wants what he calls “virtuous globalization” where people belonging to minority cultures are allowed to produce their goods and be able to network (394).

From the establishment of the Salone del Gusto to supporting the creation of Eatitaly, from the establishment of a University in Pollenzo (Università di Scienze Gastronomiche) to being present in 150 countries, the Slow Food movement has proven that it is not just a fad. Its popularity, I posit, shows that many have found in this movement an answer to their hectic life styles. Many flock to restaurants that proudly showcase the little snail, the Slow Food logo, or to restaurants, in

Italy, that boast the “Kilometro 0” status which indicates that the ingredients used to prepare the items on the menu have been produced in the same area of the restaurant. The same phenomenon has expanded to the USA with the Locavore movement. These two movements are, undoubtedly, a logical offspring of the Slow Food movement . The Slow Food Movement was born to safeguard Italian natural and original products, but its international expansion shows that humanity is concerned about the future. It also gives credence to the need that people might feel to slow down, to go back to a time when things were not so hectic. Globalization has its positive aspects, but at the same time, it also hides dangerous effects that will be felt for centuries, as some of its demands are corroding cultural boundaries and poisoning our tables.

The interest in food spilling over academia’s floor is a natural consequence of these new food movements. Food studies, in fact, is becoming a relevant field and more and more researchers and authors have created works with this theme in mind. Academia is a fertile ground for food studies to develop and grow, especially for literature. I concur with Allyson Carruth’s statement about the “capacity” that “imaginary texts” have “to shuttle between social and interpersonal registers and between symbolic and embodied expressions of power” (5). Even if it is fictitious food literature allows a reading of society, its inhabitants, the power dynamics, and their interactions in ethnic communities that, nowadays, are ever changing.

Consequently, an exhaustive body of food studies scholarship exists in ethnic literatures, such as Chicano, African American, and Asian. Many of these texts inform us about how food is, what we eat, but also how food defines who we are. They also highlight all the other underlining elements that are linked with food preparation and consumption, such as gender, class, memory, nostalgia, and personal and national identity. Additionally, a political undertone seems to be common in all these literatures, as their “inhabitants” all share a diasporic experience. *Rethinking*

Chicano/a Literature through Food: Postnational Appetite, for example, is a collection of essays about social customs, art, and authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Anna Castillo, and Denise Chavez, just to name a few, agree that food, in literature, is used as a way to rebel against the status quo, leaving the nation to build a post nation. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, a prolific scholar in the field of food studies, when asked why she studies food, acknowledges that food is another vehicle through which people's cultural behaviors are revealed. Furthermore, food becomes the focus of her analysis and she uses theories and methods that encompass gender, women, race, and class (*Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods*, 195-196). In fact, in *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, she uses "novels, chapbooks, poetry, cookbooks, and visual culture" to examine "the social and symbolic practices through which eating and food cultures inform the production of racial differences and other forms of political inequality" (1). In *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, Psyche A. Williams-Forsson "examines the complexity of black women's legacies using food as a form of cultural work" and analyzes how black women have established themselves as women and their relationship to the chicken, a foodways that is, of course, racially charged (<https://www.uncpress.org>). Anita Mannur, in *Culinary Fiction: Foods in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, argues that "food matters, and the implications of placing the culinary as a site of critical interrogation must also go beyond the literary" (223). In fact, she recognizes that in South Asian diasporic cultural texts what she calls "culinary" lives in a place that becomes a paradox, because it becomes a place of affirmation but also a place of resistance. Food in fact allows the "marking" of communities outside their countries of origins and is used to affirm one's cultural belonging, while fighting off racism and xenophobia. On the other hand, it helps the resistance, that is, "the evocation of a culinary register can deliberately and strategically disrupts the notion that cultural identity is always readily available

for consumption and commodification and always already conjoined to culinary practices” (7-8). Wenying Xu, in *Eating Identities Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, claims that eating is a way of becoming: we need to look at food not only as nourishment, but we also need to pay attention at what we eat, how we eat, and what we decide to eat. Food is a bridge between our insides and outside and it defines us.

In Italian American literature, food has been a recurrent theme but also a unifying thread that has aided authors in the depiction of family and personal experiences, as well. Italian American authors have imbedded the theme of food throughout their stories since the beginning of their immigrant experience in the United States. However, very little has been written on this subject. This study is my contribution to the field of food studies and an attempt to give Italian American literature a relevant place in the academia world, together with the other ethnic literatures. I argue that Italian American authors consider food a cultural and social marker and with it they can highlight the importance of family, the roles of women, and the community at large. Food also is a tool that characters use to express power: once in control of the process of obtaining food and feeding, they gain control over their destiny and begin a sort of food colonization of the new country. More specifically, food is employed by the authors to define relationships, identity, and roles in the community and serves as a communication tool. In fact, characters, sometimes, use food as a means to get to someone’s heart and mind or to “blackmail” the individual that does not conform to the family’s expectations.

Ronald Barthes’ essay, “Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” supports my argument. He asks, “What is food?” The answer is that food is not just a collection of items that we consume but so much more: it is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations, and behavior” (29); food, then, also transmits a situation, provides

information, and it signifies. Food is a sign and it creates a system of communication. He adds that anthropologically speaking, food is the first need but now that modern man does not live off berries anymore, food has become highly structured. The ingredients and the preparation are parts of a “system of differences in signification” (29). When this takes place, we have communication (30).

Generally speaking, food gives nourishment and energy, but in Italian American texts, food is more than that. Food, in many cases, is a ritual that begins with the preparation and like every ritual it gains a sort of religious undertone; it, not only, communicates, but also gives solace and refuge. In the United States, food also allows Italian immigrants to recreate an Italian nation outside the motherland; most importantly, it helps the first immigrants to figure out what being Italian means. Interestingly, food in Italian American communities somewhat resists assimilation. The U.S. social agencies that are created to help immigrants assimilate often pressure Italian immigrants to change their diets as the U.S. government considers what Italians eat not nutritious enough. Even if certain Italian dishes have experienced a transformation (see for example spaghetti and meatballs or the Chicago deep-dish pizza) or some have been created (see Caesar salad or the several versions of Fettucine Alfredo), food on Italian American tables has, undoubtedly, helped Italian immigrants to resist a complete annihilation of their culture in the United States. Italian immigrants use food to prevent a total assimilation and acculturation and, paradoxically, food allows them to colonize and influence American foodways. In Italian American literature, authors have used food, its production and preparation, be it in fields or in kitchens, and the locales of its consumption as a tool through which their characters hold on to their land of origin and their *Italianità* and to express their identity. In some stories, authors employ food as a pedagogical tool: food allows the meeting of the two cultures, the incoming one and the receiving one, that must be willing to learn from one another.

Italian American authors also use food as a memotic tool. Thinking, preparing, or tasting Italian food sets off memories. For those Italians who arrived during the first waves of the 1880-1890 immigration phases, the abundance of food is exhilarating; however, most cannot afford it. At this stage of the immigration process, food is not something to be enjoyed, but it is meant for survival. Many Italian food staples, such as pasta and meat are still missing from the Italian American tables. However, with the later immigration waves of the 20s and 30s, because immigrants have a better sense of what it means to be Italian and can afford to buy Italian products, they begin cooking food the Italian way. The act of cooking becomes a way to remember the motherland. Nevertheless, the food-created memories are, for some, negative, as the abundance of food reminds the immigrants of their lives in Italy, where they experienced famine and suffered exploitation by the hands of heartless landowners. For others, food creates nostalgia for the motherland, a land that many would never get to see again.

Second generation Italian Americans have a love and hate relationship with food: in many cases, food reminds them of their childhood in the Italian enclaves, but for many of them, Italian food is something that sets them apart from the “real” Americans and causes them to be ashamed of their ethnic roots. In fact, as chronicled in Italian American texts, many second-generation children are more than willing to avoid Italian food, as they fear to be labeled “un-American.” However, for the later generations, food becomes a way to remember and to retain their identity as Italians. Many travel to the areas their ancestors came from to try to reconnect to the past and to a land that they only have known through food and family stories.

Italian American authors have successfully employed the food theme to tell their personal or fictional stories. Food has aided in the representation of historical realities of communities and families: from fleeing the motherland because of famine, to coming to the United States where

food is more obtainable, Italians have been able to integrate without losing their identity. Italian American literature has aided in this process, chronicling the love and hate relationships that Italians and, later, Italian Americans have had with food.

Before talking about food in Italian American literature, one must be familiar with the history of the Italian immigration to the United States. Italians have been coming to the United States for centuries. Italian Americans are proud of Christopher Columbus and often find themselves at odds with other groups in the attempt to save the image and the value of his discovery. Because of his "discovery," Columbus is, in a way, responsible for changing the tables of Europe as the Spaniards begin the exportation of spices and of a very important staple that will become essential for Italian cooking: the tomato. Christopher Columbus is of course the first of many, like Amerigo Vespucci, whose first name will be chosen to name the newfound land, America. However, the first immigrant that tries to recreate Italian food and colonize American soil, in the eighteenth century, is Filippo Mazzei. According to Mangione and Morreale, Mazzei was living in England, when he decides to go to Virginia "to conduct a series of agricultural experiments" (12). Mazzei lands in Virginia with "several Italian peasants, a tailor, and an assortment of agricultural assortments and cuttings from Italian vines, trees, and plants" (12). Gaye Wilson, with the Monticello Research Department, explains that Mazzei,

in early 1774, announced a "proposal for forming a Company or Partnership, for the Purpose of raising and making Wine, Oil, agruminous Plants, and Silk." He had no trouble finding subscribers, but a severe frost in May of that year ruined the vines that had been planted. Although Mazzei remained convinced that Virginia's soil and climate was "better calculated" than any other for wine production, his "Wine Company" failed to thrive.

Even if Mazzei's attempt to recreate an Italian food initiative on American soil fails, it shows the enterprising spirit that is so intrinsic to the Italian makeup. Most importantly, he can be hailed as the first food colonizer: his intention of growing plants on a different soil demonstrates his willingness to peacefully "conquer" areas away from the motherland, in an effort to produce goods that would have created a new market for exceptional products. Others will follow in his footsteps and successfully generate businesses that launch products, such as wine and oil, that become staples even in the North American diet.

Other Italians are pioneers and many fight in the American Civil War. But, it is in the 1880s that hordes of Italians begin immigrating to the United States, the place where the streets, supposedly, are paved in gold. Because of the lack of food and opportunities to make a living wage, many Southern Italians decide to leave the very young country of Italy, which has only been unified in 1861, after Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Hero of the Two Worlds, fights for unification. According to Clement L. Valletta, the Italian immigrant comes to the United States "with an extraordinary sense of independence because he had experienced many dimensions of history" (156). The Italian immigrant is not preoccupied with bureaucracy but is very aware of the "interworking of organizational structures and its personal dimension in the family, the village, and the church" (156). Thus, it can be argued that the Italian immigrants, once on American soil, try to replicate what they knew in the old country: the village becomes the enclave, and family and church are the two pillars the immigrants still relies on in happy and hard times. Ironically, when Italians gain "national status" on their native soil, which they did not have before, they still decide to leave, as the conditions in the old country are not getting better, but worse (156). The immigrant also comes to America at a time when he is needed, "at the zenith of its industrial need for manual labor which he offered in exchange for a relative degree of family integrity" (157). This is a very

important point, because even if the Italian immigration waves can be described as a diaspora, those Italians who emigrated with their families in tow were adamant about the “integrity” of the family. The Italian male immigrant knows that, if his family is with him, he must take care of the family and that the family must be kept together.

For many poor Italians, food was a commodity that was hard to come by, especially in Southern Italy. Ironically, most of them, even after the Unification, did not know what it meant to be Italian or knew what Italian food was. The Italian haute cuisine belonged to the more affluent households in the North; in the South, only the rich and nobles could afford to buy ingredients, such as spices, pasta, and meat, as well: the poor ate beans, onions, and, sometimes, black bread, as pasta and meat were luxuries they could not afford for their daily meals. The recipes that many well-to-do Italians followed were in Pellegrino Artusi’s cookbook, *La Scienza in cucina e l’arte di mangiar bene*, a book that was out of reach for the poor. Published in 1891, it contains 790 recipes that were collected by Artusi during his extensive travels throughout Italy. Besides the recipes, Artusi also includes an explanation of some cooking terms, as they change from region to region, informed his readers of the regional customs that go hand in hand with the food, and even provides drawings to show the size of the different kind of pasta. Additionally, he gives some important information about hygiene, such as the importance of exercising, living in houses that are ventilated with lots of light and sun, and how to develop good eating habits (6-8). However, for many historians, this cookbook is more than a cookbook. In fact, they considered it a useful instrument, a sort of propaganda, that contributes to further the unification process of Italy, as recipes are from all over Italy. Although, some researchers state that Italian immigrants are oblivious of what constitutes Italian food, one can make an educated guess that the Italians that

come to the United States had to know about some of the regional dishes, albeit, they probably never tasted them.

Tired of their poor living conditions, Italians come to America to find jobs and fortunes. The immigration waves are partly welcomed by the U.S. government as these immigrants, even if sometimes, unskilled laborers work hard for very low wages, sometimes even lower than the African Americans working in the plantations of the South. However, the immigration has also been facilitated by the Italian government that is unwilling to take care of these poverty-stricken Italians and is hopeful to get rid of this social problem.

In *97 Orchard*, Jane Ziegelman recognizes two major waves of Italian immigrants: one in the 1860s and the other one, in the 1880s (184). She also states that the 1860 census only counts twelve thousand Italians in the country. The first wave is comprised of Italians coming from the Northern regions, such as Liguria and Piedmont. The second wave, a lot heftier than the previous one, is a combination of Italians mainly from the South, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily.

This distinction in patterns of immigration is an important element to consider when analyzing the Italian American immigration experience: Italians are not all alike. There is, in fact, a clear distinction between Italians that came from the South of Italy and those who came from the North, a distinction that is still valid, to certain extent, even today. These two main groups not only distinguish themselves visually, the Southerners, short and dark, the Northerners, tall and fair, but also their cuisines vary according to the provenance of the families. Why is this important? Once in United States, Italians from the North suffer prejudice and racism as well, but because of their complexion and because they are often literate and speak Italian and not a dialect, they can assimilate a little faster than their Southerner counterparts and to obtain better paying jobs. As a

consequence, their families have better ingredients at their disposal and rely less on the U.S. social services to obtain food.

In *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*, Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale agree with Jane Ziegelman: they also argue that the immigration in the 1860s is minimal, and only in the 1870s, immigration takes off. When King Victor Emmanuel declares Italy unified, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Ercole Lualdi, warns the Italian government that Italians are “beginning to leave the country in substantial numbers” and they are leaving because they need to survive and are “in tears and cursing the government and the *signori*” (68). The Italians leaving the country are not only from the South but also from the wealthier regions of the North, like Lombardy and Emilia Romagna.

Immigrants tend to settle in the U.S. areas where other countrymen from the same Italian region live. This phenomenon is known as *campanilismo* which takes the name from the campanile, that hovers over every main square in every Italian town. Consequently, once in the U.S., Italians move into the tenements and then to the Italian enclaves that are representative of their regions, like Sicily and Campania. In fact, in many American cities, Italians take over entire neighborhoods, but not homogeneously: there are the Sicilian streets, the Neapolitan streets, the Calabrese streets, and so on. Consequently, even the stores that are present in these neighborhoods are also regional and respond to the need and the taste of their customers.

Another important fact about the early Italian immigration is that more men emigrated than women. During the last two decades of 1900, in fact, the ratio is four to one, and even if later on it balances out, it never reaches fifty (Ziegelman 185). Italian men come to America to make enough money to buy some land upon their return to Italy. These Italian laborers are called “birds of passage”: they have families in Italy they visit especially in the winter months, when

construction jobs, in the U.S, come to a halt. This phenomenon is well rendered in the Italian American texts, *Rosa: The Italian American Immigrant* and in *Umbertina*, where authors have depicted how men come to the U.S to work and then go back to Italy to buy land or find a wife to bring back to the U.S. to work. In America, Italians are doing manual, hard, construction labor; some work building American cities, others work in the hinterland. Thus, having a family in tow would mean more mouths to feed and a hindrance for moving at a moment's notice. Only later on, when families join the head of the household, food becomes an important part of the immigration experience. Food no longer means mere survival but also something that can be enjoyed.

Undoubtedly, many Italians have their “welcoming committee” once off the ship, i.e., the *padrone*: “(t)he success of this international labor pool hinged on” this quite shady character (Ziegelman 185). In many cases, I argue, the *padrone* is an earlier version of the Mexican *coyote* of modern times and is quite the exploiter. Even if he helps his countrymen, he then robs them of half their wages (Ziegelman 185). However, I posit, Italian immigrants heavily rely on him because, many times, the *padrone* is from the same village or region, and they believe they can trust him. The *padrone* is “(p)art employment agent, part interpreter, part boardinghouse keeper, and part personal banker” (Ziegelman 185). And his area of influence is not only on American soil, as the *padrone* has partners in Italy that search the Italian countryside to look for possible clients, “dissatisfied field workers, in good health” who agree to move to America (Ziegelman 186). The *padrone* keeps in touch with American employers who rely on him for cheap labor. He also owns boardinghouses where he makes the Italian laborers and their families live sometimes “on a patch of floor” (Ziegelman 186).

Italian laborers' living arrangements are different from other ethnic groups that are sent to other parts of the country. If other ethnic groups would mingle, the Italians keep to themselves

thanks to the *padrone*'s influence. In fact, the *padrones* run the Italian camps, where the food that the laborers request is from Italy, but they are charged double by the *padrone* who also owns the commissary (Ziegelman 186). The laborers prepare the meals for entire crews and in some camps, they also run bakeries. The meals consist of "lentil soups, macaroni and tomatoes, beans and macaroni, beans and salt pork, and beans with sausage" and being able to prepare food becomes "a New World survival skill" (Ziegelman 187). In many of these camps, women might not be present, but as shown by Marie Hall Ets in her book *Rosa, The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, men begin marrying and taking their wives to these camps, where they are put in charge of making the meals and the washing. However, the lack of female help does not stop Italian laborers' creativity: forced to learn how to cope with a limited source of ingredients, in one of the camps in Newark, the forefather of the bouillon cube, made with tomatoes, was born out of necessity, around 1900. In fact, when fresh tomatoes are no longer available in the winter months, the laborers dissolve the cube and make soup that could feed at least six men (Ziegelman 187).

Without the patronage of a *padrone*, many Italians in New York City find themselves unable to sustain a living wage, and many have to face prejudice. However, Ziegelman suggests that anti-Italian bias diminished with World War 1, when "the nation shifted focus to fighting the Germans" (189). However, the bias is picked up by the nativist movement (1914-18), and the bias turns into fear: the nativists claim that "decades of unchecked immigration" have compromised "the greatness of America," and if the gates are not closed "the danger would continue" (192). Madison Grant, a New York lawyer that authored *The Passing of a Great Race* in 1916, is the driving force against immigration from southern Europe. Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale point out that Madison Grant is instrumental in spreading the idea that the immigrants from Southern Europe were "weak and inferior" (340).

The bias and the hatred against immigrants allow the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 which limits the number of immigrants into in the United States. What is even more disturbing about this act is that it is “specific about who those immigrants could be,” that is, only Western European and not Eastern Europeans, Italians and Jews. Italians realize that they are not welcome in the United States as they are paid less or even denied employment and housing (Ziegelman 193).

In this hostile environment, food takes “on a new meaning and new powers” (Ziegelman 193). In fact, Americans are not very fond of the Italian clannish predisposition and are very suspicious of them. Americans consider Italians clannish because they segregate themselves in the regional neighborhoods. Even though, the adjective “clannish” is intended to be derogatory, I argue that it is clear that being clannish is a distinct survival technique in the diasporic experience and an important cultural trait that allow Italians to resist a complete assimilation. Additionally, Italians must contend with other cultural obstacles: being Catholic and being associated with the Mafia do not help the assimilation process. Resolved to succeed, Italian Americans continue to contribute to American society while offering their children a better life. However, once the enclaves begin to dissolve and intermarriage begins to occur, Italians begin adding the hyphen: Italian-American. Many, in the effort to show that they are real Americans, decide to join the American armed forces, and fight in World War II: this is the ultimate sacrifice as some find themselves fighting against their own families on Italian soil.

Consequently, hatred against the Italian immigrants causes the Italian-American communities to build what Ziegelman calls “metaphorical” walls (193). These walls allow Italians to feel protected from outside threats and help them to create a place where they can maintain their traditions and customs (193). Food, then, comes into play. Because their traditions are so closely

connected with food, Ziegelman claims that Italian-Americans are “bonded to their gastronomic heritage with an intensity unknown to Russians, Germans, or Irish” and because they defend this heritage, food is “their cultural touchstone their way to defy the critics, tolerating the slurs and all of the other injustices” (193). For Italian Americans, food, then, becomes a means to maintain an identity on foreign soil and a way to protect themselves from being attacked and assimilated. In other words, food emotionally connects Italian Americans to one another and allows Italian Americans to express their heritage and create a nation outside the motherland.

However, Americans are very critical of what Italians are eating and try to change their food. Ziegelman points out that Italians are not interested about the American cooking classes or lectures. They are also deaf towards the nurses and the settlement agents that are trying to indoctrinate them. I agree with Ziegelman as she states that despite of all these outside forces, the immigrants believe “in the superiority of their native foods” (194). They respect the skills of the cook but also maintain the importance of the provenance of the ingredients that must be grown on Italian soil (194). Furthermore, eating Italian food means to feel Italian in the foreign land. Donna Gabaccia states that even if Italians have plenty of food, that does not mean that they want to start eating American. In fact, she posits that for many Italians “(t)o abandon immigrant food traditions for the food of Americans” is like abandoning community, family, and religion (54). The desire to have authentic ingredients clearly allows the creation of many Italian grocery stores, where Italian women can shop: thanks to these establishments, many Italian businesses prosper and live the American dream. The typical products found in the Italian grocery stores are “(o)lives and olive oil, anchovies, jarred peppers, dried mushrooms, artichokes cured in salt, canned tomatoes and tomato paste, vinegar, oregano, garlic, and a variety of cured meats and cheeses, and above all, pasta” (Ziegelman 194). Undoubtedly, all of these products have been out of reach for so many

immigrants on Italian soil and one could only imagine how exciting grocery shopping might have felt like for the poor Italian immigrants that now have the opportunity and, hopefully, the money to finally purchase these food staples.

The availability of food products that the immigrants have at their disposal in the United States stand in stark contrast to the lack of very simple ingredients or food in the Old Country. Simone Cinotto, in *The Italian American Table*, points out, many products such as beef, sugar, coffee, bread and pasta are staples that poor Italian immigrants know about but very seldom could enjoy in their homeland. In the United States, they can purchase these items, transforming and improving their diets. From enjoying meat once a year, Italian immigrant families can now purchase meat at a low cost and as the years go by, buying the meat all the time becomes a marker of social status (116). Sugar, as well, becomes “one of the most prized rewards of their migration experience” (116). Compared to other Europeans, Italian immigrants consume the least amount of sugar; now, sugar is so affordable that Italians relish it every time they could. In fact, Americans are astounded by the consumption of sugar by Italian immigrants and often blame it for what they consider the Italian diet’s lack of nutrition. In America, Italians allow their children to enjoy their sweets, because like beef, sugar denote status. Italians also begin consuming coffee daily. No longer a luxury, Italians welcome their day at work with coffee, so much so that they even put it in beer or wine, and mix it; and finally, it is the offering to give to any guest visiting the house (117). Bread is of course a staple that poor Southern Italians know but can seldom afford in Italy; however, when they come to America, bread becomes affordable. In Southern Italy, white flour is only available to the rich, and the poor resort to mixing flours, such as corn, chestnut, and beans. In the U.S., Italian bakers begin making bread with the white flour, preparing a product that surpasses the not-so-tasty bread of the American industrial ovens (118).

In the early Italian American texts, characters reject American products because they consider their diet superior and their food better tasting. Thus, Italian immigrants must find the right ingredients to be able to cook: this necessity is what leads to the creation of many small businesses that cater to the immigrant families. American stores are not considered authentic enough, and Italians purchase their food only in grocery, butcher, and bakery stores that are run by their countrymen. Simone Cinotto argues that this loyalty to ethnic stores is due to the ethnic entrepreneurs, who, “deeply embedded in networks and family and community relations” are more suited to understand their countrymen (74). Most importantly, the existence of these ethnic stores is vital, as they provide those Italian products that give the immigrants an identity. These stores are the closest thing to being in Italy: food is imported, thus authentic; food is handled by Italians, thus authentic, and the store offers a place for women to talk and share and obtain information about the neighborhood (74). The store owners give back to their communities, organizing events and sometimes policing the neighborhood. And, as Cinotto points out, they are instrumental in aiding the creation of an Italian American cuisine as they meticulously provide the different ingredients for the immigrant families.

Simone Cinotto argues that besides the demands created by massive Italian immigration, the affordability of opening a food venue is the reason why so many food businesses are created. Additionally, owning a business allow immigrants to work a job that is not the usual unskilled labor that many countrymen have (107). Cinotto claims that the new entrepreneurs rely on the relationships they create in the enclaves with their clients, a tactic that allows a returning and loyal following and great profits. However, business owners take advantage of low wages to employ countrymen. Cinotto argues that ethnicity plays a big role in the success of these food venues: in fact, in employing Italians, the business owners can provide cheap labor for their stores and

factories. The paternalistic relationship also prevents labor complaints and workers work long shifts for little pay (107).

In New York City, Italian entrepreneurs own six types of food venues during the age of mass immigration (1890-1920): pasta shops, bakeries, pastries, ice cream and candy manufacturing, fruit and vegetable wholesaler and retailers, fishmongers, and butcher shops. Even though some of these venues are dirty and unsanitary, they thrive and are instrumental in keeping immigrant families fed and happy. The labor conditions in some of the bakery businesses are sometimes worse than the ones in industrial factories and when labor unions try to get the workers organized, organized crime takes control over the trade, the wages, and the fruit and vegetable markets. Some entrepreneurs use truck gardens for the more undeveloped areas of the city. Even though this trade is somewhat risky, it allows Italian immigrants to put to use their farming skills (Cinotto 111). I argue that the flourishing of food venues in Italian enclaves is not only profitable for those Italians that are able to begin to live the American Dream a little bit earlier, but it is an important element for the survival of the immigrant families. It not only provides the food for preserving one's ethnic identity, but it also offers a wider variety of food Italians would have never had the chance to procure in Italy.

Entrepreneurs involved in the food business are very cunning. In fact, they learn to exploit the desire of Italian immigrants to feel Italian. They play on those emotions and convince immigrants that, to be Italian, they must purchase products from Italy. Cinotto points out that not only Italians are feeling a diasporic nostalgia, but these importers are crucial in creating a diasporic nationalism (Cinotto 155) and because of the close connections with Italy, Italian must be spoken, creating a demand for a standard language. Not only does this commerce allow Italians that have never been to Italy to feel Italian, but also gives roots to *Italianità* because of the gains that are

beneficial for the diasporic nation (156). In *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, John Mariani argues that by 1938, there are “more than ten thousand Italian-run groceries in America” that import food from Italy. However, some of these venues also begin to make bread, sausages and mozzarella with American ingredients (35). Thus, Italians adapt and learn how to create Italian products with non-authentic ingredients, generating a new commerce.

Another piece that helps in the creation of the diasporic nation is the establishment of Italian eating places. At the turn of the century, small eateries begin appearing in New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Through the creation of small *trattorias*, that once, only catered to countrymen, and major five-star restaurants, Italian Americans carve that niche that has been out of reach for many years: they can now be part of America. Cinotto, in fact, recognizes the importance of these restaurants as having “played an important role in shaping Italian American identities” (Cinotto 181). In these restaurants, Italian entrepreneurs create what Cinotto calls a “distorted mirror play” (181) for the Anglo-Protestant clientele that is looking for something else, that was not “the Victorian model of middle-class respectability” (181). Restaurants help the American public to see the Italians more as American, that is people that have values, family, and culture. Thus, middle-class America begin frequenting Italian restaurants where they are presented with a “complete cultural package” (193). Cinotto goes to the extent of calling this patronage an “ethnographic adventure, a journey to discover a culturally complex and racially puzzling population on the frontier of the largest American metropolis” (193). Eating Italian food in an Italian restaurant in the 20s and 30s is like “eating the other,” and, as a consequence, it is like consuming “the representation of Italy, Italians, and the Italian diaspora that American novelists, journalists, illustrators, social photographers, social workers, and filmmakers had been creating since the high tide of Italian migration” (193). Italian restaurant owners use racial stereotypes to

make a profit but also “to challenge and redefine interethnic relations of power” (194). Additionally, in these locales, Italian Americans are finally able to put together the dark negative stereotypes of the past with the most positive ones, such as “the classical tradition of beauty and finesse, rooted in ancient Rome and the Renaissance” (194) creating an image of the Italians as more resembling white middle-class America. Italian American restaurateurs choose furnishings, objects, and paintings that can give the patrons an idea of what it would be to dine in a restaurant in Italy as they listen to Italian operas.

Simone Cinotto makes an important claim:

While melting their different culinary traditions into a new syntax of gondolas, the Coliseum, and Vesuvius for their American clients, Italian immigrants found in their restaurants an opportunity to transcend the divides between northern and southern, Italian high and low cultures, and between proletariat and bourgeois. In the process, they were able to assemble a meaningful and empowering idea of nation (194).

Thus, one can argue that Italian immigrants find themselves in creating a new sort of ‘language’ through which they can communicate their worth to the American public, and, to survive and find a rightful place in America, they have to adapt in recreating an identity that can live in both worlds, the Italian and the American. However, in doing so, they also give their contribution to this country and taught Americans about food and resilience.

When Italians improve their economic status, food becomes a way to show the new-found prosperity. The Sunday supper in particular is the meal that is proof of their success in America: it is a way to celebrate their ability to win over hunger (Ziegelman 195). In fact, supper is used to display all the food that the Italians, in the past, had only seen on the tables of the rich. Ziegelman

reports that Sunday dinner begins “in the early afternoon with an antipasto of cheese, salami, ham, and anchovies” (196). And these are just a small sample of what would come afterwards. In fact, these small bites are followed by many courses of pasta and meat. In Sicilian families, the menu also offers “a *ragu* made from the marrow bones, chicken, pork sausage, and meatballs, stewed veal and peppers, and *bracirole*, a thin filet of pounded beef or pork wrapped around stuffing of cheese, bread crumbs, parsley, pine nuts, and raisins” (196). Simone Cinotto also highlights the importance of the Sunday dinner and makes an interesting point in analyzing the Italian Americans in East Harlem: he claims that as Italian Americans are facing discrimination and insecurity, they soon realize that “family intimacy was the most dependable source of emotional and material strength” (53). Thus, Italian Americans realize that with “food sharing” they can, not only gain status in American society but also create ties with their own family and the community at large. Meat is a food staple that is missing from the tables of Southern Italians; however, once in the United States, during the Sunday dinner, several kinds of meat are showcased on their tables. Even poor Italian families display an incredible amount of food: this ‘showing off’ of food and cooking skills signal that they have made it in America and they are deserving of respect. Additionally, he points out that the huge amount of food is used to celebrate baptisms, weddings, first communions, and funerals, as well (Cinotto 55). Food also allows the creation of stories and myths “like the feast of the seven fishes on Christmas Eve and the many ritual breads and cakes of Easter” (56). Religious holidays are other occasions to show off and prepare different menus according to what holiday or saint is being celebrated.

Additionally, while Italian immigrants live in a diasporic nation, they also create a new diasporic domesticity. This new domesticity is “based on ritual food consumption” and it is also “a heavily gendered process,” as the women are considered like Madonnas who are “sacrificing,

giving, and caring” (Cinotto 57). However, in literature, one can find female characters, real and fictional, that do not correspond to this image: men are also cooks, like Mr. Tiff in *Like Lesser Gods* or Schiavelli’s grandfather in *Bruculinu*. Some women become really Americanized, refusing the Madonna role, like Lucia Santa in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. In many households, though, Italian women have a very powerful position and rule in the kitchen as they are the ones feeding the family, and because of that, they are held in high esteem and garner respect.

Meals offer “immigrants the unique opportunity to celebrate the most significant promises their migration has fulfilled: intense family life and freedom from hunger” (Cinotto 58). In other words, Italians find in food an ally: it is a means not only to feel Italian in another country and to maintain cultural traits but also a way to keep their children “Italian.” In fact, the eating rituals become a way “to socialize younger people into the ideology of the family” (58). And the mammas use food to cajole and sometimes force their children to enjoy the domestic life that they have recreated in the United States. Food is also used to create an image of Italy for the children that have never see it. Further, food ways are instrumental in helping the younger generations to feel Italian in America: because of “the new diasporic family ethos,” younger Americans learn about being Italian through storytelling and participating in the table practices (60). Thus, inside this “diasporic” nation, intimacy and domesticity are cultivated: these two elements are important as they define the importance of family and also aids in the construction of a private and public identity. Italians, once on American shores, begin sharing with the neighbors that might be from another region; they begin to marry outside their enclave and open Italian restaurants; all of this allows the creation of a pan-Italian cuisine. Thanks to this cuisine, Italians who at first distinguish themselves from countrymen from other regions and would call themselves Sicilians or Calabrese, now identify themselves as Italians in New York. (60). Ironically, food seems to have aided in the

creation of an Italian identity for those immigrants, that do not even know what it means to be Italian, as they have left the motherland just after the Unification.

One of Cinotto's most important claims is that food is the shaper of the Italian "diasporic nation" that leads to the creation of Italian identity in the United States in the 20s and 30s. Even if his research only focuses on New York City, more specifically East Harlem, we can surmise that this is true in all Italian communities in the United States. Literary works, recorded oral testimonies, and anecdotes passed down to the younger generations tell of similar experiences to the ones reported by Cinotto. He identifies three reasons that support the idea that food is more than just food for the Italians arriving to America:

first, the power of food to create and support family and community in a world of cultural and material stress; second the importance of the food trade in the Italian immigrant economy; and third the symbolic value of food in the self-representations that helped Italians understand who they were and whom they aspired to be (3).

This statement supports my argument: for Italian immigrants, the acts of preparing, eating, and sharing food does not just mean eating but carries additional and charged meanings. Food reminds them of the mother country as they replicate recipes that have been used by their families. It marks them as Italians, giving them an identity. And lastly, the Italian immigrants use food to showcase their newfound wealth and success. After having experienced hunger in the motherland, feeding is surely the most important preoccupation; additionally, moving to another country always causes some stress, especially under the following circumstances: immigrants have to leave their families and customs behind, are discriminated against, and are asked to change their ways once on American soil. Thus, Italian immigrants find themselves torn between what is asked of them and what they know or think is the right way. However, food remains a constant in the Italian

enclaves and becomes a way for Italians to distinguish themselves from other immigrants. People immigrate to the United States for several reasons, such as religious persecution or wars, but two main causes spur the Italian mass immigration waves of the 19th and 20th centuries: famine and lack of economic opportunities. Irish, Germans, Polish, and Russians share this ill fate with Italians. However, Italian immigration is somewhat different from other Europeans' because Italians are more clannish. Other Europeans create their own communities too, but the Italians create regional communities first, as most Southern Italians did not know what it meant to be Italian, but they knew they were Sicilians, Calabreses, and so on. The regional enclaves afford Italians the ability to resist complete assimilation at the first stages of the immigration phase. Later, still resisting assimilation, in the realm of food and food preparation, these Italian regional communities open up to other Italian communities and this causes a blending of customs and food recipes. Even though some still claim their regional provenance, such as Sicilian Americans, Italian immigrants learn what it means to be Italian. Additionally, while other European cuisines exist in the U.S., they are not commensurate with the popularity and success of the Italian one, in the past and now. Thus, the result of the Italian immigration experience is somewhat different from the other European immigrants'. In refusing to give up their eating habits, while, creating new ones, Italian Americans are able to build an identity and mainly assimilate into mainstream America. However, their assimilation is a blend of American civism and Italian flair.

In addition to New York, Italians migrate to other big U.S. cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Italians have been arriving in California since the 18th century. It is because of Genoese sailors that the majority of wine growers are from Liguria. Afterwards the Sicilians come, and they dominate the fishing business (Bancroft Library website). In *How Italian Food Conquered America*, John Mariani states that by 1910, 80 percent of the fishery

business is in the hands of the Italians (31). It is worth mentioning that, in 1863, Ghirardelli produces his first batch of chocolate in San Francisco, starting a business that is still booming. As it is happening on the east coast, Italians settle in areas with the countrymen from the same region, such as Napa Valley, and begin cultivating and growing crops. Unlike Filippo Mazzei, Italians are successful in replicating the Italian countryside, with the vineyards, the olive groves, the fruit trees right in Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino. Additionally, as New Yorkers have Little Italy, San Franciscans have Columbus Avenue.

The Italian presence is ubiquitous: in fact, they also populate less known areas such as the U.S. southern states. In *Delta Italians*, Paul Canonici asserts that, in 1895, ninety-five families from Marche, Emilia Romagna, and Veneto come to the Delta region of Mississippi. By this time, African Americans have begun their migration to the North and are abandoning their farming jobs in the South. To resolve the now impending problem of the lack of a labor force, one of the sharecroppers at the Sunnyside plantation, Austin Corbin, strikes a deal with the Mayor of Rome, Emmanuele Struppoli, and an Italian immigration agency in New York to begin recruiting farmers from Italy. These farmers are familiar with the *mezzadria* farming system, which is a sort of sharecropping agreement where extended families live together and work the land owned by the landowner (17). For this reason, Austin Corbin thinks that the Italian farmers would fit right in on American soil. However, life on the plantation is not an easy one and many of these farmers and families die of malaria and yellow fever. Little by little, though, some succeed in purchasing the lands they share-cropped and begin to cultivate it for their own profit. Later, Italians begin to open their own grocery stores and restaurants in the Delta region as well.

Even amongst these Delta Italians, the Sunday mid-day meal, called dinner, is a favorite event. There are usually three favorite dishes: a pasta dish, called macaroni or spaghetti, with

sauce, that they call gravy; meatballs on the pasta, and stuffed chicken. Delta Italians also bring with them the love for wine. They order the grapes, make the wine, and then consume it daily (57). Additionally, the Delta Italians use their own produce and go hunting for rabbits that they eat with polenta. Canonici points out these communities feel the effects of the Great Depression, but they are quite self-sufficient and are able to survive the hard times thanks to fruits and vegetable they grow in their farms and utilizing everything from the slaughtered pigs. In fact, nothing goes to waste.

Italians are also present in other parts of the South, such as Texas, where they work the land, and Louisiana. There, Italians are employed in the sugarcane fields. Others go to New Orleans because of their interest in the food business. John Mariani states that handling food is the easy way for Italians to enter American society (29). Italians are owners of most of the groceries, bakeries, fruit and vegetables stands, and ice cream shops, which leads to a feud with the Irish who are trying to have the monopoly of the food trade, especially on the docks. This competition causes one of the saddest pages in American history, that is the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans, in 1891. Italians had been accused of killing the Police Chief, David Hennessy, but when they are later exonerated of the crime, an angry mob breaks into the jail and kills the Italians. These Italians belong to the same family, the Matrangas, who owns a stevedore company on New Orleans docks. The investigation is poorly conducted and simply based on what a Hennessey's friend had reported him saying: "The Dagos did it!" (Mangione and Moreale 202-208). Even if marred with racism and prejudice, Italian businesses flourish and allow Italian immigrants to conquer a rightful place in the Southern States.

Hunger and lack of opportunities are two of the motivating factors that propel many Italians to seek refuge in this country. Even if the first experiences are tough and leave a mark on the

psyche of first generation Italians, what follows can be hailed as a success story. Food is a big piece of the puzzle of their success story, and as it has been chronicled in literature, food has helped Italian Americans to retain the hyphen in the ethnic world. Foodways aid the first generation to hold on to their memories of the motherland, while it supports the construction of nostalgic and romanticized ties to the motherland. Food also helps them to create an identity that can survive, and thrive, in two realities, the Italian and American communities. Most importantly, it allows them to finally feel what it meant to be Italian.

The style I used in this dissertation might look unusual. My intention was to start up a conversation in the study of food and its significance in Italian American literature. Hence, I have designed a tool that could be easily accessed, with specific thematical entries. Some of the entries are explanations of specific terms, others are analysis of common themes in the texts. Secondly, this study could aid research and, most importantly, supports a cross-cultural comparison with other ethnic literatures as I tried to highlight those trends and commonalties that can be found in other literatures, such as class, gender, memory, and how food is used to create identity. It has been quite difficult to find food studies scholarship that specifically relates to Italian American literature. Thus, this study is aimed to help scholars to continue the conversation and the research. This manual is obviously not exhaustive but rather a work in progress, as many other entries could be added in the future. I chose texts that are considered the pillars of Italian American literature, such as *Umbertina* and *Christ in Concrete* and texts that were known when they were published but sank into oblivion. I also tried to use texts that span the Italian experience in America, i.e., from the beginning to today, in order to show how food experiences and community dynamics have changed over time. To give variety to the study, I chose texts that describe and represent Italian immigrants from different regions. It is my hope that this research will fill a void in the

ethnic scholarship on this theme, as a solid and exhaustive study on the theme of food in Italian American literature is oddly non-existent.

Abundance

Most Italian immigrants were not familiar with the concept of abundance. They were escaping hunger and lack of opportunities and arrived in the United States with very little. Once on American soil, they were faced with prejudice and many times they were ostracized for just being immigrant. However, with perseverance and hard work, they succeed in assimilating and changing their own taste and the Americans’.

The diet of poor Italians was very limited and lacked variety and important nutrition value. As recorded in some of the Italian American novels and stories, poor Italians barely survived on the few staples they could afford. Potatoes in the North and mostly beans in the South were the foodways that fed the masses. Other foods, such as rice, pasta, and meat were available, but only the rich could afford them. According to Ben Morreale and Jerre Mangione, food, for poor Southern Italians in Italy, was simple: the main dishes were prepared with lentils, split peas, fava beans, and escarole and chicory. Poor Southern Italians would enjoy their fruit, such as apples, oranges, prickly pears, and lemons. Pasta was eaten only during special occasions and was considered a luxury. Meat was also very scarce and was prepared twice a year, Christmas and Easter (*La Storia* 38-39). Thus, one can imagine the bewilderment Italians might have felt when strolling down the American streets and looking inside American stores: in *Lamerica* food was available, and they soon learned that they could, too, enjoy it, leaving behind a past of hunger and sufferings. Many characters in Italian American literature, especially those that belong to the first wave of the immigration cycle, are welcomed with a great variety of food. At first, some have a hard time obtaining it, but later when their economic status improves, their diet improves as well.

One of these immigrants is Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* by Marie Hall Ets (1970). Admiring the first breakfast in the new country, Rosa marvels at the quality and

quantity of the food on the table: white bread, butter, coffee, sausages, and eggs (175). However, what really opens Rosa's eyes to the new world is the realization that her situation might have improved: "Did all the poor people in America eat like kings?" (175). These were items that did not appear in her diet in Italy. She was used to onion, black bread, and polenta. The abundant but simple food she sees is surely an improvement in comparison to what she was used eating in Italy.

See also Banquets

Abuse in the Kitchen

The abuse that is perpetrated by some characters, in Italian American literature, is not only physical and sexual in nature, but it is also committed in the kitchen, the sacred place where women stay and take care of the family.

In the 1969 novel, *The Godfather*, Mario Puzo places Connie, the Don's daughter, in the kitchen: she is a good cook as she has learned from her mother. However, for Connie, the kitchen is also a battlefield, a place of abuse. After one of the many physical fights, her husband, Carlo, demands that she cook. The order "mollified her, his calling on her duties, one of them at least" (329). She goes into the kitchen and fixes the food. But, when Carlo crudely refuses to go to the table and eat, Connie retreats into the kitchen and smashes the plates with the food in the sink. The only thing she can do to protest her husband's complete lack of respect is to break the dishes and waste the food she has just prepared. Her defiant act infuriates Carlo who orders her to clean. She refuses, and he goes to take his belt in the bedroom. The violent beating occurs in the kitchen, where his wife had just shown, with the breaking of the dishes, that she still had some agency. With the vile act, Carlo invades Connie's kitchen and desecrates her personal space, an act that he will later pay with his life.

In Nancy Caronia's 1999 short story, "Go to Hell," the kitchen is a classroom, where the young narrator learns to cook from her grandmother but is also a confessional and place where involuntary abuse takes place. In her grandmother's kitchen, the young narrator is learning how to cook the sauce and meatballs as her Irish mother's never taste like grandma's. But it is during that visit that she is molested by her grandfather. The hurt grows into hate and when the grandfather dies, she does not attend his funeral; she decides to stay away from her family for good. However, one aunt reaches out to her and the narrator decides that is time for the truth to come out: "(t)he three of us together around their white formica 1950 kitchen table. Chinese take-out spread before us" (100). The choice of food is quite odd. Maybe, they sense that what the niece is about to share is not going to be pleasant and they do not want to link it to Italian food to avoid and prevent negative connection with the food in the future. However, it could also be a sign that the family has become Americanized and is trying to be worldly. It is in their kitchen that she tells the truth about the grandfather: "I recounted as much of the story about Grandpa as possible without giving them a heart attack" (100). Even if in pain, she tries to go easy on her relatives. The aunt and the uncle are incredulous, but, at the end, they believe her. In fact, after hearing of the abuse perpetrated on his niece and, maybe, even on his own daughter, the uncle admits that his father had been abusive even with him and his siblings: ". . . look at me, I'm fine. He beat us, you know, but I'm okay" (100). But, under the same breath he confesses that he is still afraid of the darkness: ". . . but I have Aunt Mimi stay up with me . . . If the hall light's off I won't walk to my bedroom" (100). The young narrator, now, feels vindicated, as the history of abuse has now come to the surface: even her sixty-five-year-old uncle has finally admitted to the abuse, hidden for some many years.

However, Grandpa was not the only abuser in this family. In the kitchen, another type of abuse takes place. The grandmother abuses the narrator's father, overfeeding him for years: "My grandmother fed him proudly when he was a child. She made him eat and eat and eat. Her baby, the youngest, would prove there was no poverty in their house. Where there was girth there was wealth" (99). Her grandmother's overfeeding her child is very typical of many Italian mothers who equate weight with wealth. Chubby children mean that your family has money and can afford to eat. He, of course, ends up being obese: "his weight is no longer a sign of their wealth, but of a rage unexpressed, violence committed, poverty of the soul and ignorance of the heart" (99). His obesity is no longer a sign of wealth for this family, but it stands as a witness of their inability to really love. They realize that they have used him as a scapegoat to show off their wealth, but in doing so, they violated him, forcing him to overeat.

The kitchen, in John Fante's 1977 novel *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*, is the stage where the narrator's family spends a lot of time fighting and eating and is also the stage where physical abuse takes place, as well. The book opens with a phone call that explains what has happened in the narrator's parents' home. The father, Nick Molise, has used bodily force on his wife. Mrs. Molise had found what she thought lipstick on her husband's underwear and had confronted him. Mr. Molise, enraged by the accusations, takes matter in his own hands and kicks his wife, bending her on the kitchen table, and leaving a bruise on the hip and marks on her neck. Naturally, the beating is uncalled for, but the fact that the beating has happened in the kitchen, a sacred place for his wife where she spends most of her time cooking, is almost sacrilegious. Later, Mrs. Molise's kitchen is then usurped by her husband and the chief of police who go into the kitchen to discuss the situation.

See also Husbands

Acculturation

J.W. Berry's studies on acculturation and social psychology can be applied to the Italian American immigration phenomenon. In his essay, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," Berry states that cross-cultural psychology is a valid tool to study "the influence that cultural factors have on the development and display of individual behavior" (6). He argues that people act in ways that are mandated by culture and cultural expectations, so when a group moves to another society, acculturation and psychological acculturation and adaptation are important concepts to keep in mind. The former refers to cultural changes that can happen when different groups meet, while the latter refer to "the psychological changes and outcomes that occur because of individuals experiencing acculturation" (6).

Berry states that acculturation is the process that involves two or more groups, with consequences for both, but a greater impact occurs on the non-dominant group. If a high contact occurs, there is low maintenance of identity but full absorption. He recognizes four levels of acculturation: assimilation (incoming group does not retain ethnic identity); separation (the incoming group rejects and retains the ethnic identity); integration, where mutual accommodations occur (the incoming group juggles the previous and new ethnic identities); and marginalization (the incoming group does not keep either of the identities) (10). Berry also posits that immigrants adopt the basic values of the receiving society and the receiving society adapts national institutions to help the immigrants. Berry emphasizes that cultural identity is a set of beliefs and attitudes that people have (11).

These four aspects represented the Italian experience in the U.S. The marginalization very briefly occurred at the beginning, when Italians were segregated from American society. Then,

they were separated, that is, they rejected the American way to retain their identity. Thirdly, the new generation vowed to be completely American, that is assimilated; lastly, one can say that Italians were integrated and succeeded in maintaining, in most cases, their ethnic identity, adding the hyphen to “American.”

A good example of assimilation and separation is young Jerry in *Mount Allegro*, published in 1942. In this text, Jerry, the narrator, becomes less and less comfortable with his family’s clannish attitude and wants to be a real American, even though, as a young child, he cannot verbalize what that means: movie stars are a good example for him, but also his teachers were “real” Americans as they physically look the part. Jerry wants to be an American, but his family is preventing him from being so. He, in fact, continues to feel embarrassment and shame: “I was embarrassed by the things my relatives did when in public” (221). The readers realize that Jerry is integrating into American society and begins to feel the “conflict between the two worlds” (221). And as any other young child of immigrants, he feels torn but must “adjust” in order to have “any peace” (221). Jerry, as an adult narrator, on the other hand, recognizes that he had been mistaken as he realizes that his relatives possess qualities that Americans probably envy: “their high spirits, their easy naturalness, and their extraverted love of life for vulgarity” (221) are characteristics that created turmoil in the young child’s heart but, now, as an adult, he looks back at these traits with nostalgia.

See also Assimilation

Acquiring a Taste

When poor Italians arrived in this country, their only concern was how to survive. They needed food because they needed to work but were not really worried about how the food tasted.

Some, probably, had tasted pasta and meat, but poor Italians began to develop a taste for food when their economic status improved. They were not searching for tasteful food but food that could satisfy their hunger. However, living in the United States and experiencing, in some cases, the abundance and variety of food available allowed the immigrants to develop their sense of taste and their palate became more demanding and refined. When Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of and Italian Immigrant*, briefly returns to Italy to take care of her husband's affairs, she is a changed woman and her taste buds have undergone a change. When her mother, Lena feeds her, she rejects the food: "(a)fter all that good food I had had in America, I was no longer content with the sour-tasting black bread, or the onion-and-water soup, or a little polenta. I wanted to make thick sup with rice in it every day and cook the rice the way I had learned to cook it in America" (191). America has changed her but has also caused a change in her taste. Naturally, it is not haute cuisine that she craves for, but, now, she is aware of the difference. Mamma Lena does not agree with her and recognizes this request as extravagant: "The people in America make pigs of themselves. They are like pigs!" (191). Surely, Mamma Lena has no idea of what Americans really ate but uses this idea to control Rosa's desire for tastier food denigrating the foodways her daughter is now accustomed to.

See also Liver

Addiction

In the 2004 novel, *Crazy in Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo writes about her addiction to the Food Network, affirming that it is better than alcohol and cocaine "I think watching TV Food has something to do with repairing wounds from childhood, with seeing a kitchen where no one fights, and every dish turns out perfectly, my antidote to everything imperfect in the world" (224). This statement is quite telling of her past: readers get the impression that she was hurt as a child and

that those wounds are still fresh in her mind, but she is trying to fix them. As a child, what she wanted was a home with no fights at the table and a mother that would cook for her. And even as an adult, a woman in her sixties, she still yearns for that kind of picture perfect meal in the kitchen, a meal that her mother never gave her.

This addiction becomes an obsession. In fact, she admits that she “obsessed with food,” she thinks about food all the time, and she reads “cookbooks the way other people read pornography” (180). Maybe, subconsciously, with this obsession with food, she is trying to fill the void that her mother caused; hence, food and love become one.

Agency

Being in the kitchen is a charged role: women are also responsible for making sure that the meals are nutritious and for shopping. In *Food and Cultural Studies*, Ashley et al. state that the act of shopping is more than just shopping: when a woman shops for groceries, she screens and sorts products, monitors the market and the family (130). Quoting Luce Giard’s work, Ashley et al. argue that the act of cooking is more than cooking, too: “In cooking the activity is just as *mental* as it is manual; all the resources of memory and intelligence are thus mobilized. One must organize, decide and anticipate. One must memorize, adapts, modify, invent, combine and take into consideration” all the needs of the different family member, their likes and dislikes and the diet needs (130-131). These processes show that, to a certain extent, women have some agency. Detractors might say that is limited, but it is clearly multifaceted and highlights the important role that women have in the home.

If being able to cook gave Italian American women agency, even if partial, this chore afforded them some control over their environment, using food to manipulate and control their

families. I concur with Amy Tigner and Allyson Carruth when they define the kitchen as “the primary household space in which those who prepare food process raw elements derived from the outside world for the particular use of the household” (*Food Studies*, 23) and this process allows the women who dwell in this locale agency and power. In the early Italian American texts, women are described as the people responsible for creating meals with very few ingredients. As the Italian American experience evolves, so does the role of female characters. In more modern texts, they create delicious meals that are no longer meant for survival but for enjoyment.

See also Domesticity

Approval

Italian American female characters often show their approval through feeding or providing favorite items related to food to their husbands. In the 1966 novel, *No Steady Job for Papa*, Papa, the head of the family, seems not to be able to hold on to a job for a long time. However, when Papa can keep a job for a longer period of time, his wife shows her appreciation. Not only does she provide delicious, yet, simple food, but she also procures beer to help with his digestion: “Supper over Mamma would go up the hill to the Beer Saloon and bring back a kettle of beerWhen Papa was working, nothing was too much trouble for our mother; even carrying a pail of beer became a proud chore” (149-150). Providing the beverage for her husband is a way to show her approval and one can guess that it was also her way to subtly communicate to her husband that he needed to keep his job.

Assimilation

Milton M. Gordon, in *Assimilation in American Life*, states that America’s greatness owes to the contributions of many races, religions, and national backgrounds. However, he argues that

these contributions in different areas of society have been made thanks to cultural patterns influenced by the white Anglo-Saxon mold. Thus, when discussing immigrants' contributions, we must "make a distinction between influencing the cultural patterns themselves and contributing to the progress and development of the society" (73). Gordon breaks down the assimilation process in seven major variables: cultural or behavioral assimilation (acculturation); structural assimilation; marital assimilation (amalgamation); indentificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation (absence of prejudice); behavioral receptional assimilation (absence of discrimination); and finally, civic assimilation (71). This process can be applied to the assimilation process of the Italian immigrant. At the beginning, Italians were very reluctant in giving up their culture and value system, slowly in some cases, but faster in others, they gave in to the cultural patterns of American society. I argue that when Italians began to marry outside their enclaves, Italian assimilation was at its apex. However, prejudice and discrimination were the last bastions to fall. Americans did not trust Italians and this mistrust accompanied Italian Americans for generations. Being from an area that gave the world the Mafia and being Catholic did not help the Italian American cause, either. Especially during World War II, Italians were considered enemies of the state and were interned. It did not matter that many were fighting in the war. When there was no value and power conflict, Italians finally became Italian Americans: they understood that they could keep the markers that made them Italians, such as food, and still be part of America.

Gordon also acknowledges two cultural patterns and traits in immigrants: one is intrinsic, and it refers to religious beliefs and practices, ethnic value, musical taste, folk recreation patterns, literature, historical language, and a sense of a common past; the other is extrinsic: dress manner, emotional expression, how one speaks English (79). Italians held on to their ethnic food because they recognized its value as a means to distinguish them from the other immigrants, and, especially,

the Americans. Consequently, food can be placed in both these patterns: when the immigrants prepared the meals, they “expressed” their ethnic background and with that preparation, many emotions were recalled.

See also Acculturation

Autobiography

Most books written by Italian American authors are somewhat autobiographical. Some are true memoirs, such as *Bruculinu* (1998), *Crazy in the Kitchen* (2004), or *The Skin Between Us* (2006), where the stories told, and the characters described are based on the authors’ experiences and families. In some others, such as *Mount Allegro* and *Come Back to Sorrento* (1948), the authors’ relatives and family events serve as an inspiration.

Because of its biographical nature, Italian American literature can really stand as the chronicle of the Italian American immigrant experience. Naturally, authors want to entertain the readers, but there is a concerted effort, which sometimes can be subconscious, to share the happy and the sad times Italian immigrants had experienced before they could gain full access to the American Dream. These stories are told by people who write from an informed platform, with sometimes a pedagogical objective, they gain in importance, and add to the complicated, and sometimes controversial, course of U.S. history.

Backyards

Backyards were an important part of the Italian American experience. Having a backyard where one could grow edible plants was essential to the survival of the ethnic pride. Clement Lawrence Valletta, in his essay “Family Life: The Question of Independence,” argues that the first generation of Italian immigrants maintained a connection to the soil thanks to the small garden

plots in the big cities, or prepared “purchased foodstuffs that recalled peasant usages” (155). In the old country, poor Italians had learned how to work the land, but the land never belonged to them. Whatever was produced they had to give to the rich owners. Thus, owning land, even if it was a little piece next to your house gave the immigrants the idea that now they were as rich as the landowners in Italy. The backyard became a place where the men had the opportunity to grow some food for the family, but it also gave them a place in the family hierarchy that could assign them the title of food provider.

In the 1949 novel, *Like Lesser Gods*, the Dalli’s back-yard offers Mr. Tiff, an old acquaintance arrived from Italy, the opportunity to feel at home: he tends to it as it provides for the family meals. The onions are never dug out as the sprouts have better flavor: “The Dalli never dug up the onions. They were allowed to relive each spring, tirelessly sending up new shoots” (29). The reader can detect a reverence in the tone of the description, a respect for the plants that give sustenance to the family. Maria Dalli uses the sprouts in many ways, “she flavored soups, meats, and the salads which invariably constituted the summer’s evening meals” (29). The various uses of the onion sprouts show how inventive and skillful Maria is: with very little ingredients, she can prepare delicious meals. And for the salads, they used chicory, and the same tone of reverence is used to describe how the family tends to it: “Maria yearly allowed some of these plants to live their full productive span of life” which gave the yard the “feathery blue flowers” (29). Thus, this plant not only gives nourishment to the family but also some aesthetic pleasure.

In *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa’s 2006 autobiography, the author’s grandfather, Luigi, uses his garden to feed the family, even in his old age, as well. Once the family moves to the suburbs, Luigi plants his garden, but his garden is very different from the “genteel pastime” (203) the middleclass neighbors take it to be. The author, probably reminiscing conversations she

had heard, separates the male and female spheres: “Gardening was a man’s occupation, being outside with your hands in the earth, knowing what to plant at what time by the season and the phases of the moon, while the women worked inside, in the space of the home” (203). She points out how, in this family, the roles are set by old rules. Tilling the land is a man’s job, while the woman’s job is in the kitchen, in the house. In the little garden, Luigi plants vegetables, such as cucumber and eggplants, and he also tries his hands in growing grapes with the wish that one day he will be able to make wine (202). Ragusa recognizes her grandfather’s effort to still wanting to provide for his family. He is a man already in his seventies and ill, who goes outside no matter what the weather is: “(b)y growing the foods of his youth, he changed the very nature of that suburban soil, made it Italian soil, a piece of home” (202-203). Luigi’s act of gardening is not just about providing some extra food for his wife to prepare, but also has the power to transform the soil and to help Luigi remember his native land. The transformative power also impacts Luigi’s personality: he tends his plants “with the hands of a lover, gently and patiently” and guards them “like a soldier, yelling from his lawn chair in the middle of the yard anytime anyone got too close” (203). Finally, gardening allows Luigi to feel useful in old age and being able to provide for his family, when the family removes itself from the relatives in the Bronx.

The backyard, where plants are grown is what makes Diane diPrima’s family Italian. In her 1969 semi-autobiography, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, diPrima recalls how, growing up in Brooklyn, her family had a “backyard full of grapevines and tomato plants” (48). Readers can surmise that her family also makes the wine, as she mentions that the only liquor her family enjoys is homemade wine. Even in the cities, Italian Americans created their own little plots that allowed them to grow what, in Italy, they could not. The link to the soil is important and no matter where they are, in the cities or in the country, they need to feel that connection with the soil, even if the soil is not in

Italy. Perhaps to them, it felt that in tilling the land, they were conquering it, almost colonizing it, an act that empowered them and allowed them to feel at home.

Bakery

In Salvatore Scibona's 2008 novel, *The End*, owning a bakery allows Rocco LaGrassa to crown his dreams of living the "American Dream." He begins working as an apprentice for Mr. Modano and when Mr. Modano decides to retire, he offers a lease to Rocco "until he had the cash to buy it outright" (8). Rocco is unsure about this plan, but he comes up with the idea that he will keep the store open every day, so that he can pay his debt off faster. When he finally finishes to pay, the business begins to decline (9). His dream is now on shaky grounds. Left alone with his middle child, Mimmo, Rocco decides to make this child his apprentice. In fact, Rocco teaches his son the wonders of bread making, but, once again, he is defeated: Mimmo asks him if he could join his mother. Later, Mimmo will die on the battlefield, in North Korea. When Rocco finds out, he finally decides to close his bakery for that day. It is Assumption Day, and the Italian neighborhood of Elephant Park is getting ready to celebrate. Clients are waiting for his arrival and are confused as to why the bakery is not open. They always depend on him: "They presumed that there was ever Rocco with anise cookies at Christmas time, and in February with the glazed sugar mounds that the red candies on top . . ." (16). When he arrives at the store, he tells one of his customers that the store is closed: "Rocco doesn't work at the moment. He's taking a holiday. A week, perhaps. Tell them. Afterwards, things will rearrange themselves nicely" (18). Unlike other Italian American characters that find cooking or preparing food soothing and helpful when they are in dire straits, Rocco is unable to continue making bread: he understands that the bakery has been the cause of his wife and children leaving him. He is resolute to go to New Jersey to claim his family back (20).

See also Bread

Banquets

In *Christ in Concrete* (1939), the abundance of food presented during a wedding is used to show that the family is doing better. The abundance reminds the readers that Geremio's family, at one point, had nothing to eat, but now hard times seem to be over. The narrator, in fact, informs the readers that the family has survived tragedy and hunger and has been awarded with plenty of food because of their hard work and sacrifice: "Out in the streets it was cold January, but in the house of Geremio his family and kind sat knee to knee at the table under the gaslight and smiled to the loving goodness of food" (184). The family is now able to enjoy and share food with their friends and the physical closeness brings warmth and happiness.

The narrator lists and carefully describes the food being served: "[b]itter green Sicilian olives and sweet Spanish olives, whittings and squid pickled in saffron, Genoese salami and mortatel, pickled eggplants, long pointed peppers and cherry peppers" (183). The food available seems to be bottomless: "The chicken soup was rich with eggs, fennel, artichoke roots, grated parmesan, and noodles that melted on your lips . . . fat eels garnished with garlic and parsley . . . fried squabs and sweetbreads and golden mushrooms . . . bowls of escarole salad spiced with wine vinegars, salt and olive oil . . . the roast suckling" (184-185). And all of this is washed down with red wine. The amount of food is quite formidable and punctuates the success of Geremio's family.

The quantity of food is also highlighted by the description of the men that overeat: "[t]he men opened their belts and top buttons of pants-fly and relieved a bulging stomach from tables' edge" (184). But even the women enjoy the food as much as the men: "wives loosened corset strings, their yearning breasts overflowed corset top" (185). These gestures that seem to be natural

because of the overeating have a sexual connotation: men unzipping their pants and the yearning overflowing breasts of the women are actions that suggest the end of the sexual act or even foreplay and food aids the process. In Geromio's house "[t]he tables were blooded with wine and soiled with oil and salt and peppers" (184). Yet again, the red wine stains and the soiled tables are suggestive of a first sexual encounter, as well as the act of relishing food: "[t]heir senses spoke through contented eyes and pleasant flesh-swell, and words kept extolling the wonderfulness of eat and drink" (184). Eyes are content, all senses are awakened, and the flesh is alerted.

The sexual innuendoes continue throughout the whole wedding party: the food is brought out in courses and one of the courses is the suckling. Fausta, one of the guests, is quite enthralled by the suckling and "lifted his nostrils and looked at the kitchen" (185). This act is almost animalistic, like a dog would do when he smells food. Everyone's senses are on high alert but especially Fausta is quite taken by with the suckling, as he beholds "the glossy dark brown suckling, and made a very eloquent sign of the cross by kissing his fingers loudly with each move" (185). The act of signing himself could be read as a thank you to God for the wonderful food they are about to continue enjoying or a recognition that things are getting better. Fausta says: "Mama, I smell the special smell of my love!" (185). The pig, then, becomes the object of desire, like a woman would be. In fact, the suckling is presented in a somewhat sexual way: it "was evenly sprawled in a thick bed of truffles and potatoes, its back and sides stuck with cloves and covered with spices, the hollowed-out eyes packed with figs, and from the smoking hot pork flesh came a mouth-provoking feminine savor" (185). The pig is sprawled and has figs in its eyes, a fruit often used to represent the female sexual organ; it also has the distinctive female smell.

The scene that ensues reminds the readers of a bacchanal: as they bring the suckling to the dining room, mimicking a religious procession, Fausta begins "beating a dishpan with a large

spoon . . . singing with gusto the triumphal march from *Aida*" (185). And everyone else joins in in the celebration, a celebration that verges on a pagan worshipping of the suckling, "banging glasses, dishes, forks, spoons, clapping hands and stomping feet on floor, tarr-ump! tarr-ump! in time with Fausta to set the air shaking" (185). And the master of ceremonies, Fausta, declares his love for the suckling: "I declare this pure love, but what a love! for the naked little angel who lies in roasted beauty under these very eyes" (185). He even calls it a "she-suckling" (186) and kisses it on the mouth. All the women are quite grossed out, but he continues to defend his love for the suckling "because she is good enough to eat!" (186). Nazone justifies Fausta's actions and words and declares that "(l)ove is a hunger" (186). Hence, there is no distinction between the sexual/love act and eating. In other words, when one is hungry or in love feels the urge to fulfill the desire.

When they cut the meat, it is "luscious, and the skin is "candied-like brown" (186) like a woman's skin might be. The guests are "ecstatic" (186) as they are ready to enjoy the meat while Fausta begins serving himself plucking one of the figs. Obviously, he is drunk, but what he says next supports the reading of this scene as sexual. As he holds the fig, he says: ". . . has that creature of my wife such a fig that I may eat?" (186). The crass comment is left hanging, with no replies from his wife or from the other guests. However, it is telling of the whole sexual undertone of the party.

The narrator has been building up to the apex of the dinner party, when the men prepare the spaghetti, highlighting the physicality even more. Once served, the men begin eating

with eyes tightly closed they sucked and swished and swilled in their juicy wheat-strings, beard to beard, head to head, Av-rom swogging it prodigiously. Louis spluttering, Paul's features fricasseed saucely red, Hunt-Hunt inhaling it, while Fausta swallowing from the

plate went on pushing their heads deeper into the spaghetti, the Lucy following and permitting eaters to bathe their faces and lap up wine from the wooden bowls (198).

With this scene, the narrator wants to underscore the newfound availability and abundance of food and describes the characters' actions like an orgiastic frenzy. The verbs used, such as "sucked, swished, swogging, swallowing," have a sexual connotation. The physicality in this scene is highlighted by the Lucy's action of pushing the other men's heads into the spaghetti. He is in charge: he allows them to come up for air just to drink the wine, just like dogs do, lapping from bowls. Additionally, food touches other parts of the body, like the head and the beard to show how man becomes one with food, in a very primal way.

This wedding banquet is reminiscing of the Bakhtin's carnivalesque and the later bourgeois banquets. Bob Ashely et al. recognize four stages in each of them (43-44):

Carnavalesque

Bourgeois

Communal event

Domestic world and private chamber

Connection with the process of labor and struggle; celebration of the fruits of one's labor and victory over struggle

Loss of material connection with the struggle against adversity

Suspension of any prohibitions in speech (see cursing and joking)

Controlled speech

Association with 'gay' time (see grotesque body)

Body is complete, no more grotesque

It is important to recognize that the wedding banquet in Annunziata's house is more carnivalesque than bourgeois. It is still a communal event where friends and neighbors are invited to take part in the celebration of the bride and groom, but also a celebration of the struggles and setbacks the family and the community have been enduring and the abundance of food stands as the testimony that, with hard labor, this family has succeeded in keeping desperation at bay. The narrator and characters' speech are still not controlled and somewhat foul. The underlining orgiastic physicality and gluttony are probably the closest trait to the grotesque body: there is no body shifting here, but the exaggeration, the rather eccentric and strange behaviors of some of the commensals, and comic atmosphere give the party description a somewhat grotesque quality. Later, Italian American celebrations and Sunday dinners will lose the carnivalesque connotation and will gain a more bourgeois quality, where families get together just to enjoy food and celebrate one's culture.

During the party, a visible separation between men and women is marked by what they eat and drink and their position in relation to the other sex. For example, different drinks are served, "(m)int and licorice and coffee, sweet liquors for the ladies, and dynamite drinks for the men" (182). The separation between the sexes puts the female in the subservient one. One of the male guests addresses women as "you who wear dresses bring me a cup-a-tella of that so-good scented coffee" (190). Furthermore, there is a physical separation: women hang together, "breast to breast" (190), drinking coffee and eating spumoni and ice cream, separated from men. The women are on attention and ready to serve the men. Nevertheless, this division is, in some cases, fluid. In fact, at the end of the dinner party, some male guests are still hungry and want spaghetti and some of the men do not mind wearing aprons to cook it because "[m]an needs spaghetti" (190).

In Mario Puzo's 1964 novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, a banquet is served to impress guests, as well. When Lucia Santa wants to fix up her son, Gino, with a distant cousin's daughter, she prepares a banquet. The narrator uses the hyperbole to praise Lucia Santa's skills: she prepares a "sauce fit for a king of Naples" (213). She also makes the dough for the macaroni. Then, she opens a bottle of olive oil. However, this olive oil is very special: it is "sacred" (213) and the almost religious quality is gained by the fact that this oil, impossible to find in America, not only was it made by a poor peasant, with few resources, but was the "first blood of the olive" (213). Lucia Santa is a food connoisseur. In fact, the products she buys are not cheap, but she buys "the best olive oil, expensive cheese, imported prosciutto" (86) and she serves "meat at least three times a week" (86), and she reserves the best to impress her guests.

Delicious banquets and meals that looked like banquets are an important part of the Italian American immigration, because being able to purchase, cook, and present bountiful spreads of food was the ultimate revenge against hunger and the memory of it.

Barthes, Ronald

Ronald Barthes, in his essay "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," states that when we eat, our olfactory and gustatory senses are awakened but also the visual ones are alerted. When our "mouth waters," our reaction can be triggered by smell but especially by sight. It is a body of images because when we are in front of a dish, we see it first with our eyes, and sometimes the image of the food in the plate activates memories. Additionally, not everyone uses the same protocol, that is eating at a table or using the same utensils to eat, nor everyone goes to a funeral, then a party in honor of the departed afterwards. Thus, food becomes intrinsic with culture and important part of the lore of entire civilizations.

Additionally, Barthes states that when modern man purchases, consumes, and serves food, he does not simply “manipulate a single object in a purely transitive fashion” (29), but the food item sums up and transmits a situation, that is, “it signifies” (29). Consequently, the food item is a real sign, a “functional unit of a system of communication” (29). If we consider food a system, he later asks, what “its constituent units” might be (30). He states that we need to start with a complete inventory of what food is in a given society. He uses bread, in French society, to prove his point: “the passage from one fact to another produces a difference in signification” (30). Bread itself is not a signifying unit, but we must look at the “subdivisions with which production is not concerned” (30). Cost is not so significant, and we must take into consideration its preparation and use. In fact, the signifying units include not only a commercial value, but also how this product is prepared and used, adding more significance to the unit. The choice that we make when we prefer brown bread to white bread signals a change in “social terms” as brown bread is now considered a “sign of refinement” (30).

Barthes finally claims that food is “an organic system, organically integrated into its specific type of civilization” (34). However, what happens to the organic system when its people are taken to another civilization? The case of Italian food is quite unique, and Italian American literature has helped in chronicling the immigrants’ experience in the United States. The tales are about many Italians that were, at first, somewhat unaware of what it meant to be Italian, but they knew that they were from Sicily, Calabria, Campania, etc. They were, perhaps, clueless about the existence of an Italian cuisine, but were probably conscious of certain regional dishes that had been passed down for generations. Thus, in Italian enclaves, the organic nature of food afforded the Italian enclaves to be self-sufficient and to remain closed off to the U.S. government’s attempts to force assimilation. However, when Italian Americans began to intermarry and moving out of

the enclaves, food began to change too. Thus, the fabric of the organic system did change, creating an ancillary system that would satisfy the new American Italians' palate. Later, Italian Americans began to re-discover the land of their ancestors and began to recreate the original organic system or at least something that was more similar to the food enjoyed in the motherland.

Biasin, Gian-Carlo

Gian-Paolo Biasin in his book, *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel*, argues that fiction is a representation of reality, and that food and its rituals are an important part of this reality. He recognizes food as a sign, as well, and believes that because literature, specifically the novel, is an imitation of reality, we need to explore the role of food as “it carries meanings that have to do with human experience” (4). He in fact considers the “alimentary referents . . . an integral part of the technique used for representation, narration, and characterization” (11). The function of the representation is a realistic one: food becomes a guarantor of the verisimilitude of the text as it adds “the pretextual, historical or sociological level” (11).

Biasin's analysis is based on Italian texts but most of his observations can also be applied to other literatures. Analyzing the Italian *verista* novel (from Giovanni Verga to neo-realism, such as Carlo Cassola), he points out the mimetic function of food that allows to represent the everchanging reality of society (12). We can apply the same mimetic function to food in Italian American literature. In fact, food matches the changes occurring in the Italian American enclaves: we read about the preparation of simple dishes, designed for survival, when Italians arrive on American shores, but we also witness the Sunday dinner banquets, prepared by Italians that are becoming more affluent and assimilated.

On the narrative level, Biasin states that novelists, more specifically, use the meals to “introduce characters on the scene of the narration . . . to make the characters meet . . . to follow them in their movements or in the passing of time” (13). And he claims that it is not necessary to describe the whole meal, sometimes just a bottle can be used to build tension or bring an issue to a resolution. Hence, food is an important element that adds to the story being told. Food can also be a catalyst of need-desire and desire-satisfaction (14). One can consider these relationships at the basic level, that is, one needs to eat to survive, but can also be taken to another level, that of eroticism. Biasin also points out that food stands in the center of juxtapositions, such as scarcity and excess, bulimia and anorexia, and hunger and gluttony. And because hunger and gluttony produce dissatisfaction, this dissatisfaction creates movement, and this activity leads to storytelling (14). He also states that food can be a useful tool for authors to establish relationships among characters, that is, who is going to be in an authoritarian or subordinate state. Food also allows a convincing portrayal of characters thanks to its connotative function, as it can define the characters at different levels, such as social, psychological, and affective (15). Food can also become the reason for rebellion or for fantastic and free play (15).

Biasin argues that food is used in literature for two main purposes: one is cognitive and the other is tropological. In the cognitive pretext, food is “used to stage the search for meaning that is carried out every time one reflects on the relationship among the self, the world, and others-or among the subject, nature, and history-and such a reflection is made somewhat easier by the fact that precisely in food . . . nature and history tend to be conjoined” (17). In Italian American texts, the characters oftentimes use food as a way to search for their identity, or as a way to connect with the land of the ancestors, and finally as a way to remember one’s past. On the tropological level, food becomes a metaphor, a metonymy, the “linking by comparison and similitude” (20) or a

symbol, where it is also something other than what it literally is, and this other, i.e. the rhetorical figure, contains an entire discourse. This discourse can be many things, such as moral, ideological, affective, or social, but mostly it is a literary one, as it is expressed within a rhetorical figure. Subsequently, the literary discourse can be an inquiry, a knowledge, and an expression that just belong to literature but not to other disciplines. In Italian American literature, food contributes to enrich the immigrant experience and to add meanings to its history. Food is used to protect one's roots, turning the discourse into a political one, or to give refuge and solace to pained experiences. Women especially use food as a weapon of persuasion: the famous saying "The way to the heart of man is through his stomach" is taken literally by many Italian women. Even the food preparation act has a social function and it is expected that young girls learn how to cook, as their future job would be in the kitchen taking care of the family; thus, the passing of recipes to the younger generations is used to perpetuate the custom of relegating women in the kitchen.

In fact, Biasin states that the novel is an important cognitive tool to understand several structures that surround and condition "the alimentary phenomena" (27). These structures are anthropological, social, cultural, and psychological. He recognizes that discourse on food becomes discourse on pleasure and on power. In this worldly discourse, food also helps to develop dialogue, it allows people to discover one another, and to share the rituals of eating. Thus, using food as a theme allows authors to build a discourse that encompasses several realms of the narration/storytelling and renders the story more real and connectable to the experiences of the readers.

He also points out that the mouth is the source of two oralities: we speak with our mouth, but we also ingest food for survival, and for enjoyment (3). On one hand, the mouth, and the tongue, are the channel through which we satisfy our basic need of feeding for survival, but in

some instances, it also allows us to experience pleasant, almost orgasmic, feelings. On the other, the mouth and tongue allow us to speak and to tell stories. Thus, the mouth serves two purposes: nourishment and language. Storytelling and food then become intertwined and this commonality justifies the analysis of the importance of food presence in literature.

Bildungsroman

Pietro di Donato uses the *Bildungsroman* format, more specifically the *Erziehungroman*'s, to showcase the young character's coming of age in his 1939 novel, *Christ in Concrete*. Paul can be considered di Donato's alter ego, as the novel is telling of his own experiences that he lived first hand when he found himself in charge of his family after his father's death. Thanks to the pedagogical nature of *Erziehungroman*, di Donato successfully delivers a message to his readers about perseverance and dedication. In particular, in Chapter 6, di Donato really focuses his attention on Paul: during one single night, the twelve-year-old, after losing his father to a construction accident sets on the quest to find food for his family and roams the city searching for help. After this night, experiencing the negative encounters Paul has in the adult world, he will no longer be a child but a man. Tobias Boes argues that the *Bildungsroman* novel is "a kind of novel that focuses on the spiritual and intellectual maturation of its protagonist" (1). Paul grows quickly, overnight, but not only spiritually and intellectually. Paul, in fact, becomes more and more aware of his situation as an immigrant, that is, his place in American society. He also becomes aware of the type of government is running the country and of the institutions that are designed to protect its people but fail. There is surely the desire to teach the readers the invaluable lesson to never give up.

Di Donato describes Paul's "travels," in detail. Paul first goes to the grocery store, but the store keeper tells him he will not be able to help and suggests he go to the church. Then, he walks

by a butcher shop, he goes in, but he does not have the courage to ask for food. He keeps walking and arrives at the Municipal Building where he is told that because his father was not a citizen, the City will not help him. While he walks the streets, the readers are given a glimpse of his confused state. He notices people walking by: “Big strong people coming out of food shops with great bundles and laughing with lit eyes and store after store choked and flowing with bread and steak and fruit and shoes and cake and clothes and toys and darkness pushing day over tenement tops” (53). The people he sees look strong and big because they eat, he assumes, while to highlight Paul’s hunger and helplessness, the narrator describes Paul’s “thin feet” and his wrist “getting thinner and thinner” (53). The wealth, the light, and the merriment are in the streets and even if it is getting late, the darkness of the night only covers the tenements, where people are hungry and poor.

Hunger is slowly changing Paul’s appearance. When he goes to the church, he sees dame Katrina, the midwife and the neighborhood “witch.” She notices how hungry he is: “Little son, how stung and pale you are” (55). He is changing and losing weight in front of the readers’ eyes. She knows he is hungry and offers him food, projecting her expected role as mother, the feeder: “Katarina drew a round loaf of bread from her sack and from the little soiled bag tied about her neck and hidden between her breasts she took out its contents” (55-56). The bread was hidden between her breasts and Katrina, who is childless, can perform the act of feeding: she cannot breastfeed him, of course, but she can feed him the bread. However, Paul turns it down because he is about to ask for help to the priest. Unfortunately, he is turned away, but dame Katrina intervenes. Finally, when Paul is allowed to see him, he walks in the dining room where the priest is having supper: “plates containing baked potatoes, and cuts of brown dripping of lamb and fresh peas and platters of hot food cool food hard food soft food . . . Then pink hands placed a wide and high shortcake with big perfect strawberries staining the pure white whipped cream” (57). The food is

described with few details, but these minor details are enough to whet anyone's appetite, especially if hungry. This banquet takes Paul's breath away: he begins fantasizing about his mother and siblings being at that table and enjoying the food. But he is brought back to reality by the priest's arrogance and coldness: he does not want to be bothered and suggests that Paul go to City Hall and ask for welfare or ask the neighbors for a collection. Paul listens but silently wonders why the priest is not willing to give him the food on the table. He asks for assistance: "Could you please help us?" (58), but the priest stubbornly refuses to help.

In the meantime, "(a) stomach trickles hollowly . . . and thin wrists getting thinner" (58): poor Paul is hungrier and weaker. Finally, the priest decides to share the cake with Paul: "Cut a good portion of the cake, wrap it nicely and bring it here" (59). A nice gesture, but this family does not need cake, but real food. Dame Katrina, who has waited for Paul, calls the priest a "bursting gut and sausage-in-mouth" (59). She expresses her disgust with the priest, a mistrust that many Italians that frequented churches run by Irish priests felt.

Paul returns to the "dark kitchen" (60) and leaves the bread and the money on the table. He has completed his task and he has now become a man. He has grown and has matured in his quests. However, there is another aspect of this night and of his experience that di Donato has taken advantage of when he wrote this chapter: the *Bildungsroman* needs to be read keeping in mind the historical time in which the novel takes place (Tobias Boes 6). Namely, the *Bildungsroman* has allowed di Donato to highlight not only Paul's transformation but also the historical time and he makes of this chapter, a social commentary. In fact, he negatively showcases those institutions that should help their citizens in moments of need, especially the Church. These institutions leave those who they are supposed to protect alone and defenseless and Paul loses respect for those who are

meant to take care of him and his family. At the end of the book, Paul tells his mother that he does not believe in God anymore, a decision based on the painful experiences he had that night.

At the end of the chapter, Paul has found some help, but Annunziata, his mother, is overwhelmed by fear and the uncertainty about their future: “In the home of Geremio the air has become hunger. In the home of Geremio stomachs have become wounds. In the home of Geremio senses have become famished mouths . . .” (60). Hunger has become palpable, is causing pain, and is taking over the household: it is so overwhelming that it is paralyzing the characters. Paul will then realize that he needs to quit school and find a job to be able to provide for his family. Ironically, the life education that he has received leads him to quit his school education.

Bread

Bread is an important staple in the Mediterranean diet. Bread fills up the stomach and helps you not feel the pangs of hunger. However, the kind most poor Italians can afford is a subpar kind of bread, that is, black bread, and not the white, refined bread they later find in the United States. Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale in *La Storia* state that bread was an important staple in the diet of poor Southern Italians. Bread was respected, never placed upside down, and before cutting it, people would make the sign of the cross (38). It was paired with onions or sardines or eaten hot with olive oil, pepper and salt (136). However, when Italians came to the United States, they began enjoying the white, soft bread, the bread considered to be the bread of the rich (136). White bread began to be a sign of refinement on rich people’s tables in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century (Albala 90) and maybe for this reason, the poor immigrants in purchasing the white bread in America thought that eating it would elevate them, as well, to a higher social status.

In *Christ in Concrete*, Paul, the young twelve-year-old boy that grows up almost overnight because he must face the consequences of his father's death, realizes that he will be in charge. After his task of trying to get help from the U.S. institutions and even the Church, he is turned away every time. The dame, a woman who is a mix of witch and healer, had suggested that his family will now depend on him: "Little son, straight-straight your spine with hands into the heavens, and the poor carpenter Christ build strong the bread of your arms" (59). She tells him to pray for strength in his arms so that he will be able to bring bread to the family. The use of word bread, in this book, not only refers to bread but also to food in general: this is a rendering of the Italian saying *guadagnarsi il pane*, to earn one's bread, used to express to make a living. Hence, Paul begins looking for a job as a bricklayer and thankfully, when he meets up with an Italian crew on a construction site, he is given a job.

Bread is an important food item in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, as well, and the author dedicates an entire section of the book to it. Louise DeSalvo describes her time in the kitchen with her step-grandmother. Observing her grandmother making the bread in her mother's kitchen, DeSalvo learns invaluable lessons about the old country; in fact, not only does she learn to make bread but also "how to curse and swear like a Southern Italian peasant woman" (20). She is able to connect with her grandmother more so than with her mother and the moments that the young DeSalvo spends with her grandmother in the kitchen are intimate moments, but, most importantly, a means for young DeSalvo's survival: "(m)aking the bread, a welcome ritual that redeems the difficulty of my grandmother's days, of my days. A time I share with her sometimes wordlessly, sometimes accompanied by her stories" (22). Her grandmother is not happy to be living in this house, as the young DeSalvo, and this camaraderie allows both women to survive the hostile environment that DeSalvo's mother has created in the house.

Additionally, bread becomes the food item that causes a big drift between her mother and step-grandmother. The mother prefers the American bread because “(y)ou can keep this bread for a long, long time without it becoming green-molded” (12). She refuses to eat her stepmother’s bread, and this act of defiance is a rejection of everything for which her stepmother and her own ethnicity represent. She also does not allow her stepmother to use the oven in the kitchen, forcing her to use the one in the basement and also fusses over the amount of flour used to make the dough. These feuds are acted out in front of the children and are a response to their failed relationship. The making of the bread and the bread itself become an excuse for them to fight. DeSalvo’s mother never accepted her stepmother, and the stepmother never showed her any love, as she was one of those brides that were contracted in marriage out of necessity. This feud is worsened by the fact that DeSalvo’s father also enjoys the bread the step-grandmother prepares, and this add fuel to the fire. Not only does it cause marital frictions, but DeSalvo’s mother thinks that accepting the Italian home-made bread stalls the assimilation process: “there’s no hope for this family making it into the big time” (15). Eating the Italian bread means that they are “stuck in a rut” (15), that they cannot advance and forget about their origins. DeSalvo’s mother does not want to be Italian American, but American, and eating the American white bread will allow her to become a real American.

DeSalvo closes her book with a fictional picnic she imagines she has with her mother: both take the bread they like, the one without seeds for her mother and the ones with the seeds for DeSalvo. They did not bring a knife, so they have to tear the bread, and even if it is hard, because the crust is hard, it is not impossible (252). With this concluding fictional anecdote, DeSalvo wants to restore her relationship with her mother, or at least the memory of her, and ultimately to convince her that the barriers between them could be torn down as well.

The narrator ChiChi Maggiordino, in *I Love You Like a Tomato* (2003), also finds solace with her grandmother, Angelina, when she prepares bread, in a scene at the beginning of the book. The scene takes place in Italy, before the family comes to America, but it still a very important element as it presents the closeness these two characters feel. The narrator focuses on the proximity the two share: “. . . Nonna bakes bread. I am beside her, between her elbows, under the flesh of her breast, hanging on to her apron, stepping on her feet . . .” (7). It seems that they are becoming one person, and this explains the type of relationship the two have, especially when they will move to the United States. ChiChi adores her grandmother, as she will be the bastion of sanity and love during the hard times they face on American soil. ChiChi explains the whole process in detail: “Nonna baking. Kneading the dough, punching it down, rolling it out, cutting it into mounds, rolling, folding over, rolling, pinching the ends, patting into little hills, rising, slipping into the brick oven, baked brown and stiff, and then, *fripp*, into the straw basket hanging from the beam of the ceiling” (8). Not only does this detailed description show how observant the young child is, but it is also a way to praise her grandmother’s skills and dexterity, qualities that will be vital when they encounter obstacles in the United States.

The same love and care in making bread is shared by Rocco LaGrassa, in *The End*. He wants his child, Mimmo, to learn how to make bread in the bakery the family owns. The narrator describes in detail the act of bread making: “[t]he dough in his grip, leavened by a colony of yeasts he’d founded and daily fed and daily taxed so as to save on brewer’s yeast, was folded by him, rolled, thrust, folded, rolled, swung through the air behind him, thrashed against the surface of the worktable, rolled again, all at terrific speed (he was not ungifted at this) until it was as tight as a mattress and wondrous to touch . . .” (12). A frugal but very knowledgeable baker, Rocco tries to entice his son’s attention and invites him to enjoy this creating act: “Spank it. Look, I am little god.

I make flesh out of dust and water . . . Give it a roundhouse punch . . . Go on, close your fist and give it what you have” (12). The cheering Rocco is performing sounds more like a cheering of a coach to a boxer in the ring: Rocco is trying to make this experience fun and uses a language that can be understood by a teenager. Mimmo is a boy, so Rocco thinks that this is the right way to teach him, as if he were in the ring. Then, the cheering becomes calmer, almost sexual: “Feel how silky and warm like your skin is. Sit up and touch it, why don’t you, talk to it, stick your nose in it and take it in” (12). Rocco wants to share this creation act with his son; he wants to have a relationship that transcends the roles of father and son. He wants closeness with the only child that has stayed behind, while his wife and two other children have moved away. Mimmo is all he has left, and Rocco wants to pass him the art-of-baking torch. However, his dream is shattered: Mimmo shows no interest and asks if he can join his mother in New Jersey. Unlike other characters that enjoy the learning experience and the closeness to a relative, Mimmo lacks this desire and the understanding that what his father has just attempted to perform is an act of love.

See also Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers and Bakery

Bribery, Food as

Italian American women were expected to be in the kitchen and to take care of the house and the children. These homemakers were quite skillful in cooking and feeding their families, sometimes with very little ingredients but a lot of imagination. Cooking gave the immigrant women a way to keep control over the household and they used this art to their advantage. However, sometimes, even men use food as a tool to persuade.

In *Come Back to Sorrento*, Maria, the narrator’s mother, knows that preparing food for her husband prevents him from completely blowing up: it is her way to softly blackmail him or to

sugarcoat a new family dynamic, that she knows will upset him. For example, the day after their wedding, Maria is still in her wedding gown and her husband, Patsy, even if confused, trusts her that he will get a surprise. Of course, he thinks that the surprise is food, *lasagna* to be exact, because that is cooking in the oven, but soon realizes that the surprise is his just-arrived-off-the-boat father-in-law who will become the bane of his existence (17). Even when his brother-in-law moves in, Maria breaks the news at the dinner table with a dish of spaghetti. When she breaks the news, her husband has no reaction: “Papa looked up, chewing and frowning” (105); with his mouth full, the only thing he can do is frown. The readers are left to imagine what goes through Patsy’s mind and are given a vivid yet comical picture of Patsy’s lack of reaction: food placates his anger and because he is chewing the good food his wife has prepared for him, he cannot react or talk back.

However, Maria is not always successful. Before the presidential elections, the narrator’s mother, Maria, wants to know who her husband, Patsy, now a U.S. citizen, is voting for, as she does not want a socialist president that, she knows, will kill the priests. However, he refuses to tell even when she tells him to vote for Alfred E. Smith: “Is a secret . . . Nobody knows how I’m vote, only me” (224). But Maria does not give up quickly and, among many threats, she uses food to get an answer: “(e)very night, she threatened him with divorce, with murder, with running away, with no-cooking-and when none of those things worked, she promised him heaven and earth and macaroni five times a week” (224). Just the threat of not cooking, that is not having food on the table and the promise of eating pasta more than usual does not convince Patsy: they continue for weeks to discuss his choice over dinners of spaghetti and fish, but Patsy does not budge. On election day, she still holds hope that he would tell. Thus, she puts extra care in her cooking: “There was still a chance left: Papa’s stomach. That night she bakes his favorite dish- a large pan of

lasagna, filled with cream cheese, mozzarella, and sausages. For good measure, she cooked a mushroom and garlic sauce” (227). Everybody is aware that something is up: the table is set as if someone is coming to dinner. She has prepared a real banquet for her husband: “([i]n front of Papa’s plate she set a large dish of antipasto, a plate of provolone, and under his chair, she placed a bottle of Gino’s wine” (227). Patsy comes home, and she attends to him: “Mama cut a large square of lasagna out of the pan and ladled the mushroom sauce over it” (225). Nevertheless, she does not treat the other family members the same way: “For us she cut smaller squares, making sure there was enough left over for Papa to have a second helping” (226). She anxiously waits for an answer, she wants to know who he voted for, but her husband is resolute and will not tell. She finally gives up. Preparing a banquet is Maria’s way to her husband’s heart, but, this time, the trick does not work.

Even when Patsy, with the intent of getting rid of his brother-in-law, Uncle Funzy, tries to convince him to marry the rich Fortunata, the dialogue takes place at the table. While her husband is busy drinking and chatting with Uncle Funzy, Maria is preparing supper, spaghetti and *braciola*. Patsy tries to convince Uncle Funzy to marry; it does not matter that he has no job, he needs to marry because it is not natural that a big man like him is not yet married (114). Uncle Funzy just promises that he will think about it. From Maria’s reaction as she serves the food, the reader understands that Maria, this time, agrees with her husband: “Mama came over and put the steaming plate of spaghetti and braciola on the table with a thud, scowling and leering at Uncle Funzy” (115). She does not place the plate gently, but with a thud, and together with the leering and scowling, she sends the message that she is not pleased.

Even Mrs. Amoroso, in *Mount Allegro*, knows “all the tricks” (33) to put her husband in a good humor. During a family quarrel, to prepare her husband to be in a better disposition, she

prepares his favorite food, seafood: “boiled squid soaked in lemon juice, and for dessert she brought out her best peach preserve” (33-34). The old and best wine is served to make sure that “his mood would be mellow” (34). Mrs. Amoroso knows her husband and realizes that praying will not be enough to prepare her husband for what is coming.

However, coaxing with food with the intention of bribing is not just used with family but also outside its circle. In *Come Back to Sorrento*, during a doctor’s visit from the insurance that Patsy has been tricked into getting for his father-in-law, he tries to bribe the doctor to get a favorable diagnosis: “Maybe the doctor would like a plate of spaghetti?” (196). Patsy seems to have learned something from his wife and tries to bribe with food, that will still be prepared by his wife. After the doctor’s refusal, Patsy still nags him: “Not too busy for a glass of wine? He nudged the doctor with his elbow, as if wine were something special” (197). If spaghetti does not work, Patsy thinks of the next best thing, wine. This type of behavior indicates that the host is trying to ensure that the guest will be inclined to help, even if it means to break the law.

Italian American authors have described these power struggles which adds a humorous tone to the story being told but also informs the readers of important dynamics that are present in Italian American households: even if the old ways are still considered sacred, some women have some agency and can, somewhat, hold the reins in the house, while the husbands think that they are in complete control.

See also Agency

The Brotherhood of the Grapes by John Fante (1975)

John Fante, in this semi-autobiographical novel, tells the story of the Molise family. Henry Molise, a writer in California, receives a phone call from one of his siblings: his mother, Maria,

wants to divorce his father, Nick, because Maria thinks that Nick has been unfaithful. This call forces him to go to see his parents in St. Elmo. He is sure that the divorce will never happen, but he goes, just in case. Little does he know that his visit will turn into an adventure with his father: Nick, a very famous and accomplished bricklayer, has been employed by a friend to build a brick oven in the mountain. This adventure compels Henry to spend time with his father, a mean, stubborn, but sad tyrant who will later be diagnosed with diabetes. Throughout his book, John Fante explains the dynamics amongst all the siblings and the kind of obsessive relationship his mother has with her children, which is mostly regulated by food. Even if the story is quite humorous, it brings to light how all the characters in this story lead unhappy lives, of broken dreams and promises.

Bruculinu, America by Vincent Schiavelli (1988)

Vincent Schiavelli's *Bruculinu, America*, is an autobiographical account of his childhood in Brooklyn, but also a recipe book, an interesting way to share "a 2,500-year-old culinary tradition of Sicily" (10) with his readers. Unlike other second-generation children, Vincent Schiavelli experiences a happy childhood and describes his life in New York with a semi-idyllic tone. He feels the urge to write this book because he wants to chronicle the history of his family in the New York neighborhood and clearly admits that this book is "based on Sicilian food" (10). He mainly wants to stress how, as the child of an immigrant, "(g)rowing up in this place was like having one foot in mid-twentieth-century United states and the other in mid-sixteenth-century Sicily" (10). However, this dichotomy is not lived as a traumatic experience by the author. In fact, Schiavelli wants to share the wealth of knowledge his grandfather left him with. Not only does he tell family stories, but he accompanies them with recipes, that are "from the hand of Papa Andrea," his grandfather (10). He states that these were dishes that his family used for every day enjoyment but

also for special events. Most importantly, he claims that “(t)heir magic still delights the senses and enriches the home hearth” (10). This desire to share not just the stories but also the food described in them shows his wish for these recipes not to be forgotten. The collection of recipes allows the readers to enter Schiavelli’s family’s home and be part of its domesticity. This act of sharing represents a sort of invitation to partake in the “magic” these recipes create in the kitchen. They also serve as a tribute to his grandfather’s legacy. Sharing the recipes with his readers, Schiavelli makes sure that these recipes will never be forgotten.

Cannoli

A Sicilian pastry, filled with sweet ricotta and pistachios, cannoli are now ubiquitous in the United States and are readily available in stores and restaurants. There are other filling versions such as chocolate chips instead of the pistachios or with candied fruits, and mascarpone instead of the ricotta cheese.

Cannoli are the food that Garnet, the main character in *The Patron Saint of Ugly* (2014), thinks about when she is forced to eat bloody meat. Garnet cannot stand the sight of blood and during a family luncheon where bloody steaks are being served, she is forced to cut the piece of meat in her plate. As she does this, she tries to visualize the “[c]runchy tubes stuffed with ricotta” (73) to take her mind off the blood coming out of the meat. She is determined that after this attempt, she will eat at least five real cannoli. As she puts the meat in her mouth and start chewing, she thinks that the meat is “*tiny chunks of pistachio that would stick to my teeth*” (73). However, all she tastes is blood. The visualization attempt did not work, and Garnet will not be able to eat her steak. And because of that, she will get a spanking.

Catholicism

For Italian immigrants, religion played an important role in the lives of Italian immigrants as it provided moral support and mental strength in difficult moments. Some Italian immigrants would go to church, but many relished their relationship they had with God and their trust that He would provide in their homes, rather than to the church run by the Irish priest who did not speak Italian and could not understand some of the religious customs Italians brought from Italy, such as the religious processions in the neighborhood.

Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, is assisted, throughout her life, by her deep faith in God: “I had such strong religion -such a good faith. I thought God wanted it that way and when He wanted different it would be” (213). Nevertheless, her religious devotion is linked to food. In fact, when desperate and in dire straits, she asks for heavenly assistance: “once in that poor time I was crying and praying. All the night I was praying. I said, “Oh God, if I can only have a crust of bread for these children! I have not one crumb in the house-not one thing!”” (212). The hyperbolic description of the lack of food in the house is a demonstration of how skillful Rosa is at story telling: she needs all the compassion from her listeners, but she also needs to show that her faith is valid and how she always comes on top of every situation, no matter how bad it is. In the street, she will find a quarter that allows her to buy some bread for her children: “That quarter I found when I prayed God for some bread, it was really a miracle” (213). Hence, in her eyes, finding the quarter is not pure luck, but a Godsend. The Madonna comes to rescue Rosa, as well. In fact, when she burns tomatoes that she is cooking, she prays the Madonna to tell her how she can make the tomatoes good again. The Madonna puts in her mind the idea to go to the pantry and get some black spices and that little trick makes the tomatoes edible again. This is another miracle according to Rosa: “I never in my life heard to put that stuff in tomatoes. But when I told Mis’

Bliss the Madonna made that miracle, she looked at me funny, like she thought I imagined” (242). However, she is dead serious and wants to convince who is listening that this was a Madonna’s miracle, as she is the mother of the poor women.

The same religious undertone is present in *Christ in Concrete*, when Annunziata’s eighth child is born. Annunziata’s brother, Luigi, a surrogate husband, serves as host and arranges the chairs for all the women that have come to assist with the birth. He breaks the bread for them and serves the wine in large glasses. These two acts are undoubtedly linked to the act of the holy communion where church goers partake of the body/bread and blood/wine of Christ. Luigi also takes care of the children, giving them “weak coffee and stale bread” (35), while he serves “a gallon wine and two round loaves of bread” to the guests (34). He makes the decision to give a better treatment to the guests and it can be argued that the family, even if grieving and in dire straits, is still trying to keep up with the appearances: they still want to practice the “bella figura” and want to show off in front of the neighbors. Annunziata’s family wants to display wealth that they do not really possess, and the good wine and bread are an attempt to show that the family is still doing well.

The Catholic act of sharing of bread and wine goes hand in hand with the almost pagan rite the dame, Katarina, the midwife that the family has employed to help with the delivery. She pours the wine, she has been served, into a bowl, she makes a sandwich with 2 hot peppers, soaks it in the bowl and swallows it “ravenously” (36). She “devours” a second bowl. At first, she is ravenous, then she devours, it is as if she is gaining super powers or maybe turning into a beast. In fact, one of the women says, adjusting her own breasts, as if she is trying to offer it:

“Poor beast, how it loves the grape.”

“It’s the blood of our sweet Christ!” And with a circling movement the dame signed the cross.

“But it is not expected to swim in his blood.”

“Better than in water, which decays great steamboats and drowns the Christians . . . Now when I was a girl-“

“Nine years before the Lord was born.”

“Water was not invented and all the women were great beauties-“

“Such as yourself who frightens even sin.”

“And we bathed, and washed the streets, in wine-“

“So that is why you no longer bathe!”

“Quiet! And the elders taught us to drink it, for it painted real color on the cheek, put milk in the tit and fire in the stove . . . Bah you holes askew will yet become baloney-eating Americans!” (36)

This exchange is quick and somewhat vulgar: the women try to poke fun at the dame and the narrator uses them to relax the heightened atmosphere created by the dame’s little rite with her bowl filled with wine. Additionally, the dame makes the sign of the cross, a gesture that the narrator introduces, maybe, for the American audience: the American reader might have been ‘weirded out’ by the strangeness of the scene and the simple religious act is a sign that the dame is religious and to be trusted. The narrator uses this short dialogue to introduce some old wives’ tales about wine and employs the dame to tell them: it was common belief, which is still held true today, that

wine made blood. The dame is also convinced that drinking wine colors one's cheeks, helps with the production of milk in women, and helps with procreation. Ultimately, the dame's revenge is to call the other ladies "baloney-eating Americans:" she seems to warn them that they are losing their ways because they have made fun of her and her use of wine. Calling them baloney-eating Americans is not meant to be a compliment, but rather a scolding.

For Italian American immigrants, religion does not mean just support but it is also an important element that regulates their daily lives and affords a sense of stability and belonging. Clement L. Valletta, in his essay "Family Life. The Question of Independence," states that "the immigrant remembered and tried to live in the cyclical rhythm of the seasonal and church calendar" (154). For example, the Esposito family in *Come Back to Sorrento* follows the Catholic religious calendar, that established that only fish could be eaten on Fridays. One day, Maria, the narrator's mother, cooks fish on a Thursday: she claims she has forgotten, but this slip will cost her a fight with her husband:

Mama said, "So I make a mistake. So we eat fish twice this week."

Papa stopped rubbing his face. "Twice?"

"Sure," Mama said. "We eat fish tomorrow too."

"Not me," Papa said. "Tomorrow I eat meat."

Mama pressed her thumbnail to her lips, horror stricken. "No meat in this house Friday!"

"No fish!" Papa said.

"I don't care," Mama said. "But we no eat meat."

"I don't care neither," Papa said, sitting at the table. "But I'm no eat fish no more!"

“No more?”

“No more!”

“But, Patsy, you like fish.”

“No more.”

“Since when you no like?”

“Since now!” (156)

This humorous exchange shows how Patsy is trying to arm-wrestle his wife. He wants to have his last word because he is the man of the house. In this instance, food has caused the characters to act and to fight for power. The quarrel continues and the body language becomes more pronounced: “Mama shook her head . . . She threw her hands up” (156) but she still does her job of serving her husband who proceeds to “sneer” and to jab the two headless halves of the baked whitefish. Then, he throws his fork and leaves the house: “I’m go to the restaurant . . . Today is Thursday-and I’m eat macaroni on Thursday” (156). He finally has the last word and this rebellion against his wife is due not so much about the food but it is an excuse to fight because he is jealous of the fish vendor.

Characters’ Features

Italian American authors have used food to describe some characters’ features and in doing so, not only do they add a visual element to the narration but also a humorous touch to the development of the story.

More specifically, in *Come Back to Sorrento*, Joe Petracca effectively uses food to describe distinctive characters’ features: “. . . Papa was a squat mound of muscle, with hands like big

caciocavalli or Indian-club cheeses, and Mama was built like a spaghetti” (140). The sizes of the cheese and the spaghetti give the reader an effective visual and this description highlights how physically different the parents are. During a bocce game, Patsy’s friends’ eyes are described “as big and white as mozzarellas” (128): the narrator’s intention is to give his readers a visual of the surprise felt by his father’s friends that are watching the bocce game. Even one of the most telling of Italian gestures is effectively described using garlic: “bunching his fingers like a garlic bulb and shaking them in Mama’s face” (168). These food features add to the humorous tone that permeates the story. The whimsical nature of these descriptions reminds readers of Arcimboldo’s paintings, where fruit, vegetables, and fish were used to portray composite heads.

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Mario Puzo describes Lucia Santa preparing breakfast for her children with a loaf of bread that is “thick as her thigh, tall as a child” (48) and milk. The narrator lets the readers peek under Lucia Santa’s skirt to prove Lucia Santa’s strength and power. Namely, the thick thigh signals Lucia Santa’s physicality and health. The hyperbole used in the description of the bread highlights the abundance and availability of food in America, as well: the bread has consistency, a refined food item that is present in her home. She and her family have just been abandoned by her second husband, but the family still can afford food. In this scene, the readers witness not only the wealth of the family but also Lucia Santa’s will power. Lucia Santa’s cutting the bread, something that only the man of the house should do, is an action used to display that she is still in control of her life, her family, and her future.

Chitarra

According to the Culinarylore website, the *chitarra* “is a wooden frame (sometimes metal) with wires stretched across it: it resembles a guitar, thus the name. The wires are used to cut pasta dough into thin square strips called *maccheroni alla chitarra*, *spaghetti alla chitarra* or *pasta*

alla chitarra abruzzese. These cutters are especially used in the region of Abbruzzo, in central Italy. They originated in the 1800s in the province of Chieti.” Thus, this pasta maker is originally from the central area of Italy. However, in *Come Back to Sorrento*, the *chitarra* is present in a family that is from Southern Italy. It is not clear if this family, from Campania, begins using the *chitarra* in the United States or was familiar with it previously. In either case, it shows a sharing in cooking techniques that, at one point, were purely regional, but, now, once in the United States, they are at the disposal of others regional groups.

Patsy, the narrator’s father, is a very practical man, and his practicality influences his family’s dynamics. As many major announcements are made at the supper table in the kitchen, one evening, during supper, he lets his family know that this year they will have “a practically Chrisamees” (168). No nice presents for anyone because Patsy will buy a “*chitarra*-a wire strung box for making homemade macaroni-because he said, he was sick and tired of paying the high prices in the store for wormy spaghetti that tasted like glue when you threw it in the water” (168). The children try to hide their disappointment: “we all looked sadly into our soup bowls, sloshing the beans and macaroni around in the orange-colored sauce” (169). Patsy shows his true colors, selfish and bossy, a person who only thinks for himself. The *chitarra* will also force his wife to make pasta and prevent her from buying it from the store, making her chore harder and more tiresome. Even the menu at Christmas day will be practical: as it falls on a Thursday, he orders that the food be what they eat every Thursday, no different: macaroni and meat. Maria objects: “No lasagna, chicken . . .?” (172). In this instance, Maria is shown as powerless and with no agency, but she tries to object using her husband’s favorite dish, lasagna. However, this time, her husband will have the last word: the food that will be served is macaroni and meat.

Christ in Concrete by Pietro di Donato (1939)

Published in 1939, *Christ in Concrete*, by Pietro di Donato, is based on a short story that di Donato got published in the *Esquire* magazine and tells the story of his own family. Di Donato becomes Paul in the novel, a twelve-year old who after losing his father, Geremio, in a construction accident, in 1923, finds himself in charge of the family, his mother and seven siblings. Hunger is what spurs characters into action and the lack or the abundance of food regulates relationships and status.

Coexisting

Italian American authors often describe the meeting and coexisting of Italian American characters with Americans, other ethnic immigrant groups, or Italians from other regions. This is accomplished by using food as the element that allows such encounters.

In *Rosa: The Life of Italian Immigrant*, the meeting and sharing of food between cultures is usually successful. Rosa meets Miss May, a rich, American lady that helps her with the birth of one of her children, Rosa realizes that even if Miss May is rich, she is willing to spend time with her: “. . . she’d give me much pleasure when she’d come in my house and eat. She’d come in and see the onions and she’d say, “Oh, Mis’ Cavalleri, I just love the onions! I want an onion sandwich” (234). Rosa knows that not everyone is like Miss May, kind, accepting, and curious, but seems appreciative that Miss May enjoys a simple sandwich as much as she does. The onion sandwich serves as a class leveler: thanks to the sandwich, not only two cultures meet but also learn from one another and being rich or poor does not seem to matter.

In *Christ in Concrete*, Pietro di Donato highlights how Italian immigrants dealt with coexisting with other ethnic groups, as well. In fact, the Italian immigrants are not the only ones

that offer help to their countrymen. In Annunziata's tenement, there are twelve families that are willing to help her and her son, Paul: Missus Donovan, for example, "[w]henver she saw the Geremio's children with hungry looks, she would call them in to bread and baloney" (99); or the Olsens who worry about Paul's thinness: "Come up, Paulie, an' we'll put somethin' on your bones" (99). These families are willing to help another family in a dire situation: the food is not refined, and they probably have not much more than Paul's family. However, this concern highlights that it does not matter where one comes from: hunger is hunger. The human spirit being displayed is the same spirit on which America is built upon and the narrator seems to want to shed some positive light on the human aspect of America. Unlike the Church, government, and civic institutions that are supposed to aid citizens and foreigners in need, the people in the tenements are willing to help one another, painting a picture of hope for the human spirit.

Coffee

In our modern times, when people think of Italian food, pasta, pizza, and coffee, namely the espresso kind, come to mind. In Italy, coffee is an essential ritual that regulates the life of most Italians. It is the first thing most Italians drink in the morning, mid-morning, and after lunch. It is used as an excuse to see friends or to close a deal. Because it is so ubiquitous, one might think that coffee has always been affordable to all. However, this has not always been the case. In fact, at the time of great immigration waves, according to Simone Cinotto, author of *The Italian American Table*, coffee in Italy was a "luxury" (117) and only rich people could afford it. Poor Italians would drink a concoction of "chicory, barley, wheat, chestnut and lentils" (117). However, once in the United States, drinking coffee "became a daily habit" (117). Thus, coffee becomes a staple that allows Italian American characters to show that their economic status has improved.

Being able to enjoy a cup of coffee, though, not only signals an amelioration in their position on the American social ladder. In fact, in “Toward A Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” Ronald Barthes argues that coffee, in modern society, is not just a stimulant, a “substance” (34), but it is a “circumstance” (34) and people begin recognizing it as an “occasion for interrupting work” (34). Thus, coffee gains a new function. Especially for Italian American characters, drinking coffee is not an occasion for interrupting work, but it certainly signals a circumstance, that is, a way to impress guests and to show that they have made it in the new land. Additionally, Barthes argues that food is not only a collection of products and a “system of communication,” but also “a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (29).

The latter argument can be applied to Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. Puzo uses the term “ceremonial coffee,” (35) throughout the novel. He highlights the great amount of coffee consumption to mainly display Lucia Santa’s family success, but also to empower her with a tool that is used to welcome guests in her house. She also follows a protocol and uses the coffee in certain situations. In fact, coffee is also used as an aid to help characters to relax or to sooth emotionally unstable characters.

Lucia Santa offers coffee, and cake, to guests, such as Mr. Colucci and his family. Mr. Colucci is her husband’s friend and minister and Lucia Santa believes that he will save Frank, her husband, as he promises him a job and the gift of learning how to read and write. However, in this instance, she is not the one pouring the coffee, but her husband. Frank is slowly going insane, thus, the act of pouring the coffee gains major relevance: it is Frank who wants to pour it, and this act seems to indicate that he is trying to take charge of his life (92). In another instance, Frank handles the coffee again: “Everyone must have coffee. I’ll make it myself” (111). At this juncture, Frank

has completely lost his mind, and the simple gesture of making coffee is the last normal act he will perform.

Lucia Santa thinks that thanks to coffee and cake, she has been granted a bigger welfare check by the slimy Mr. La Fortezza, the welfare agent: she “was so grateful that she served coffee with cake, though coffee alone was enough for the laws of hospitality” (165). In this case, she has decided to go the extra mile: not only does she offer coffee but also cake. Moreover, Lucia Santa provides him, every two weeks, with “a little parcel of groceries . . . a pound of the pink sweet ham, a bottle of homemade anisette to help his digestion” (166), because his Italian stomach cannot stand Italian food. At this juncture, Puzo is making a commentary on those Italian Americans that, instead of helping their poor countrymen, were taking advantage of their position of power to steal from them. He also ironically points out that Mr. La Fortezza does not like Italian food and this dislike marks him as a traitor in the narrator’s eyes. He is a sort of caricature, and Puzo intends to make him an unlikeable character.

Lucia Santa’s behavior is justified: her catering to Mr. La Fortezza is due to her dream of having her daughter married to him. However, when Octavia is offered coffee during one of Mr. La Fortezza’s visits, she turns it down. Octavia has just returned from the sanatorium, and instead of accepting the hot drink as a welcoming gesture, she rejects it. She is a smart girl and has figured out that the deal between her mother and the inspector is illegal and that her mother has been swindled and will have to pay back a percentage. Thus, she will not partake in the sharing of coffee. Rejecting the beverage, she expresses her dislike for this man, and her rejection crushes her mother’s dream.

Other times, Puzo uses coffee to create an atmosphere of trust and the act of drinking puts the people closer together: Lucia Santa and Octavia fight very often, but they usually smooth things

out over a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Additionally, coffee helps characters to think, gather their thoughts, remember the past, and to make decisions. It is also used to cheer people's spirits. In some cases, coffee is preferred over alcohol: Larry, Lucia Santa's son, turns down alcohol in favor of a cup of brew when he meets the mafia boss, Mr. di Lucca, who is offering him a job; however, his refusal causes Mr. di Lucca to mistrust Larry at first. Puzo decides to close the book with a cup of coffee: readers see Lucia Santa one last time sipping coffee as she watches out of the window of her apartment. She and her family are finally moving to Long Island, a sign that the family has finally gained a superior status and will leave the tenements.

In *The Right Thing to Do* (1988), by Josephine Gattuso Hendin, iced coffee becomes a peace offering. Nino Giardello decides to follow his daughter, Gina. He knows that he is losing control over her and wants to see what she has been doing. Gina realizes that her father is following her and, to take a small revenge, walks all over the city. She finally enters Ferrara's where she will finally invite her father in. Feeling guilty because she has caused Nino to go on a wild goose chase, she offers him coffee. To her father's dismay about the iced espresso, she answers that is "(b)etter than amphetamines" (85) and it will help with his energy. Nino drinks the coffee that smooths the "lump" in his throat (85). Over coffee, he realizes that his daughter has humiliated him, but because they are in a public place, he does not make a scene, especially in a place, where people know them (86). He notices that his daughter is in complete control of the situation, even by the way she puts sugar and cream in her coffee. When asked, why she does not order a coffee ice cream, Gina responds: "This way it comes out just the way I want" (86). At this point the coffee is no longer a peace offering, but a metaphor for her life. She wants control over it and wants to live her life as she wishes, and not the life her "dictatorial" father wants for her (86).

Come Back to Sorrento by Joseph Petracca (1948)

A text that is telling of the early Italian immigration experience is *Come Back to Sorrento*, by Joseph Petracca. Written with a light and humorous tone, Petracca finds inspiration in his own family's history. Published in 1948, the book tells the story of the Esposito family in the 20s. This is the typical Italian family, where the male character thinks he is in charge but, mainly, it is the woman that is pulling all the strings, and she usually does it with food. Throughout the book, Papa, Patsy Esposito, the father, is saving money to move back to Italy while mama, Maria, is happy where she is. Needless to say, the Esposito family will never go back.

Connection, Food as

In *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa describes an unforgettable meal that her great grandmother, Luisa, prepared for her. This was not an ordinary meal, but a traditional Italian meal, one of the first Ragusa has ever had. She states that she would lose her appetite when facing new situations, but this time, she does not. In fact, she has a second and a third serving of it. As she is tasting the Italian food, she is able to make a connection with the cooking of Miriam, her African American grandmother: “[t]he flavors were familiar, welcome; there was so much in them that I connected with Miriam’s cooking, with her kitchen across town, the saltiness, the heaviness, the feeling of being lulled and caressed by the food as it settled inside you” (135). Ragusa is longing for a connection to both her ethnic roots, the Italian and the African American, and tries to connect them through food. Food also allows a spatial connection, putting the two homes together. Ragusa feels safe and loved thanks to the sharing of food, especially the heaviness, that, in this case, is an important characteristic, as it seems to anchor her. Additionally, she is not interested in describing the food Luisa prepared for her, but food assists her in establishing a relationship and a bridge between her being Italian and African American.

Contractual Marriage

Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, is forced by her adoptive mother to marry Santino, an older man that Rosa calls a “devil” (133) and never liked from the first time she saw him talking to Mamma Lena (122). Her wedding is more of a contract than a real wedding: “Santino is generous. He gave the money and I bought you a nice wedding dress . . . And Santino has gold ready too . . .” (147). Even the women in the village tell her that she must marry him: “Never mind, Rosa, you have to marry a man you don’t like . . . He is not poor. You will not be hungry” (153). What is important is not a happy life with a man she loves, but a man that will provide for her. These women know her and know about her preoccupation with food. However, Rosa will continue to be hungry as her need for real love is not coming to fruition. She marries Santino at the age of fifteen and while he is back in the United States, she gives birth to her first child. When Santino finally calls for her to come to the U.S., she needs to leave him behind. She finally finds out about her fate: “Those men in the iron mines in Missouri need women to do the cooking and washing” (160) She is reminded again by Mamma Lena about her place: “You must go. However, bad that man is, he is your husband-he has the right to command you. It would be a sin against God not to obey” (160). And Rosa must obey and goes to America.

See also Patriarchal Society

Cooking as Panacea

Maria Dalli, in *Like Lesser Gods*, even in hard times, continues to cook. After her husband has contracted TB and has been taken to the countryside, she understands that he is very sick and will soon die, but she is still strong: “Maria was making ravioli. She had always enjoyed fashioning these tasty morsels of meat and pastry: a song blossomed in her throat, and her capable hands kneaded the dough in gay tempo. But today the rhythm of her hands was a plodding adagio” (211).

It is her wedding anniversary, but it will be a somber one. Even if making the ravioli is difficult, she is resolute in keeping up the appearances and preparing the familiar food affords her the normalcy she craves.

Cooking “Classes”

Louise DeSalvo has written two autobiographies, *Vertigo*, where she focuses more on her sister’s suicide and how that has impacted her immediate family and *Crazy in the Kitchen*, where she narrates her difficult and painful childhood, but also her negative and positive experiences with food. In *Vertigo*, she is despondent towards her role as the food preparer. In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, on the other hand, she loves being in the kitchen, her kitchen is right across from her den, where she writes: she even admits that without cooking, she could not write. However, in the former, her disposition towards food is more pragmatic. In fact, she describes her experiences in her cooking classes at school quite differently. In *Vertigo*, she explains how “(a)ll the girls are required to take home economics to make them into good home makers” (156) and she thinks “it’s stupid” (156). However, she likes the “cheery kitchen with the stoves, and well-stocked refrigerators all lined up in a row” (156). Her despondent tone is carried on to the description of the food they prepare in which she is not interested. She admits that she should be taking shop, because it will be helpful in the future and also because she can meet boys. Sharing this with her readers, DeSalvo makes a stand against the role that others are expecting of her. On the other hand, she considers the ability to cook as an unimportant skill to have for the future.

DeSalvo tells a complete different story in *Crazy in the Kitchen*. In both texts, she admits having failed at sewing, but in this specific text, she raves about her experience in home economics: “I am very happy in the kitchen at school because I see our teacher as a soul mate . . . I discover that there is ceremony in cooking . . . I like this. Here, there is order, discipline. Here, I feel safe”

(51). She shares that in this class is where she begins her education in the pleasure of the kitchen, in the pleasure for the flesh. Most importantly, maybe unconsciously, she admits why cooking is important for her: “I learn how little effort it takes to produce something that-unlike so many of the other things I must do in my life-can always be counted upon to provide pleasure” (51). This realization shows a shift in the role of women in the kitchen: no longer sort of forced in the food preparer’s role, now women can cook to give pleasure and, at the same time, enjoy the experience.

In *Vertigo*, DeSalvo is very adamant about her displeasure with the teacher and the food they are learning to cook. On the other hand, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, she considers her teacher a “diva” as herself (52). Her teacher is her role model in the kitchen as her mother failed in that specific role. Her tone is of admiration: “(s)he insists on perfection, scolds delivery boys if they bring inferior merchandise, gushes if what is brought is fresh and wonderful. The kitchen is her stage, and she swoops and twirls and stirs and beats and slices her way through our class in a dance of the ages” (52). DeSalvo receives a good kitchen education and gets to experience food that was better than the one her mother cooks. She admits that the food they make is, obviously, 1950s food, uninteresting food, tuna casserole and chicken salads, and not Italian. However, DeSalvo is very appreciative of this experience because it teaches her about how to cook and how to enjoy the food. In fact, she thinks that she and her classmates “were learning how to be good housewives” (53) and what she really receives from this class is an invaluable lesson: “. . . I was learning under the tutelage of this unlikely guru, the wanton of pleasure of the sybaritic life” (53).

The change in attitudes in the two books is problematic as the reader does not know what story to believe. One can also surmise that, maybe, DeSalvo has changed her mind about her high school home economics class, as *Vertigo* was published eight years earlier, or that she just changed

her story to better match the theme in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, to showcase her coming of age in the kitchen, and to highlight the lack of this teaching in her home.

“Il Cortile”

In *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, Donna Gabaccia researches Sicilian immigration to Elizabeth Street, NY, for a period that spans from 1880 to 1920. She regards the Sicilian kitchen as the “center of family life” (82). Most importantly, she points out that the kitchen plays the role of the *cortile*, the common area shared in small agrotowns in Sicily. Sicilians, in other words, recreates the former *cortile* in their homes, once they moved to the United States. Gabaccia adds that even if some of the homes have a *salotto* (living room), “the kitchen remained the favored place for visiting and entertaining” (83).

Crazy in the Kitchen: Food, Feuds, Forgiveness in an Italian American Family by Louise DeSalvo (2004)

In this autobiography, Louise DeSalvo uses food and her family’s problematic and traumatic experiences to highlight what it meant to grow up in a dysfunctional family environment. Mainly, DeSalvo used *Crazy in the Kitchen* to talk about her failed relationship with her mother. In fact, in the book dedication, her mother’s name does not appear, only her father’s. She uses the theme of food because she wants to show her readers how her mother fails her role: she is unable to satisfactorily feed her family and is unable to be a mother. Only in very few instances, DeSalvo recognizes that her mother loved her, but one can sense, throughout the novel, a lot of resentment and mixed emotions in the narrator’s voice. However, the negative tone, sometimes, turns the narration into a nagging session. Thankfully, her step grandmother lives with her family and she becomes a surrogate mother for DeSalvo.

Courtship

Many female characters use food as a tool to court and show their love to their spouses. In fact, the act of cooking a favorite dish for a partner or family members is what gives Italian American women agency and power in their households. Joey, the narrator in *Come Back to Sorrento* describes one evening, when his parents are still engaged. Patsy, his father, shows up unannounced and when he tries to leave, Maria, makes him stay: “Today you eat with us.” (10). When Patsy says that he has already eaten, she responds: “A sandwich! That’s what you call eating? You work six days a week, twelve hours a day, and then comes Sunday and you eat a sandwich” (10). First, she places the wine, a chilled bottle of Chianti, in the middle of the table and then proceeds to get the food: “Mama took out the shallow baking pan and moved it back and forth under Papa’s moustache. It was *lasagna*, ribbon macaroni casserole, Mama’s best dish, and the smell of the baking *mozzarella*, the stringy cheese, and the spiced sausages-little bites of fire-made Papa hungry all over again” (10). Mrs. Esposito is at ease using her skills to conquer her future husband. The wine is used as a weapon, as well: she wants him to keep drinking while she is doing the dishes. She pushes him to drink: “Finish the bottle . . . It makes the blood” (12). This is in line with the idea that Italians believe that drinking red wine will make blood. The wine helps Papa think about the future and Maria pushes her future husband to drink, to finish the bottle: Maria’s behavior sets the tone of the kind of relationship they will share. In fact, Maria will control much of the family dynamics with food.

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, the readers witness Lucia Santa’s skills in the kitchen, as well, as she tries to impress her second husband, Frank Corbo. He is introduced to the family during the Sunday “midday meal, the feast for Italian families” (30). Lucia Santa has probably prepared a very good meal because she may be trying to impress him and through his stomach, she wants to

conquer him and make him see that he needs to stay with this family. As requested by Italian etiquette, Frank also tries to impress his new family bringing sweets for the children and homemade wine for Lucia Santa. The narrator describes the meal with few but effective details. He pays close attention to colors, such as red and green as to wake his readers' senses: his intention is to let the readers know how tasty everything is because of Lucia Santa's cooking skills. In fact, the sauce is not just regular sauce, but it is the "finest" (30) and the meatball are "beautifully round" (30). She also serves "the dark green lettuce with olive oil and red vinegar, and then walnuts to eat with the wine" (30). All details have been taken care of and the narrator seems to be praising Lucia Santa for her ability to prepare a simple but succulent and unforgettable lunch for her potential husband. At the same time, the way he describes the meal places the narrator, and readers alike in the middle of this lunch, in Lucia Santa's kitchen: "Everything had a bite to it of herbs and garlic and strong black peppers" (30). Senses are awakened: taste, sight, and smell are at work and the readers are, potentially, as enthralled, as Frank, about Lucia Santa-so much so that they want to be in her presence so that they can also take part in the libation.

Culturalism

An effective way to read Italian American literature is through "culturalist" lenses. Readers are presented with characters that are representative of the Italian communities and settings that are raw and historical. These communities were the enclaves, where Italians became self-sufficient and, gradually, citizens of the United States. Ashley et al., in *Food and Cultural Studies* argue that culturalism is humanist because it stresses the subjective experience. Culturalism does take into consideration the separations that occur in society and is aware of gender, ethnic background, and sexuality differences, and it favors a Marxist outlook, with its subsequent questioning about class and the male working class (10). Additionally, culturalism stresses the human presence and

participation in a given community. Ashely et al. argue that culturalists are interested in the bounded spaces, where they can analyze “the dramas of microdomination and microresistance” (13). The bounded space for the Italian Americans is the enclave, where they can buy, sell, produce, and enjoy the food they want. Even if they have freedom, their foodways are constantly under attack as the government with its continuous attacks on the immigrants’ diet is trying to assimilate them.

Culture, Food as

Especially for Italian immigrants, food was a way to represent their culture on foreign soil. Once in the United States, they began to ameliorate their economic status and could afford ingredients that, in the past, had not been accessible. Thus, when they cooked Italian food on American soil, they distanced themselves from American food and declared their *Italianità*. Additionally, they chose the food they wanted to eat and supported the creation of Italian stores where Italian products could be bought. With food, they were able not only to teach America about Italian food, but also resist a complete acculturation.

Massimo Montanari in *Il cibo come cultura*, acknowledges that food is culture when one produces it, because man does not only use what he finds in nature but vows to create his own food (XI). Food also becomes culture when one prepares it, because once the main ingredients are gathered, man transforms them with the use of fire and varied methodologies (XII). Furthermore, he states that food is culture when it is consumed, because man does not just eat anything but chooses what to eat, based on his cultural background. Most importantly, he affirms that “. . . il cibo si configura come elemento decisivo dell’identità umana e come uno dei più efficaci strumenti per comunicarla (food becomes a decisive element of human identity and one of the best

ways to communicate it)” (XII). Thus, food is more than just nourishment that allows us to survive, but it implies other deeper meanings, such as culture and communication.

In his historical preface, Montanari states that agriculture began as a question of necessity. In fact, when hunting and gathering became insufficient for mankind to survive, man began to cultivate, around 10,000 years ago. Every area in the world picked one grain, and in Europe that grain was wheat. Agriculture allowed the creation of cities where man could “artificially” create his foods (8). Montanari *claims* that bread represents the exit from the bestial state and the conquest of civilization (9). In fact, according to the first literary manuscripts from Mesopotamia, man was introduced to bread by a woman who was a prostitute, and this exchange leads to the creation of the role of women as the custodian of food knowledge and as a sexual object. However, the role of women as keeper of the food knowledge included their role as observers and pickers of the right plants, and in a sense, gave them power (10). Even wine, always present on Italian tables, as other fermented drinks, are not just drinks but they represent the result of a knowledge that was conquered by man, i.e., man had learned how to dominate the natural processes for his own benefit (10).

Montanari agrees with the famous saying “Tell me what you eat, I will tell **who** you are” (please note that in Italian, we say “who” and not “what”). Thus, the way one eats reveals the personality and the character of that individual. But most importantly, he recognizes that not only the individual is revealed but also his belonging to a certain group in society. Additionally, the quantity and quality of the food reveal a social identity (99).

Recognizing food as a communicative tool, Montanari states that the food system “contiene e trasporta la cultura di chi la pratica (contains and transport the culture of the individual that practices it)” and it is the “depositario delle tradizioni e dell’identità di gruppo (serves as

depository of the traditions and identity of the group)” (153). This explains why Italian food for Italian immigrants, especially during the second wave of the later immigrations, must be present on their tables: it makes them feel Italian and allows them to be part of what Montanari calls “a collective group” (153). He states that food is even a vehicle through which man auto-represents himself and comes in contact with other cultures, as it is easier to eat their food than trying to understand the language. And this is exactly what happened in Italian households in the U.S.: American food became one of the elements that Italians had to accept and learn how to become American.

Food defines culture and, through the consumption of said food, its consumers get assigned to a specific ethnic culture. Additionally, when the act of cooking is performed, the creation of the dish undergoes a process. Ashley et al., in their preface to their book, *Food and Cultural Studies*, have recognized “five major cultural processes: production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption” (vii) when we discuss the meaning of any food cultural phenomenon. If we apply this model to one staple in Italian food, we will get this result: prosciutto is produced, but of course it must be produced according to some rules and regulations. Later, prosciutto is presented on a dish but some, belonging to other cultures, might find it gross, as it is basically raw, cured meat, or dirty, as it is forbidden by their religion. However, the Italians will probably eat seconds, and these might be rich Italians, as prosciutto can be expensive. Thus, the consumption process is not only based on taste but also class, gender, ethnic, religious, and historical identities. This is what in cultural studies is called circuit of life, and each of these processes, according to Ashley et al., “is unthinkable without the rest” (viii).

This circuit is present in Italian enclaves, where food is important for several reasons: it gives nourishment, but also comforts in hard times; it represents culture, as it sets the Italians apart

from the Americans and other immigrants and gives them a national identity they do know they have; and, most importantly, it is used to communicate with family members, the outside community, and American society. Italians use food to resist a complete assimilation into mainstream America, but they also use it to show that they have made it: the more food they can display on their tables, the richer they can be perceived by the community. Food, then, becomes a means used “to speak” when the immigrants cannot, yet, satisfactorily communicate in English.

Food is a very loaded cultural element, especially for those cultures that emigrated to other countries and, in fact, gains a very important role in the survival of the minority culture inside the receiving culture. When a housemaker prepares Italian food, she is performing the act of feeding and fulfilling her duty, but she probably uses recipes that belongs to her family. Consequently, the homemaker performs an important act of cultural survival. Ironically, sometimes, Italian food, for the younger generations, offers a reason to be ashamed of their culture: oftentimes they abhor the smell and the taste of the food their mothers prepare because it sets them apart from the other kids, the real Americans. As chronicled in literature, only after three or four generations, food becomes, once again, a positive cultural marker, and is embraced by those Italian Americans that want to keep the Italian adjective attached to the American one. The food selection also categorizes Italians according to their region. Even if we like to lump Italian food in one big pot, regional differences were, and are, still relevant.

Dago Red

The name dago red refers to homemade red wine. According to John Mariani, in *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, the contemptuous slur had been used since the middle of the nineteenth century (131). Dago Red can be found in print around 1906, when Italian immigrants began to be

called “wops” and “guineas”. However, he argues that the negative connotation disappears with use, and it becomes to be more of a slang word, rather than an insult (131).

See also Wine

Dandelions

A favorite food staple in *Like Lesser Gods*’ is the dandelions. There are plenty in the hills of Granite Town. Mr. Tiff accompanies the Dalli children on the last picking of the season. Mr. Tiff will make sure to pick lots of them so that Maria could can them for Pietro. Mr. Tiff seems to be wanting to contribute to the marital bliss: it is maybe his way to try to smooth things out between husband and wife. Mr. Tiff is in the position to provide for Pietro’s favorite food so that Maria can prepare it for him, creating a win-win situation. The dandelions are also used to offer the opportunity for the receiving American culture to learn from the incoming Italian culture. During the outing, as Mr. Tiff is getting ready to cut the dandelions, he hears an “icy” voice: “Look here, I won’t have my lawn dug up!” (43). Mrs. Minna Douglas, the owner of the land, is having a bad day and takes it on poor Mr. Tiff who in his broken English defends his efforts: “Me, I don’t dig – I cut at the top. See?” (43). She retorts: “I don’t care how you pick them, I just don’t want them picked. There are any number of dandelions over the hill, in the field below” (43). Nevertheless, Mr. Tiff is able to break her iciness, recognizing that she might be related to Denny, a good friend of the Dalli children. The interchange that ensues is telling of Mr. Tiff’s will to justify his being there and to ultimately make fun of the hostess.

“*Dio mio*, you planted these dandelions?”

“Of course not! How foolish! People don’t plant dandelions in their lawns. It spoils them.”

“Hah, really then you don’t *want* them here, no?”

. . .

“It’s our gardener’s business to take care of that!”

“I go, I go,” . . . “The gardener – he eats the dandelions?” . . . “At our house, we eat them.

You know, in soup and in *insalata* -”

“*Insal-*“ . . . “You mean salads? You eat raw dandelions?”

“You eat the lettuce raw, no? And the endive?” (44)

After this quite humorous interchange, the reader realizes that Mr. Tiff has been subtly making fun of her. However, her rudeness is repaid with an unforgettable meal. The author, Mari Tomasi, puts Mr. Tiff in control, possibly trying to elevate his immigrant position to a superior status: he makes Mrs. Douglas clean the dandelions and orders the maid to boil the eggs. When he asks for garlic and is told that they do not have any, he produces a clove from his shirt pocket. He offers an explanation as to why he has garlic with him: as the flavor of American ham is flat, he brings garlic with him on these picking excursions, so that he can add flavor to his sandwiches (44). Tomasi’s description of the preparation of the salad is quite mouthwatering: Mr. Tiff cuts the garlic and coats the salad bowl; then, he chops the eggs and an onion. He adds everything to the salad bowl and “let trickle a thin flow of olive oil. A heavier stream of vinegar broke up the golden globules of oil and sent them shimmering between the greens. He added salt and pepper and tossed the salad lightly until each dandelion leaf was coated with yellowed vinegar” (45). His act of preparation is detailed up to the globules, as if it were blood, and demands attention: preparing a simple dish needs to be admired with awe and respect. His skills are used to break down the

American hostess' prejudice and ignorance. In fact, after trying the food, she is so enthralled by it that she wants to prepare it for her husband and for her bridge club (45). Hence, Tomasi is also wanting to make a social commentary: this very simple but quite flavorful dish is often prepared by the poor immigrants who are able to cope with very little, but, ironically, it is also considered a delicacy by the more affluent. The disdain that Mrs. Douglas felt at the beginning and her wariness about trying the salad show that she might think that this ethnic dish is just beneath her, almost barbaric: after all, dandelions are weeds! However, she changes her mind to the extent that she will bring it to the bridge game, where we can surmise that other rich ladies like her are going to be. Hence, the salad that she denigrates is now being served to the rich. Mr. Tiff's simple salad preparation has allowed for a teaching moment but, most importantly for an unforgettable cultural encounter.

Domesticity

The domesticity that allowed for the survival of the Italian family inside U.S. communities might have delayed the assimilation of the Italian immigrants. According to Thomas Ferraro, in *Feeling Italian*, many Southern Italian immigrants' assimilation was slowed down by their being victims of their own values, such as clannishness. He also adds that "(i)ndividual opportunity was held in check among them by domestic needs and domestic focus, including domestic pleasures (the conviviality of the dinner table, the kitchen, the bridge table), a culture of poverty" (108). Domesticity, then, seems to have been a blessing as it allows for Italian families to survive in hard times, but, at the same time, a curse, as the domestic demands on the immigrants distract them from fully being a part of American society.

Economic Status

At the first stages of immigration, most immigrants were trying to survive hunger, as they were lacking resources. Later, when their social status began to improve, Italian American families could afford to buy different Italian ingredients. Consequently, their diet improved, as well as their demands on the market. Quoting a study done by Marjorie DeVault, Ashely et al. assert that family economics does, in fact, impact the role of women: “while for middle-class women the family meal may symbolize love and care, for poor women putting a meal on the table is more likely to be an assertion of survival” (131). Even if this study is quite recent, the argument can be applied to the Italian American experience. Only when the social status improved, Italian American women were able to afford to prepare the foods that they had only seen on the tables of the Italian upper class.

However, for De Salvo’s family, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, the improvement in economic status did not go hand in hand with an improvement in De Salvo’s mother’s cooking skills. When De Salvo’s family moves from the tenement, her mother has finally a real kitchen with a gas stove. This is a step up from what she had in the tenement: now, she does not have to load the stove with the coal and wait for it to heat. DeSalvo describes the first encounter her mother has with the stove: “(s)he runs her fingers over the stove like a woman teasing a lover. She can’t believe the magic of this stove. She walks into the kitchen. Turns the burners on and off. On and off. She is mesmerized by the flame and by her good fortune, though she will never use the oven in this stove” (44). This description allows De Salvo to attack and fault her mother for her unwillingness to conform to her food-provider role. The stove is a step up, a step closer to being American, but it will be rarely used.

Additionally, DeSalvo's mother has now an electric refrigerator "that does not need huge blocks of ice that melt onto the floor" (44). The kitchen also has lots of cupboards, which means that she does not have to shop every day. In her mind, the upgrade in the size of the kitchen and its gadgets represent the parting from what held her down, even her ethnic background: "Now my mother is away from the old ways, away from the dimly lit, cold-water tenement where she struggled up the stairs with two children and a stroller and groceries. She is away from the smell of the other people's cooking, away from the old men playing pinochle on the folding table on the sidewalk" (44). De Salvo's mother wanted to leave behind not just the tiring chores, but especially her Italian heritage, so that she could feel more American.

Emotions, Food and

Characters use the act of cooking to release emotions. Even when cooking is not a welcome chore, it allows the character to express their frustrations. For Louise DeSalvo's mother, in *Crazy in The Kitchen*, cooking is not always a positive experience. In fact, DeSalvo's relationship with her mother suffers because the mother very rarely provides the food that DeSalvo craves. The mother begins to use short cuts and uses canned food to prepare meals in her attempt to be more American. However, for special occasions, such as birthdays or holidays, she still prepares the food from scratch. This preparation entails the cutting of onions, as all the favorite dishes do. DeSalvo observes that when her mother is making these special meals she cries, not like most people that get teary-eyed when cutting onions, but she "really cried. Her chest heaved, her head sagged, her eyes bled huge tears onto the scarred Formica countertop where she did her cutting and hopping" (33). Cutting the onion becomes her emotional release, and DeSalvo agrees that her mother has a lot to cry about: orphan at a young age, she only has her father because the stepmother never shows her love; she is abused by some relatives who are supposed to take care of her; her

husband comes back from World War II a changed man; her father dies leaving her alone; and she has two daughters that only bring her concern, one depressed like she was, and the other one, DeSalvo, a rebel. Other than those days, DeSalvo never really sees her mother cry, not even when DeSalvo's sister commits suicide. Even though her mother's "emotions were always extreme and unmodulated" (34), cutting the onion give her the opportunity to release all her pain and sorrows. And these tears, according to DeSalvo, become ingredients of the food that her mother is preparing. Consequently, DeSalvo admits that she is afraid that when she eats that food, filled with her mother's tears, she is also eating the tears, as well, and "become unhappy as she was, and as unsatisfied" (37).

In other texts, the act of feeding is another mechanism that is used to cope with bad situations and death. At the beginning of *Christ in Concrete*, when an Italian construction worker, Geremio, and some of his crew members die in a construction accident, the wives, who are patiently waiting on their husband to return from work, have heard of the accident, but they do not know who has been hurt, or even worse, who has died. Annunziata, Geromio's wife, is among these women. Her reaction is to feed and entertain the neighbors that have come together after the news: "Annunziata back to the wall, her lips quivering. With a motion of her hands as though she were a distant symphony, she intoned: "It will come out . . . the Lord will not permit . . . fathers are needed . . . wait, and my Geremio will come and assure you . . . wait . . . partake of my cake and wine"" (22). This invitation not only shows her willingness to share this awful moment but her faith in God is displayed as well. It is quite an invitation to share the bread/cake and the wine, almost like a communion, after her husband's ultimate sacrifice. There is a connection between the horrible and cold reality that is about to hit these families and the food they are sharing: "(t)he cakes had cooled, would never again know warmth. And not only they had lost their warmth" (22).

Even the people tasting the food are slowly going cold, that is, losing hope to see their relatives alive, as they are fearing the worst. The narrator uses this contrast, between cold and warm, to effectively express the oppressive atmosphere that lingers in the air. Trying to delay facing reality, Annunziata keeps repeating: “Bring out the food and drink. Give to the good paesans that which will not make them sad” (23). Annunziata’s role now is to make her guests comfortable and her preoccupation to feed helps her keep her sanity while she waits for the news about her husband.

In *The Patron Saint of Ugly*, the desire to feed is felt by the Ferraris’ neighbors, as well. Preparing food is a way to help the Ferraris deal with the loss of the father and son, who die in a car accident caused by icy roads. Unphased by the dangerous conditions of the roads, some Italian ladies in the neighborhood congregate in the snowy street and decide what to prepare: “*You make the minestrone; I’ll make the risotto . . .*” (192). Food, then, has the power to soothe upset characters, but it is also used to give agency to characters and to mark the closeness of the Italian community when in need.

The End by Salvatore Scibona (2008)

This novel, a debut one for Salvatore Scibona, tells the story of five characters in an Italian neighborhood in Cleveland: a baker, a seamstress, a jeweler, an elderly abortionist, and a teenage boy. The story is not told chronologically and it spans from 1913 to 1953, and it begins on August 15, 1953, while the Italian neighborhood of Elephant Park is getting ready to celebrate Assumption Day. The lives of the five characters are interwoven and are connected by a murder. Readers might think that food plays a minor role in this novel, but the author begins the story with a baker. Oftentimes, guests are invited to dinner or to partake in sharing food. Additionally, one of the side stories tells of Italian immigrants leaving the city to go to the country to work the land.

Enterprise Spirit

The old adage says, necessity is the mother of intelligence and invention. When Italian immigrants could not find a job in construction or in the mines, they found a solution: they became organ-grinders, rag pickers, and junk dealers. In *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement*, Jane Ziegelman argues that these “jobs,” even if they allowed the poor Italians to survive, did nothing to elevate the status of Italians in general, on the contrary: Americans began looking at these peculiar figures as lazy, criminal, and a nuisance (188). This disgust towards Italians was also supported by their diet: “stale bread, macaroni with oil, and . . . a handful of common garden greens” (189). However, the rag pickers, mostly women, seemed to have been instrumental in feeding their families. Their diet consisted of a “hodgepodge of bread crusts, vegetable trimmings, bones, and meat scraps plucked from middle-class trash bins” (190). They would go to the city’s markets, fisheries, grocery stores, and fruit vendors and search their garbage: “American abundance was so staggering that the garbage accumulated daily in cities like New York could support a shadowy system of odd distribution operated largely by immigrants” (191). Not only was the rag picker a life saver for her family, but she was a business woman. She would keep what she needed but would sell to other peddlers, restaurants, and neighborhood grocers what she did not. The rag picker was also an accomplished cook: “(in) her own kitchen, the rag-picker’s culinary gleanings formed the basis of a limited but nourishing diet” (191). These rag-picker cooks wanted to feed and delight but were also inventive, turning the damaged fruit into jelly and marmalade (191).

However, peddling was not the only way Italians were responding to a lack of jobs. For example, several characters in *Like Lesser Gods* show an enterprise spirit. Mari Tomasi wanted to show her readers that Italians immigrants are industrious and willing to make sacrifices. For

example, when Mr. Tiff realizes that he is becoming a financial burden for the Dalli family, he devises a job that he can do: he gets a wheelbarrow, some ice, sodas, bananas, oranges, and chocolate bars to be sold to the workers in the quarry. He knows that his sister would not approve of this manual job, but he recollects that even “Christ had carried lumber in His father’s humble woodshop” (55) and that even Saint Anthony had used his hands in manual labor. Even if this new enterprise is successful, when he meets up with Pietro Dalli, the reader realizes that Pietro is not very pleased: Mr. Tiff’s enterprise is showing everyone that Pietro is unable to take care of his financial duties and is hurting his image in front of his peers’ eyes. Thus, Piero offers to buy the whole “business.”

The same enterprise spirit, a telling characteristic of immigrants that, when in need, find ways to make a living, is shared by Lucia, a Dalli family’s friend. Lucia’s husband has died because of the lung disease that Maria Dalli is so afraid of; thus, she is left to raise her children with a little money that she wants to keep for her children’s education. When Mr. Tiff finds out by chance that she is selling wine out of her house and warns her about the danger of running such an illicit business, she defends her enterprise: “Say it, say whatever you will! If you think I like to turn my kitchen into a taproom for thirsty men – you are mistaken -” (62). When Mr. Tiff points out that it is against the law, she replies “Others in Granitetown do it . . . Is it against the law to feed my boys? . . . in the meantime, we have to eat. How can I get an outside job when there is a baby to look after? Selling wine is better than charity” (62). Charity is not an option: her pride will not let her accept that type of help and she’d rather go against the law than to be seen broken and in need. Mr. Tiff realizes that this venture might not last and comes up with the idea of turning Lucia’s house into a seamstress’ shop, perhaps saving her from jail.

Even Maria, Pietro Dalli's wife, thinks that opening a business will allow her husband to quit the dangerous job at the quarry: "(l)et us put shelves in our little living room. Let us have a store, with the bell on the front door to tell us when customers arrive. We can dress always in Sunday best, and you can sell the bread to the living instead of cutting stones for the dead" (14). This is the portrayal of the American dream, a little store, with the bell, and being able to dress nicely for the Sunday mass. The food store, in Maria's eyes, will provide enough for the family to live well and prevent her husband from dying an early death. However, her husband does not agree. He confesses to Mr. Tiff that he had meant to talk to him, as well, about the same issue: "I was going to enlist your aid in making Maria understand that for me there is no work but stonecutting" (20). When Mr. Tiff tries to convince him otherwise, Pietro really lays out what he thinks of Maria's plan: "Run a store? Hand over the counter the products that other hands have made? No, no. For me there can never be anything like cutting a beautiful stone and knowing it will last, as I have fashioned it, long after all of us have gone" (20). Pietro's opposition towards opening a store is selfish: his American dream is not having a store, but to be a stonecutter. His worth is measured by what his own hands create and not what someone else has. On the other hand, Pietro's attitude might indicate that Pietro is less of a dreamer and uses the financial burden he carries as a valid excuse to continue working at the quarry. In his eyes, owning a store does not equate to personal gratification or a safe way to make a living.

Unlike Pietro, Umbertina in *Umbertina* (1979), with her no sentimentality but "American practicality" (76), sees the advantage of owning her own business. Her business gets started by chance. When her family moves to the country and her husband, Santino, begins to work for the railroad yards, she prepares food for his lunch: she prepares pizza "sprinkled with oil, oregano, and a touch of ground red pepper . . . with onions, or with potatoes and rosemary, or pieces of

scamozza cheese, or olives and anchovies” (93). However, she does not use tomatoes, unlike the Neapolitans, because it makes the pizza soggy and messes up the taste of the dough (94). If pizza is not on the menu, she would give him “*panini* of meat, or egg and escarole, or peppers” (94). The lengthy and detailed description by the omniscient narrator wants to highlight two important elements: Umbertina’s skills in the kitchen and the availability of fresh ingredients. Additionally, it also shows that now Umbertina’s family can afford to purchase these ingredients.

Santino is envied by his coworkers because of his delicious food: “[s]oon they were asking Serafino to bring them the same lunch as he had-they’d pay” (94). Little by little, this small enterprise turns into a real business: Umbertina begins to sell her food in a real establishment, a “*spaccio*- a space, as it was known in the old country- in a little storefront on Third street” (95). Two years later, the *spaccio* turns into “a *groceria*, a real grocery store” (96). Then, the store becomes also an import business: “(s)he carried pastas of all shapes and sizes in glass-fronted drawers, and genuine semolina flour for those who still made pasta at home” (97). Later on, the business evolves into a bank, a steamship and ticket agency, and finally an export business which also sells alcohol. The success of the business is due to Umbertina’s strong will and determination.

In fact, in this family it is Umbertina that “wears the pants.” Santino is quite passive and goes along with Umbertina’s ideas and projects: “Serafino let his wife take charge-somewhat because he was an easygoing fellow, somewhat because she would have done what she wanted anyway” (97) and he also thinks that she is more intelligent than he is. Umbertina is unlike other women that stay in bed in the morning instead of preparing food for their husbands (94) and she does not cut corners, either. When she prepares the orders for her husband’s coworkers, she uses “the most virgin oil, the most aged and mellow cheese, the best salami and freshly baked bread” (94). She also possesses such an incredible memory and concentration that she never gets an order

wrong. She does not know how to read and write, but her business sense allows her to reap incredible profits for her family's future. The author wants to showcase a character that is strong and resolute and to write a story of an immigrant family that has made it in the United States, thanks to hard work, determination, and tenacity.

Edible Heritage and Culture

When one eats ethnic food, not only enjoys the specific ingredients but also partakes in enjoying a final product that maybe was created many years ago by other generations of people belonging to that particular ethnic group. The presence or absence of certain ingredients are what sets off one dish from another and marks them as part of a certain culture. Once we eat a certain dish, we also 'bite into' its culture. Vincent Schiavelli, in his introduction to *Bruculinu, America*, states that food "served to nourish" his Italian heritage and that food is "edible culture" (10). Schiavelli spells out what food represents for the Italian immigrant: food figurately nourishes the heritage because it stands as a reminder of where one comes from and, through its flavors, one satisfies the need to belong to a specific group.

See also Culture, Food as

Emasculation at the Table

Traditional and nontraditional Italian foods, like T-bone steaks, are served for the celebration of Garnet Ferrari's communion in *The Patron Saint of Ugly*, by Marie Manilla. Garnet's father, Mr. Angelo Ferrari, is very proud of the steaks he is about to prepare for his family, but especially for his father. His wife, Marina, praises him: "They are beautiful, Angelo . . . Your father will love them" (68). This comment makes Angelo hopeful: "Dad's chest juttet out" (68). Readers understand that maybe this son-father relationship is on shaky grounds. One can feel that

Angelo is trying to please his father and possibly trying to get his approval and cooking these beautiful steaks might earn him some points. Through Garnet's description, readers realize that Angelo's father is, in fact, not a very pleasant person: he bosses people around, is very selfish, and is not the most affectionate towards his family. The fact that Angelo's chest juts out let the reader understand that the son is trying to impress his father so that he can get praised.

Garnet's Uncle Dom is of no help and adds animosity to the already fragile relationship between his brother and his father. Angelo is a bricklayer, and he can barely provide for his family. However, he has been able to provide these steaks, thanks to his bartering, at night, putting down a floor in the local supermarket. Uncle Dom, Angelo's brother, asks where he has stolen them and Garnet's mother comes to the rescue lying, saying that they have used the birthday money her mother has sent them. This comment allows for another attack on Mr. Ferrari's manhood: "So the woman of the house puts the meat on the table" (70).

More drama will occur when Garnet is not pleased with the way her steak is cooked. She does not want bloody meat: "The blacker, the better" (71). However, at the table, she is given a bloody steak and she refuses to eat, Her Grandpa does not allow his wife, Diamante, to eat it: "Don't you dare . . . You no take-a food from your elder's mouth" (72). And when Garnet's mother interjects, Granpa attacks his son: "I said eat! Angelo, this is your house and you are her father. You make this child eat" (73). Angelo, then, must obey his father and asks his daughter to eat "[j]ust a couple of bites" (73).

Garnet, however, cannot do it, and her Grandpa, as he stuffs his face with a potato, orders his son: "Angelo. You spank this child and send her to her room. That'll teach her to obey" (74). And when Marina tries to object, Uncle Dom tears into his brother's manhood once more: "Not

only does your wife bring home the bacon, but she calls the shots” (74). Angelo, then, is forced to save the little dignity he has left and spanks his child.

Euphoria

Euphoria was felt in Italian enclaves, where food was served and young and older children were expected to be at the table. The subliminal message was to control and to keep their children close. Additionally, even if the abundance of food was a sad reminder of the past painful experiences in the old country, it was often used to keep one’s village in the minds of the commensals as some of the dishes, prepared like in the Old Country, would help to recall the past, and in this case, the euphoria would turn into nostalgia, amongst the oldest Italians. And the Sunday dinners, a custom that is still present in some Italian American families, were euphoric excuses to show that the family had made it. Hence, food signified status: the more food on your table, the richer you were.

Family, Food and

Even when the family lived according to the Old Way rules, the internal dynamics were even more complicated, because the Italian family was patriarchal but also matriarchal. In *Blood of My Blood*, Richard Gambino states that the man had a “passive role in daily household affairs” (15). He argues that this was possible because the woman, the mother, played the active role. In fact, “(h)er designation as the “center” of the family might be extended-she was in a crucial way the center of the culture” (15). She was in charge of the household and responsible for the maintenance of order but also had to nurture the children: “(i)f the father was monarch in the family kingdom, the mother was the powerful minister of internal affairs” (15).

Oftentimes, the homemaker displayed her power through the act of cooking. Preparing food and expecting the family to be at the table gave her an important role in the family dynamics and in the Italian community at large. In fact, in *Food and Cultural Studies*, Ashley et al. consider the family meal and the dinner meal as “potent symbols, even metonyms, of the family itself” (128) and an important part of the creation of families. Ultimately, “the family meal is a practice through which we produce and reproduce human culture and through which we recognize ourselves as belonging to a culture” (128). Italian immigrant women did not really understand the importance of their role that allowed for the survival of the Italian culture in these modern terms, but they surely were instrumental in protecting customs, value systems, and cultural habits that lasted over time. For example, in *Bruculinu*, Vincent Schiavelli recognizes that supper was an important meal of the day, as it offered a way for the family to share the day; it was in fact considered a “a forum for exchange among generations of family members” (10). He admits that food “was always the centerpiece of this ritual” (10).

“*Fare bella figura*” (to look good)

“*Fare bella figura*” is one of those idiomatic expression that does not have an exact translation in English, because it is so closely related to Italian culture, but it encompasses many expected behaviors. Thomas Ferraro, in *Feeling Italian*, attempts to explain its real meaning for Italian Americans. He states that “(f)or an Italian, to do well in food and friendship and clothing is to put a good face (*fare bella figura*) for and in front of your friends-it is part fear, part love-and it generates what Italian mean by *rispetto*, respect: all the more necessary once you’ve made it . . .” (99). In *The Italian American Table*, Simone Cinotto tackles this state of mind, as well, more specifically for the Southern Italians who had moved to Harlem. He considers it as “a culture of hospitality, and the accumulation and display of social capital, in which to offer food was to gain

dignity, reputation, and respect” (55). Thus, *fare bella figura* is to show off the fruits of your labor to your family or neighbors. One can see, then, for the Italian immigrant, how *fare bella figura* is extrinsically connected to food for the Italian immigrant. In more modern terms, *fare bella figura* could also mean: “Do not embarrass yourself or your family by dressing inappropriately or bringing the wrong gift to a party or wedding”.

In *Mount Allegro*, Jerry, now an adult, visits his family in Sicily, he is treated like a king and through food the Sicilian relatives take care of their guest: “they took turns at dining me and each one tried to feed me more than others” (253). The Sicilian family’s behavior mirrors the same attitude that Jerry’s family showcases in the U.S.: there is a constant desire to outdo the other relatives and what is important is to show off, to look good, *fare bella figura*. Jerry realizes that his relatives do not have the money to feed him, but somehow, they get to feed him and later get offended when he tries to help with some food provisions.

Farming

Before coming to the United States, many poor Italians had held jobs in agriculture. However, the lands they worked on belonged to the rich who exploited the masses making them poorer and hungrier. I posit that for many immigrants, especially for those who had worked in the fields, owning land was the ultimate goal. In their psyche, owning land equaled being rich and being able to provide food without depending on anyone else, but themselves. Thus, the desire to own land, and sometimes just a little backyard in the city, became paramount in the Italian immigrant experience. In his essay, “Family Life: The Question of Independence,” Clemente Lawrence Valletta argues that “[t]he rural experience offered greater opportunities for extensive gardening, canning, wine-making, and the raising of livestock” (155). Thus, this independence allowed Italian American to live their American dream.

In *Umbertina* by Helen Barolini, owning land is Umbertina's ultimate goal and dream. When the family arrives in America, they first live in New York City, but she longs to move to the country: "to have a piece of land, to be again in the open air under the sun working the soil . . ." (71). When they finally move, they settle in Cato. Additionally, Barolini adds that the cultivation of the land for Umbertina "was something else: It was direct contact with the land, an almost angry wrenching of well-being from the earth and whatever ruled it" (113). She really does not care that this land is not Italian soil: as long as it produces food, she does not mind. Umbertina even decides to take all her children to Oriskany Falls "where the farmers needed seasonal pickers" (113). She feels the need to have a connection with the land: she feels this "urge . . . to harvest as much as the wealth of this prodigious country as she could" (113). In fact, these ten-day excursions allow the family to breathe better air, but also to make money: Umbertina takes to heart the old Italian saying, "*unire l'utile con il dilettevole*," i.e., unite what is useful with what is fun.

Farming and owning land, as witnessed in literature, allowed some Italian immigrants to feel connected to the new land and gave them a stable place in American society. Their American dream became a reality and, thanks to the land, they kept hunger at bay.

Fathers

The stereotypical Italian American father is often absent as he must provide for the family, but his presence is felt throughout the household. The man of the house lives according to the old ways and his authority must be respected. He considers himself the boss and his sons must respect him and follow in his footsteps. Even if he shows love and affection especially to the young ones, he often uses corporal punishment and this causes his children to fear him. His authority cannot be questioned and even the older sons cannot object to his power. Italian American texts show how some of the male characters' macho presence is felt and experienced by the families, such as Nino

Girardello in *The Right Thing to Do* and Nick Molise in *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*. Naturally, not all fathers are bossy and mean, and after two or three generations, things begin to change.

A man that does not fit the macho mold is Kym Ragusa' father, in *The Skin Between Us*. In fact, as a young child, the author's father learned to cook from his grandmother, Luisa. His daughter, the narrator, believes that Luisa "recognized something tender and unguarded in him, kept him close to her" (112). Luisa chooses to pass the cooking torch to her grandson and not her daughter. Maybe this choice was guided by the awareness that Mr. Ragusa, as a child, was indeed different from his brother and cousins who busied themselves in fighting other neighborhood children. Instead of learning the tough language of the streets, he learned the language of food, that is "the language of olive oil, tomatoes, and garlic, of honey, water, and flour. She taught him the arts of sustenance and survival. These he took with him to war" (113). In fact, his ability to cook gave him the opportunity to "volunteer for kitchen duty" (112) during the Vietnam war. Soldiers enjoyed his food: "(h)e made pots of beef stew and bean soups and spaghetti and meatballs-*that was their favorite . . .* as streams of mortar and rocket fire flared and sputtered not far in the distance" (113). Being able to cook and give sustenance to the troops allowed him to mentally survive the horrific war experiences he had to live through, such as being shot while trying to deliver food to another camp or being attacked by rats or by snipers as he was trying to set up his kitchen in the morning. Cooking for Mr. Ragusa did not start as a pastime but as a way to connect with his grandmother, and later, as a way to feel useful and proud of his skills. The author uses her father's cooking skill to highlight his sweet nature, and, at the same time, recognizes that cooking, a female chore, has helped him survive in hard times.

See also **Husbands**

Food

Food is not just ingredients or a final dish. When we speak of food, we also imply other elements and more complex processes: to create food, we need a cook/chef, recipes, ingredients, pots and pans, a stove (or not), and of course, people at the receiving end. These elements serve a function and are essential to the success of the final product, i.e., savory dishes that can be enjoyed and, hopefully, praised and never forgotten. Thus, if we accept the argument that food communicates, we can create the analogy that food is language, another important function, especially in literature. To analyze this language, we can break it down as follows: the recipes are the grammar rules; pots, pans, the stove (or not), and ingredients are the nouns, the adjectives, and the verbs; the way food is presented is the register and tone of voice; the final product is the message or the meaning, and the dining guests are the listeners and receivers of the message/meaning. Thus, if food communicates, it also delivers messages. These messages can be subliminal, such as preparing your husband's favorite food, because of ulterior motives; or offering an expensive and luscious business meal to close an important deal; or more concrete ones, such as celebrating someone's birthday, graduation or wedding.

Italian American authors use food to highlight several of its functions. Characters use food not only to communicate but also as a pedagogical tool, to teach the American receiving culture about Italian culinary habits that might have seemed a little odd, if not just plainly unhealthy, to the American public. Thus, food becomes an opportunity for the two cultures, the incoming and receiving, to meet and learn. Oftentimes, authors, in order to prove that their countrymen, or their own families, are carving a successful niche in American society, use food as a symbol of success: the bigger the party, the more successful and rich the family is. In *Umbertina*, Helen Barolini uses food to show that her main character, Umbertina, has successfully crowned her American dream.

Thanks to the successful business, Umbertina can purchase a mansion, but most importantly, her prosperity is shown by the display of the “expansiveness of the table she spread for the christening feast” (105). The table is “replete” with all kind of pastries: “*chinolelli*, almond cookies, sponge cakes, ricotta pies . . . gelati, spumoni, and biscuit tortoni . . . the pink sugar almond candies . . .” (105) all paired with Marsala wine and colorful punches (105). This description is a tribute to Umbertina’s business acumen which allows her to make money and show off her ability to afford food that was unattainable for her and her family in the past.

Lastly, food, being an ethnic marker, not only influences taste but allows for the generational gap to be even deeper: the children born in this country want to fit in and the “funny smelling” food does not cut it for them anymore. However, by the third or fourth generation, for Italian American authors, food becomes as a reason to be proud of one’s roots. In fact, tasting the food of the ancestors allows the newest generation of authors to re-tie one’s present and identity to the Old country.

In Italian American families, food is an important element that also aids in maintaining an Italian identity on American soil and also marks the importance of the family unity. In his memoir, *Bruculinu, America*, Vincent Schiavelli argues that food regulates his family’s life:

Specific dishes were used to mark seasons and events; others, according to traditional wisdom, had medicinal value and could restore health or well-being; still others were imported and adapted from the other immigrant cultures around us, or from “the Americans,” whose cuisine generally left us puzzled. We did not know what they ate (10).

Thus, for this family, food is more than food, as it is used as medicine; it becomes a tool to integrate other Italian or American foodways, marking the adaptation and change of some Italian

dishes, which, later on, became Italian American delicacies. And lastly, it ethnically marks them as Sicilian.

Food is a tantalizing theme used by Italian American authors to communicate and entertain. Conversely, the characters in their stories use food to define identity and nationality and to communicate inside and outside their fictional communities. Food is an important piece of the big puzzle that is the Italian American immigration experience and a useful tool to describe the different phases of assimilation or enculturation. In many Italian American texts, food is not just a meal predominantly prepared by women, but it is a way to convey extra meanings to stories and to give characters the ability to multitask. In fact, immigrants carried with them the memories of the old country while they were creating new ones in the new country and had to learn how to share common values inside the Italian communities, while building bridges to the outside society.

Food and Sex

The primal nature of sex and food makes the creation of analogies possible. At the primordial stage, sex and food are interdependent as one eats to have the strength to procreate. In *Food: The Key Concepts*, Warren Belasco recognizes that sex and food have lots in common. In fact, he highlights how both “are central to biological reproduction and to the establishment of strong social ties” and how both “involve the incorporation of outside entities within the private body” (33). Additionally, he argues that both are intimate, use the five senses, sight, smell, touch, and taste (33), and require especially the use of the mouth (34).

See also Banquets and Gian-Carlo Biasin

Foraging

From the peddlers' foraging to the picking of weeds in the country, Italian immigrants find ways to find food. Maybe built in their DNA, this industriousness bears witness to their willingness to survive and to their resourcefulness.

In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, DeSalvo describes her grandfather's foraging skills. Her grandparents' kitchen is not just a fun and safe place for the young DeSalvo, but it is the place where food is foraged as well. From the kitchen, DeSalvo's grandfather 'hunts' for food. With a slingshot, he gets a pigeon that later he will cook. But the pigeon is not dead, and the kitchen becomes a 'slaughter house,' where the grandfather brings the bird and wrings its neck: "I have, in my young life, seen many animals brought home live from the market and slaughtered in my grandparents' kitchen . . . My grandparents won't eat anything that doesn't come into their home alive" (66). These rituals that can be considered quite barbaric in a modern society show a stubborn willingness to still do things the way they were done in the old country. As in the tenements, there is no yard, the slaughtering is executed in the kitchen. Additionally, DeSalvo's grandfather prepares the pigeon with care and gusto, which, except the entrails, he is ready to share with the family. DeSalvo's mother is very appreciative of her father being there, because he can attend the "business of food" (67), even if it means foraging. This is not the only instance that DeSalvo's grandfather has foraged. He had learned how to cook while working for the railroad where he traded "pickax and shovel for frying pan, pots, and knives" (71). DeSalvo is quite proud of her grandfather who shows an incredible entrepreneurial attitude as he is not ashamed to pick up a trade that many other men would have never have thought of doing. Because of his background,

(h)e knows how to study the land. How to hunt an animal, how to forage . . . He knows how find land snails after the heavy rain. How to scour for edible wild herbs and greens-

bay laurel, savory, thyme, sorrel, dandelions, spinach, chicory, nettle tops-and for onions shoots, wild leeks, berries. How to make a trap, make use and use a slingshot. How to rig a net so he can wade into a shallow stream and catch fish, river crab, river eel (72).

Thanks to all of these skills and because he “wanted a hot meal” (71) instead of the bread and cheese the workers were given, he begins to cook his own food. Later, he convinces the *padrone* to allow him to cook for the gangs that work with him.

The Fortunate Pilgrim by Mario Puzo (1964)

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Mario Puzo uses his mother as an inspiration for the depiction of his main character, Lucia Santa. She is not weak and powerless as Annunziata in *Christ in Concrete*, but she is strong and determined in leading her family as a “chief” who also holds “the scales of power and justice” (40). Married twice with six children, she loses her first husband to a job accident and the second one to the mental hospital. She governs her family and affairs with love, but also with an iron fist, as she must be the mother but also the father. Even in the times of need, she expects others to take care of her and family. She never looks for a job to help support her family but sees her children as the food providers. Lucia Santa often considers her children more like a commodity, a means to obtain food and sustenance for the family.

Friends and Neighbors

In the U.S. Italian enclaves, friends and family often come to aid their neighbors and relatives, when things get tough. Many turn into surrogate fathers, others feed their neighbors’ starving children. In *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, during one of Rosa’s husband’s absences, a family friend, Toni, when he is unable to find a job in the mosaic business, picks up

his father's organ and performs in the streets for the rich people. He earns three cents and with these three cents, Rosa's family can afford some food (214).

In *Christ in Concrete*, friends come to the rescue as well. When Paul, the young protagonist, has been turned down by all U.S institutions, the Church included, is looking for a job, he goes and visit his father's friend, Nazone. As they sit down for lunch, Nazone and the other workers realize that Paul is hungry, so they offer him food that he places in a bag to bring home (65). It seems that they feel responsible and want to help. The reader can sense that these workers respected Paul's father Geremio, who had died in a construction accident, and to honor his memory they help as they can. The narrator's intention is to show that while the institutions did not help the family, there were people in the community that understood the plight and were willing to help. However, to get help, one must go to his or her own community, while the government that is supposed to protect these laborers does not.

See also Coexisting

Garlic

Mr. Tiff, in *Like Lesser Gods*, uses garlic several times during cultural encounters. In one instance, during a bootlegging adventure, in Canada, he is left behind in the house of the Canadian accomplice; as the host is preparing a steak, Mr. Tiff produces a clove of garlic to give flavor to it. Having garlic always at his disposal allows the narrator to release some of the narrative tension and also to humorously describe the character.

See also Dandelions

Gathering with the “Paisani”

At the beginning of the Italian immigration to the United States, Italian immigrants are oftentimes forced to live in the tenements, where they sometimes live with other Italians or other ethnic groups. Later, they leave the tenements and start moving to certain areas of the major cities, creating Little Italies all over the country. This necessity to feel closer to one’s kind can be viewed as a way to resist assimilation, but mostly as a tool for searching for mutual support in a foreign land.

In *I Love You Like a Tomato*, ChiChi, the narrator, describes how her grandmother, Angelina, longs to be with Italians. According to Chichi, Angelina does not change when she comes to the U.S. In Tar Town, the Italian section of Minneapolis, where the family lives, she manages to become friend with everyone, from the store clerks to the priests, a habit that she has brought over from Italy. She also wants to know all her neighbors’ business. Most importantly, ChiChi points out that her grandmother “sought out old *paisani* to share conversation and gossip, *una tazza di caffè*, slices of cake. They shared thimbles of *Limoncello* saved in cupboards from back home” (58). The choice of the verb “to seek” indicates that Angelina needs to feel the closeness, needs to perpetuate the customs of sharing coffee and cake, and to share moments with her people to probably feel still connected to her home country.

See also Banquets

Generational Gap

By the second generation, Italian Americans begin to feel the pressure to become American. Many youngsters of Italian descent feel that what sets them apart from their American

counterparts is food. They begin to feel ashamed and refuse to eat certain food. This refusal, sometimes, causes some family dynamics to suffer.

In Joe Petracca's *Come Back to Sorrento*, the second generation is represented by Joey, the narrator of the semi-biographical story. Joey still likes some of the food his parents feed him, like pizza, capocollo, and prosciutto, but he begins to object to some of the real ethnic food. Joey begins to rebel against the food that only his parents seem to enjoy and invites his readers to be on his side:

I was hungry, but can you call supper when you get a dishful of slimy mussels that nobody but Papa could eat anyway? Or watch a potful of snails being boiled alive, their horns sticking out of the bubbling water like two arms lifted to God to help them? Or can you go on eating dandelions, as if you were a nanny goat; or spaghetti with no meat sauce, seasoned with pieces of black garlic? (100)

This description follows a very bad haircut and very sad ball game defeat for poor Joey: he is already in a bad mood and he takes it on his parents. But Joey is also looking for a shoulder to cry on: he wants his readers to feel sorry for him and wants his readers to side with him against his 'horrible' parents that force him to eat 'gross' food. Additionally, Joey portrays himself as caring: the humanization of the snails that are cooked alive with stretched out antennas as to be begging for help is an attempt to direct the reader's attention to his own plight.

On the other hand, Joey still enjoys pizza and loves going with his dad to the neighborhood pizzeria: "I enjoyed eating pizza, its rubbery cheese stretching the length of your arms and then snapping" (25) but he objects to a food considered a delicacy by his father: "the *capozella* or lamb's head was something else" (25). Joey describes how his dad eats it ravenously, but his goal is to

prevent the readers from being curious about tasting it: “I could not even look at the halved head in the plate, let alone eat it” (26). He could be describing the feelings that an American would feel in the presence of the halved head and describes the sick feeling that many would feel in witnessing his father eat the lamb head: “It used to make me sick just to watch Papa as he ate the whole thing- meat, brains, and eyes- right down to the dry bone, sucking with such gusto in every cavity that it turned my stomach” (26). These descriptions signal the drift that occurred with second generation. Joey, even though he still enjoys certain Italian food, cannot stomach the “super” ethnic food and is disgusted by his father’s way of eating snails, mussels, and the lamb head. Additionally, the narrator might have wanted to justify his readers’ uneasiness in front of these dishes: even if he is Italian, he still feels that some of these foods are inedible.

The same humorous tone is found in *Mount Allegro*. Jerry, the narrator, born in the United States, through his story telling, allows the readers to get acquainted with his family and their quirkiness. Jerry, like every Italian born in the United States, is torn between his family and the surrounding community. He loves his family and tries to please them, but at the same time, he recognizes that to live in this country, to be a real American, one must change and adapt to the new country. Like Joey, he is often embarrassed by his family. For example, Jerry would dread the picnics his family enjoyed in public parks, when “(s)paghetti, chicken, and wine were consumed with pagan abandon” (222). He’d rather have the quiet and composed American picnic style instead of the “circus din” of the “Sicilian eating festival” (222). Sicilian mothers would also breastfeed their children in public during these picnics, causing even more shame in the young Jerry. As long as the festivities were private, that is, confined to the four walls of the house, it was fine to act a certain way, but when in public, Jerry wants to fit in. Additionally, being in the park with the Americans made the contrast even starker, visible, and certainly audible.

Angel Lupo and her sister, Lina, in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* want to be American, as well. To be an Italian means that one is a “Pockabookie,” and nobody wants to be that. Thus, in order to be an American, one must act like Marilyn Monroe. Additionally, Lina, after conferring with her girlfriends, tells her sister that, to avoid becoming a Pockabookie, they must drink a lot of ginger ale, a drink that in their family is considered “highly American” (109). However, after another talk with her girlfriends, Lina tells her sister that “you can’t eat anything along with it” (110). The two sisters are not very happy about this new rule: “Lina and I thought about the *cannoli* and *cornetti* . . . the spumoni we got whenever we visited our aunties, and the frosted cookies that we ate at Communion parties and wedding receptions” (110). They are aware that they will have to sacrifice and miss out all of this good food to become and American. However, they decide that the “Pockabokkie Lady Diet could *vaffanculo*” (110) and quickly lose interest in becoming an American if it means that they must give up the Italian sweet food.

Even the children, ChiChi and Marco, in *I Love You Like a Tomato*, begin to feel the desire to fit in, to be American. They both want to leave Tar Town to go downtown Minneapolis, which in their eyes is the real America: “Cement and steel, flying skyways! Smells of office building lobbies and department store perfume counters!” (44). But they also dream of the “blonde heads” and “the pale-flashed faces” and they long to be like that, “translucent” (44). And to be a perfect American, in their eyes, these are the food that will make you one: “The endless arrays of exotic American foods! Wieners in buns, fried hamburger meat and cut up potatoes in paper boats, corn dogs on sticks, runny barbecued things, pretzels!” (44). In the eyes of a child, these foods are exotic because they are in the city, and they carry their fascination because they are unattainable. Even if they long to be in the American city, the siblings are not ashamed of being Italian like Jerry, but, subconsciously, they desire to assimilate.

The Godfather by Mario Puzo (1969)

This crime novel chronicles the Corleone's family rise to success in the crime world in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. The family, led by the Don, Vito Corleone, belongs to the New York mafia and is feared and revered by most. Even if this is a fictional family, it brilliantly encapsulates what a real mafia family would be. It is obviously the story of a self-made man, that must flee his country and, once on American soil, has to resort to criminal activities. Mario Puzo succeeds in creating an incredible story and unforgettable characters, while depicting the horrors and criminal acts, perpetrated in order to protect this mafia family's honor and values, but also intimate moments around tables with food.

Government Help

Oftentimes, Italian immigrants do not only depend on nice neighbors but also take advantage of government's help. Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, is not ashamed and looks for this assistance: "We used to get for one week a piece of salt pork and some dried peas and the loaf of bread and some coffee or some tea" (211). Another place she sends her children is the police station, where they are given "a little pail of soup and a piece of bread for each family" (221). However, the children cannot avoid eating the bread on the way because they are so hungry and cannot resist. Describing how American institutions have helped her family allows Rosa to inform her audience that America comes to her aid, and, as any well-mannered guest, she wants to show her gratitude.

On the other hand, in *Christ in Concrete*, the institutions that should help the desperate family do not. Out of his concern for his family's survival, Paul, the oldest son, visits the people that he thinks will help, such as City Hall and the Church, but, unlike for Rosa's family, their doors remain shut, and is turned away. Paul is a child not a man, but he is quickly forced into that role

by fate and circumstances. He does not know how to behave in the adult world, but because he is male, he is expected to provide for the family.

See also Bildungsroman

Gramsci, Antonio

At the beginning of the massive immigration to the United States, the U.S. government tries to control the immigrant's diet, but the Italian immigrants, at first, put up a fight. This idea of resistance and capitalist control leads to Antonio Gramsci's hegemony. In *Food and Cultural Studies*, Bob Ashley et al. state that "hegemony concerns the way in which a 'fundamental social class' (or group) attempts to exert *moral and intellectual leadership* over both allied and subordinate social group" (18). Hegemony is not static, but dynamic, and needs to be "reproduced and renegotiated," if the ruling power wants to remain relevant: "(t)his dynamism indicates its flexible and self-policing ability to inhabit the world view of its subordinates, but it also forces it to reshape itself through the incorporation of the culture and aspirations of those on whose behalf it claims to govern" (18). Ashley et al. argue that hegemony is not something that can be achieved but rather, it is "an ongoing process, operative even at those moments when a ruling power can no longer generate consent" (18). Gramsci argues different practices can be found in civil society as well as in economy. Ashley et al. state that food and drinks belong to both realms.

Even if Gramsci's hegemony clarifies what happens to culture and civilization, his argument lacks a variable, that is, what happens when a subordinate is an immigrant. It probably does not matter: a subordinate is a subordinate in the eyes of the hegemonic state. However, being an immigrant adds to the status of subordinate: the hegemonic state must work overtime to assimilate and then indoctrinate the immigrant subordinate. More specifically, in the case of

Italian American food, it is obvious that the U.S. government uses hegemonic tactics to finally and completely assimilate Italian Americans. Even if at first, the government allows the resistance, it erodes, little by little, the walls that the Italian American enclaves have put up. This is to be expected as the immigrants that want to live productive lives in a new land must negotiate and learn to accept new behaviors and beliefs.

Grandfathers

In Italian American texts, most grandfathers are described as loving and caring for their grandchildren and often serve as surrogate fathers. Others are mean and despotic, such as Garnet's grandfather in *The Patron Saint of Ugly*, and even abusers, such as the narrator's grandfather in the short story, "Go to Hell." However, the good grandfathers take care of their families and attend to their duties with love and fondness.

Vincent Schiavelli's grandfather, Papa Andrea, in *Bruculinu, America* does not tend to a garden, like many other grandfathers, but in this household, the "grandfather did all the cooking" (79). Not only does he cook for his family, but "in Bruculinu his cooking skills were legend" (79). In fact, he even helps a friend that is running a failing restaurant and is able to resuscitate the business at the age of 82. Schiavelli, in this book, pays homage to Papa Andrea including the recipes that he used. One might think that in this Sicilian household, the male and female roles are reversed. However, the author, early in the introduction, informs his readers that his grandfather's position as the food preparer is not that of a cook but that of a chef. Thus, he elevates his grandfather status: Papa Andrea is a *monzù*, which means master chef. Before his coming to America, he had worked as a *monzù* for the Baron Rampolla of Polizzi Generosa (10). And to emphasize this elevated status, Schiavelli explains how the *monzù* came about:

The culinary tradition of the *monzù* began in Sicily at the outset of the nineteenth century. It was then the fashion among the houses of the powerful aristocracy to import chefs from France. These great masters applied the French method to traditional Sicilian cuisine, creating a collection of dishes known for their subtle refinement. Throughout that century, this style of cuisine remained popular and grew, as native-born Sicilian apprentices learned from French masters. So, from these original *monsieurs* evolved the Sicilian *monzù* (10).

Schiavelli seems to be wanting to justify his grandfather's role with this description: his grandfather was a chef and his cooking was very refined, not to be judged as the daily cooking of women. This justification is probably unconscious, but there is a deliberate willingness to prove that Papa Andrea was no ordinary cook.

Schiavelli describes his grandfather's cooking with admiration and awe. During the holidays, he prepares *pasta chi sardi*, pasta with sardines. Even if there are many versions on how to prepare this dish, "Papa Andrea's recipe is the most delicate and elegant of any version" the author has ever tasted (190). The hyperbole is followed by the comment that being invited to their home for the Feast of St. John "was highly prized" (190), because the guests "would be eating the best *pasta chi sardi* in Bruculinu-maybe in the world!" (190). In Sicily, this dish is quite common and surely a favorite, but Schiavelli, describing how his grandfather would prepare it, takes it to another level. Again, this is to praise and show his admiration for his grandfather who prepared incredible food with "masterly hands" (191).

DeSalvo, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, has "a special bond" (97) with her grandfather, as well. During World War II, as her father is away fighting the war, DeSalvo spends lots of time with her grandfather, in the kitchen, drinking wine, hers diluted with water, and eating *lupini* beans. In this kitchen, she shows the first sign of rebellion that her grandfather allows: "Love that my grandfather

lets me eat as many as I want, as messily as I want; love that he lets me pile my lupini beans in front of me on the oilcloth-covered table without telling me to put them on my plate” (64). He allows her to break the table rules and this permission creates a deeper bond of trust between the two. In the kitchen, he tells her stories of the old country but also about her mother and what is happening in the world, at the moment. The kitchen, then, becomes a classroom, a place where memories are shared. However, the sharing is encumbered by the lack of full understanding by both

Words, phrases, sentences get through me; then suddenly, and always when the story gets interesting, I’m lost. But because I can’t speak dialect, and he can’t understand English, I can’t tell him to repeat what he says, to slow down. So, I can’t be sure, now, if my memoirs of what he told me are sure or if they are riddled with my own interpolations, and so part fabrication (65).

Even if they do not understand one another, she recognizes that they shared an important bond, a sort of secret camaraderie that she did not have with anyone else in the family.

The positive relationships grandfathers and the younger generations are able to build are based on love and trust. I posit that these immigrant grandfathers, subconsciously, realize how important their role is. In fact, the elders are the ones that are still attached to the Italian motherland and offer an opportunity to the younger generations to hear stories of the past and of the Old Country.

See also Abuse in the Kitchen, Emasculation at the Table, and Foraging.

Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers

As grandfathers play the role of the surrogate fathers, in many instances, in Italian American texts, great grandmothers and grandmothers play the role of mothers. The place where the relationship evolves is mainly the kitchen, where grandmothers and granddaughters exchange intimate moments, but also painful moments of hurt and rejection.

It is in the kitchen that Kym Ragusa, author of *The Skin Between Us*, desperately looks for a connection with her Italian grandmother. Ragusa is African American and Italian and this dichotomy causes identity issues for the young Ragusa. Both grandmothers offer her stability and a place that is in between the two realities she grows up in. The book opens with Thanksgiving dinner that both grandmothers are attending. This will be the last Thanksgiving that they will share. Ragusa wonders about this meal, where her two worlds are now in the same room: “How did we get here, sitting together, sharing a meal? Two warring communities, two angry and suspicious families, two women tugging at my heart, pulling me in different directions” (25). But, she realizes that, that day, they are “held together for a moment by a warm light and a kitchen table, and everything makes sense” (25). In the kitchen, differences are forgotten, people come together, and the only preoccupation is to enjoy the food.

In the Italian family’s kitchen, Ragusa, as a teenager, listens to stories about her family. These moments when her grandmother, Gilda, and the Italian family discuss the family history and contradicting family anecdotes offer the opportunity to Ragusa to picture and imagine the events that are being told. Ragusa remembers one instance when she asks Gilda about her honeymoon. The encounter happens in the kitchen over coffee, Italian coffee, and not “the brown, drip-brewed American coffee” (129). According to Ragusa, Gilda uses the coffee as a way to teach her about being Italian and being part of the Italian family. However, even though Ragusa loved

her grandmother, she admits that there was some distance between them, but she does not place the blame on Gilda. Because of her doubts about her own identity, Ragusa feels more like a guest in her grandmother's house and even asks for permission when she wants to eat or drink. She feels like an outsider also when her aunt, cousin, and Gilda play cards, in the kitchen. Ragusa tells jokes, but she feels that she does not belong, that she "had come into a story that had begun long ago" (214). In Gilda's kitchen, the readers also witness a physical fight between Ragusa's father and grandfather. Because of this fight, Ragusa will leave her grandmother's house. And it is in the same kitchen that goodbyes are shared. Much of the action that happens in the book when Ragusa describes her dealing with her Italian family occurs in the kitchen. It is in fact an important place for her, because this is where she will eventually understand that she does not have to fit in just one world, but she can live in both spheres, the Italian and the African American one.

Ragusa's great grandmother, Luisa, is the great cook of the family. In fact, her cooking is legendary. Her daughter, Gilda, born in the United States, "learned from her mother how to keep a spotless home, how to care for her younger siblings, how to feed a growing family, all in preparation for the time when she would have a husband and children of her own" (123). She is, then, being schooled on how to be a good housewife, a role that she is expected to fulfill. However, people in her family think differently and often joke that she did not inherit her mother's cooking skills. However, Ragusa comes to her rescue. She fondly remembers her grandmother's cooking: "(b)ut it is Gilda's fortifying meals that I remember and long for, the Monday night lentil soup, the vinegary iceberg lettuce salads, the chicken wings baked with oregano, the salty tomato sauce whose memory lingers in my taste bud-the dull, hungry ache of nostalgia always on my tongue" (123). These meals, not as extraordinary as Luisa's, still activate Ragusa's memory and are so

important because they ground her and allow her to identify with the white side of her family and to have a tangible past.

Likewise, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo shares how her step-grandmother, Libera, is an important figure in her life. Libera prepares the bread that everyone in the family likes, except the mother. She is the baker and maker of pizza, and even if, in young DeSalvo's eyes, this is a static and limited role, it is still a role that positively marks the narrator's life (74). The passing of the cooking torch has skipped a generation, but it will be partially passed to DeSalvo and her future generations. In her essay "Ethnic Identification, Food, and Depression: Louise DeSalvo's Memoirs and the Female Italian American Experience," Theodora Patrona argues that, when describing her step grandmother, "DeSalvo offers her readers the grim image of a lonely and dissatisfied woman, a constant misfit, and an outcast in a family she finds already made" (178). She is, in fact, removed from her Italian enclave and is placed in her stepdaughter's house, where she cannot even use the kitchen to cook those food items that would make her feel home. Patrona also states that DeSalvo's mother stands "in contrasts to Libera's intimate connection with ethnic cuisine." In fact, she refuses for the better part of her life, to be influenced by the "charms" of the Italian south and its culture. As a second-generation immigrant, DeSalvo's mother is consumed with the desire to assimilate into her new country and its culture. She categorically rejects ethnic cooking "early in her adult life" (179). Thus, the kitchen is used to mark one's ethnic identity: the step-grandmother who rejects the new ways is still very much Italian; the mother who refuses to cook ethnic food but prefers junk food in the attempt to be assimilate is American; while DeSalvo, herself is the true Italian American, a woman that is able to juggle her two identities, without feeling the need to choose one over the other.

In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, DeSalvo also mentions her paternal grandmother who is considered by her father a saint, but stupid by the narrator. Not only did she have a horrible husband that would leave her without any money to go to Italy to visit who everyone thought another woman but was able to survive and raise her family with very little money and help from her husband. She is the typical southern woman that “always made do” (107). She makes simple food into something that is always good and nutritious. She purchases fruit and vegetables and prepares pasta with a sauce prepared with few ingredients. She also cooks the meat only for the boy of the family, because “(a) man needs his strength” (107). She also has some quirks, as she cooks for the family but does not sit with them, and then in the kitchen, she cooks something different for herself, a custom that is also followed by DeSalvo’s maternal grandmother. She stoically stays in a horrible marriage “(b)ecause the Catholic Church didn’t allow divorce. And besides, she wanted to keep up the appearances, she wanted the family to stay together” (108). DeSalvo’s grandmother plays her role of what she thinks is a good wife: she knows her place is in the kitchen and feels not worthy to share food with her family. Even if she is not happy, she perseveres and continues to play her role of wife and mother, just like a martyr.

An older Carmolina, in *Paper Fish*, the novel by Tina De Rosa (1980), loves eating lunch with her grandmother. These are intimate moments they share, eating the sandwich, grandmother Doria prepares, “cheese on Italian bread, or tomatoes on Italian bread, or just Italian bread” (23). The fact that there are different kinds of sandwiches mentioned leads the reader to assume that this was a common ritual the two share. The kitchen and the cold Formica table keep them cool, while outside the “whole world is burning” (23). And at this table, grandmother tells stories about the family, fulfilling the important role of chronicling the past so that it will not be forgotten by the younger generations. Carmolina resembles, in part, Louise DeSalvo. They both

love their grandmothers and often listen to their stories of the Old Country. However, unlike DeSalvo, Carmolina does not hate her mother and even if she is unable to build a real relationship with her mother, what is important in her maturing process is her grandmother's presence. In "Broken Images, Broken Lives: Carmolina's Journey in Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*," May Jo Bona also recognizes Carmolina's relationship with her grandmother, her true mentor, has been paramount. In fact, Bona state that "Carmolina has been given the most gift of all – Grandma Doria's life force" (103).

In some cases, young characters have been left alone to fend off for themselves because parents die or simply cannot love, but some others have been helped, supported, and loved by their surrogate mothers, the grandmothers. Great grandmothers and grandmothers serve as mentors, mothers, and confidantes. However, their most important role is that of the story teller: spending time with the elders allows the younger generations to learn their family's histories and culture.

Grappa

Grappa is a liquor that is predominately produced and served in the North of Italy. This strong drink is used by authors to mark the provenance of their characters. For example, Mari Tomasi's characters, in *Like Lesser Gods*, are immigrants from the North: the author uses grappa to signal their origin and also to establish an environment that will spur some characters into action and to show their determination. In fact, in the Dalli family, grappa is produced in the house. In one instance, after making grappa, Pietro invites his friends to a game of *briscola* and grappa drinking. Maria, drunk from smelling the grappa fumes, devises the plan to ruin the cross Pietro is working on hoping that Pietro's boss would then fire him, giving them the opportunity to open a store (142). After the guests are gone, she goes to the quarry and hammers away her husband's creation. Alcohol has given her the courage to act, to feel bolder and determined. The next day,

imagining that her husband would be crushed by the vandalized cross, she plans a favorite dinner for her husband. She knows that her husband will be enraged and sad, thus she needs to prepare a good dinner: “(h)e would enjoy *salsigi*, and a snappy salad of endive, tomatoes, and onions” (147). This is the only way she knows how to resolve the matter and to probably feel less guilty about her act. However, the results of her foolish act are not what she expects as Pietro will continue working at the quarry.

Hoarding Food

In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo admits that she has learned the history of her people, not from her family, but from other Italian American authors that have detailed the horrible living conditions of the poor Italians of the South had to endure. She also states that her mother and father did not know about their history, either. However, she thinks that they all knew it in their bodies. And this is why her mother treated food the way she did and this how her father’s rage began. She also reacted to this painful history in her own way, that is by hoarding the food: “. . . this is why I hoard food, treat it as if it’s sacred, bless it. Revere it, let it nourish me, let it excite me, calm me, placate me, spend as much time with it as I can. Perhaps I do this because my people could not” (137). Food, then, becomes her way to honor her ancestors, to feel closer to them, and, subconsciously, avenge them.

See also Trauma and Foraging

Homemakers

In Italian American texts, women are often physically relegated, to the kitchen, and figuratively, to the static role of the homemaker. However, this static role is more loaded than what the Italian immigrant really realizes. The Italian family is patriarchal, but also matriarchal. The

father is the head of the family, but the mother is also running the household. The man is expected to provide the money for the survival of the family, but it is up to the wife to shop and prepare the food. I concur with Warren Belasco when he recognizes that being in the kitchen gives women a voice (*Food: The Key Concept* 44) and even when women are confined to the kitchen, they are still in charge of the household, they become a sort of gatekeeper as they are the ones who decide what to cook and how to cook it (42). Additionally, the control women have in their kitchen also helps their families to resist a total capitulation to the American food system. Even if we accept the idea that men want to relegate women in the kitchen, women have agency and are responsible for the survival of the Italian culture while preparing meals for their families. In fact, Megan Elias argues that when women can maintain control over food preparation, they can help “their families retain a sense of continuity with the past” (“Summoning the Food Ghosts: Food History as Public History” 27). Thus, with food, they keep the cultural ties alive.

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, for example, the narrator does not describe Lucia Santa slaving over her stove and preparing food. Her cooking skills are not constantly displayed and are rare occurrences. Lucia Santa is somewhat atypical: she does not fret and does not even engage in the everyday house daily chores. Most of the chores are, in fact, done by her children, such as washing the dishes and mopping (60). Even if Lucia Santa knows that her place in the kitchen, she accepts that role: in fact, she does not look for a job after her first husband’s death, not even after the death of the second one. She expects her children to take care of her and provide for the family.

In *The Right Thing to Do*, Gina realizes how her mother, Laura had wanted to live a different life. Her mother had worked outside the home which allowed her to have some money. Gina also knows that her mother “had an independent mind, even if she didn’t show much of it to Nino” (36). Laura is a strong woman, in the way she survived her marriage: “(s)he had run the

house, done the cooking and the laundry” (36) raised a daughter and worked. Gina understands that her mother, even if bogged down by her submissive role of homemaker, still had a mind of her own, and having a job outside the house gave her a somewhat limited control over her life. Seeing her mother in this condition give Gina impetus to move out of her parents’ house. Josephine Gattuso Hendin clearly highlights how the women of the second generation want to break the mold and strive for freedom and independence in their thinking.

Humor

In semibiographical *Mount Allegro*, the author, Jerre Mangione uses personal and funny anecdotes which mostly end up with a celebration and food. For example, in line with Sicilian customs, Jerry’s accepting ice cream from some distant cousins causes major trouble for Jerry. Once he accepts the ice cream because of his “abnormal passion” (27) for it, and his mother realizes that he is not hungry, he slips and tells her that he has had ice cream at his cousins’, at Don Antonio’s house. This causes a major crisis: both his parents call him names but what is worse is the fact that Jerry, allowing his relatives to be hospitable, has let his “family’s honor to be besmirched” (27). In the eyes of his parents, Jerry becomes a “traitor” (24) and his relatives are vilified and called names by his parents. The torture lasts a whole week and poor Jerry “can hardly bear the thought of ice cream” (24). This episode allows the narrator to explain to his readers a very common behavior amongst Sicilians, that employed techniques such as “gossip, snubbing, and hospitality” (26) and divided the family into factions. He closes up the episode reassuring his audience that these quarrels would wind up being reconciled and forgotten. Most importantly, these quarrels would end with sumptuous meals.

Hunger

Hunger is often employed as a driving force that spurs characters into action and Italian American authors have succeeded in using it to highlight the desperation their characters experience in a powerful way. *Christ in Concrete*'s young character, Paul, after his father's death, is forced to look for a job as a bricklayer. He meets up with an Italian crew on a construction site: the narrator uses the lunch time to amplify Paul's hunger and despair. At the construction site, the men are gathered to eat. Nazone, one of the men, is eating a sandwich: "The smell of peppers, chicken, tomatoes, salami, fish eggs, and thick fresh Italian bread . . . pulled Paul's stomach and squeezed it into aching . . . Nazone broke a tender drumstick, and ate it with dancing eyes. The juice ran down the channel of his chubby dimpled chin. He scooped it and while sucking his finger he saw Paul" (65). The description and the smells of the food underscore Paul's hunger and powerlessness: the dancing eyes stand in contrast with Paul's aching stomach. The juice running down Nazone's chin seems to be happening in slow motion and awakes Paul's senses, now even more alert because of his hunger. What is striking about this scene is Paul's strength and dignity: he does not ask for food but waits until Nazone gives him a drumstick. Paul still cannot eat but as soon as Nazone sits down next to him, Paul eats his chicken, bread, and fruit.

In *No Steady Work for Papa*, hunger is considered to be the cause of wars and food is hailed as the solution to avoid them. The narrator's father has a jovial character and loves to involve his wife "in an argument, especially if he was certain to emerge the winner" (65). During one of these arguments, Mamma's intelligence is brought to the forefront. The questions posed by Papa as to how she would prevent wars from happening is met by firm and well-thought-through solutions. One of them is feeding the world with Italian food: "I will tell you. It is simple like a recipe. War is a bad seed in an empty stomach. I would fill the world's belly with gnocchi and polenta, bread

and meat, so that it would be so busy digesting its food and so full of contentment there would be no energy left with which to fight wars” (66). She might be a simple woman, but she often surprises her children, husband, and readers on how informed she is about current events. Her answer is intelligent and on point, and the readers can only agree with her.

Husbands

As explained in the “Fathers” entry, the man of the house must be revered, attended to, and respected. Italian American authors characterize husbands as tyrannical or loving.

A despotic and tyrannical husband is Nino Giardello in *The Right Thing to Do*. He lives according to the old ways, where the husband orders everyone around him and the wife must obey and cater to his needs. Kathleen McCormick, in her essay “City Moves in a “Feminine Key”” argues that this story “directly confronts the patriarchal assumptions underlying conventional Italian American culture” (49). In fact, Nino is the prime example of such a culture. When he thinks his wife, Laura, has been disrespectful to him in front of some relatives when she has merely given her opinion on a family matter, he proceeds with dropping every single dish on the kitchen floor, orders her to clean up, and demands she prepare him coffee (27). The breaking of the dishes is quite an affront: it is an attack against his wife’s private space, the kitchen; it is an assault against domesticity, and shows the lack of respect for the work his wife does every day. His attempt to denigrate her role and demanding she bring coffee allows him to put her in a subjugated position. This exchange is quite telling of what is coming next. Not only does he want to control his wife, but also his daughter, Gina, who rejects his demands and rebels, moving out.

Nino is similar to Lucia Santa, in that, he is quite oxymoronic, as well. He teaches his daughter not to trust men, and he is overly protective of her, not understanding that his daughter is

quite independent and will not accept his ways. Through the narrator's voice, Gina tells the readers what Nino is really like: "(h)e liked women but didn't respect them because he thought they were spineless, easily swayed, subject to force" (36). That is why he is so disrespectful to his wife. Even when he loses his two legs due to diabetes, he is still mean and bossy. His wife suggests he move around, but he refuses and orders she bring him food: "Bring me lunch . . . Bring it here . . . I'm not getting up. And I'm hungry. Bring it here and bring it now!" (175). Nino considers his wife only in terms of catering to his basic needs. Sadly, he does not know how to love his wife or daughter, and his inability to show any affection makes him an unlikable character. Women are a commodity: he bosses his wife around but miserably fails to control his daughter, as she has become Americanized and will not accept the role he tries to block her in. She will not be like her mother and rejects the housewife restrictive mold.

Another bossy husband is Nick Molise in *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*. Nick, like Nino, was born in Italy. Thus, even if he has lived most of his life in the United States, he still follows the old ways. He spends most of his time drinking with his buddies and bossing his wife, Maria, around. He is an artisan at heart and is very disappointed that his American born children do not follow in his footsteps. His son, the narrator, as well as all the other characters, has a love and hate relationship with his father. Nick is selfish and can only think of himself, and the way the narrator describes him makes him a sad and lonely man.

On the other side of the spectrum, as far as men are concerned, Papa, in *No Steady Job for Papa*, by Marion Benasutti, represents those men that seem not be concerned about anything and leave their future in the hands of fate. He is unable to keep a steady job and the jobs that he has, such as in the mines and then in the Navy Yard, he accepts because he needs to put food on his family's table. He is not lazy, but his nature makes him a free spirit. He does not boss his wife

around; in fact, in this household, she is the one that decides about family matters, such as when it is necessary to move. He enjoys dancing and cooking: during the family outings, he is the one in charge of making the polenta. He also provides the meat that goes with it, hunting “birds, blackbirds or larks... wild rabbits deliciously cooked in lots of butter” (74).

Another man that does not fit the macho mold is DeSalvo’s husband, Ernie. For the author, he becomes a surrogate companion in the kitchen. Because her mother had not fulfilled that role, DeSalvo finds in her husband a true food companion. She starts to cook in her mother’s kitchen, not with her, but with Ernie. DeSalvo’s mother even allows them to call their guests to her home (199). This makes DeSalvo realize that her mother really wants her to marry Ernie, as in the past, DeSalvo preferred not to have anyone in the house, as she was a little embarrassed of her step-grandmother and afraid of her mother. This is one of the many experience DeSalvo and her husband will share. In fact, DeSalvo states: “Cooking is our hobby. We don’t eat out. We don’t go to the theater. We can justify how much we spend on food if we shift some food expenses over entertainment” (196). Traveling for them means finding the best food, the best ingredients that sometimes they bring illegally from Italy, and the best eating establishments, be it a fancy restaurant or a hole in the wall. Ernie loves cooking as much as she does. He also knows that she needs to cook in order to write. And even if they have different shopping styles, they always come together in the kitchen. When they fight in the kitchen, he is usually the one being yelled at, but he says he is used to it. He is willing to take the yelling and recognizes something her wife when she is in the kitchen: “You’re always crazy in the kitchen” (166).

Mr. Amoroso, in *Mount Allegro*, is industrious in the kitchen as well: he makes the wine and he is famous for making the best cannoli which he prepares whenever there is a banquet at their home on Sundays. The Amoroso family’s dynamics is very much regulated by food, as this

family still relishes good food and company and it does not matter who cooks the food, as long as the food is good (22).

See also Fathers

I Love You Like a Tomato by Marie Giordano (2003)

This novel is about the coming of age of Letizia “ChiChi” Maggiordino. She has a loving grandmother, a little brother, and a mother that, unfortunately, does not know how to love. ChiChi is very protective of her little, sick brother, Marco, and she spends lots of her energy in trying to protect him. Her family comes to the United States, because ChiChi’s dad, has provided them tickets to move. However, when they arrive in St. Paul, the dad’s family is not willing to help out. Left alone to fend off for themselves to find a new living accommodation or even food, they settle first close to a lake- an area that is later condemned as inhabitable for the ever-growing immigration population- then, in Tar Town, the Italian section of Minneapolis. Chichi narrates her integration and assimilation into mainstream America and her family’s trials and successes. However, the assimilation process is not always easy and the family faces racism and prejudice. ChiChi’s story is proof of the resilience many Italian immigrants had to display and of the sacrifice many Italians immigrants had to endure.

Industrializing Italian Food

The assimilation of Italians into America’s mainstream was not a total capitulation: Italians had some agency and left their mark on mainstream Americans who had begun to enjoy “Italian” food. Thus, the U.S. hegemonic state was also influenced by the subordinate’s food culture: a sort of negotiation occurred, where the hegemonic state allowed its subordinates’ culture to influence

society and the economy. In fact, some Italian businesses bought into the mass production of “Italian” food for the American market.

When food begins to be mass produced because of its convenience, the American consumers still demand fresh food. Walter Belasco argues that Americans begin to accept canned and processed food “only by being convinced through advertising and branding” that this food is really fresh and natural (*Food: the Key Concept* 22). Italians, consequently, buy into the same concept. In *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, John Mariani states that the automatization of food production was welcomed by Hector Boiardi (creator and founder of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee) and Vincent DeDomenico (creator and founder of Rice-a-roni) who both began producing “Italian” food in cans. Mariani argues that even if Italian Americans would shudder at the thought of canned food, Americans had already been accustomed to prepared food, such as Macaroni and Cheese by Kraft, and had no idea how real Italian food tasted (71). Additionally, Italian Americans began to can other products such as fruit, tomatoes, and tomato paste: the goal was to provide these products to other parts of the country, where these ingredients might have been scarce, due to geographical constraints or war. Thus, Italian food became part of the American hegemonic system.

Fred L. Gardaphé and Wenying Xu, in their introduction to the MELUS literary journal’s issue on food, “Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures,” affirm that the U.S. government’s attempt to change immigrants’ food “was not simply an effort to assimilate” immigrants into mainstream American culture” but it was also a way to turn the immigrant into a “capitalist consumer, because culinary diversities in the 1940s resisted homogenizing, industrial food production” (9). This argument can be applied to the Italian experience: the receiving American culture tried to use food to force the assimilation of Italians into the mainstream. Additionally, food was used to create a market for the new ethnic groups so that there would be a demand that would satisfy the capitalist

system, but Italians were not ready to come to this market, yet. Italians could resist the assimilation, at first, thanks to the establishment of the regional enclaves. But later, the Italians contributed to the market, demanding authentic foods.

While addressing the Italian American experience, in *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon quotes a study done by Herbert Gans. Gans studied a second-generation working-class group of Italian descent in the West End of Boston in the late 1950s. He found that “few traces of the immigrant Italian way of life left in these American born semi-skilled and unskilled workers.” However, he affirmed that “(t)hey still prefer ‘Italian cooking’ in their dietary habits.” This study supports the idea that many Italian Americans, even when integrated, still maintained a preference for authentic and not canned Italian food (204).

Immigrant Angst

Some characters in the early texts feel nostalgia towards the Old Country, as their immigration experience is so fresh, and develop a binary feeling about the U.S.A. This love and hate relationship is especially felt by Lucia Santa, in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. She realizes that her voyage to this new land, America, means survival for her and her family: “What madness was it that made them leave such a land? Where fathers commanded and mothers were treated with respect by their children?” (7). The new country is corrupted and children can only be handled with the *Tackeril*. On the other hand, Lucia Santa recognizes that America is not so bad: now, the women that had lived in solitude and poverty on Italian mountains can now enjoy the bustling and noise of the big cities. She considers these women pioneers even if they never went on a plain, but they are pioneers in their own right. They paid a price, that is, “they moved in a sadder wilderness, where the language was strange, where their children became members of a different race” (7). However, her son, Lorenzo, or Larry, did not become a member of another race but “(h)e was like

a young man brought up in Italy” (42) and had “[r]espect” (42). He is assimilating into American Society but he is still very much Italian: he visits relatives in the hospital and takes part in all the “tribal customs sneered at by young Americans” (42), such as Communion, Christening, marriages, and so forth. Her daughter, Octavia, on the other hand, wants to be an American, through and through, and pities the other Italian women of the tenement (11). She is resolute that she will not end up like them and will not marry an Italian (23).

Inability to Coexist

The inability to coexist is a relevant topic in *Crazy in the Kitchen* by Louise DeSalvo. In this autobiography, the coexistence is within the same ethnic “group” and quite problematic. First, the readers witness the clashes in the kitchen between the author’s mother and step grandmother and how both cannot share this private sphere: when one is in the kitchen, the other is not. This inability to coexist in the same place causes a breach in what is usually the “passing of the cooking torch” to the next generation. Additionally, DeSalvo’s mother yearns to be an American, and she thinks that choosing American food will help her in that endeavor. She refuses to eat the bread her step mother prepares but rather buys canned food: “[t]he canned vegetables she believes contain more vitamins than the real thing because they are canned “at the peak of freshness” and the canned spaghetti, the canned ravioli, and the canned soup” (17). DeSalvo’s mother is taken by the possibility of having fast and ‘nutritious’ meals for her family, while her step mother considers all of this “the devil’s work” (17). Even if DeSalvo’s mother is feeding her family, doing her duty, and considers her kitchen “her realm” (17), DeSalvo rebels: “(b)ut when I tell her I want *real* food and not the fake food, she thinks is food, she calls me spoiled and ungrateful” (17). Even as a young child, when she does not like her mother’s food, she cooks something else by herself (42).

Mocking her mother's choice of food and refusing her mother's cooking do not only highlight DeSalvo's anger towards her own mother, but also their inability to build a loving relationship.

See also Acculturation

Job

In *Christ in Concrete*, Pietro di Donato decides to capitalize the word Job so that Job becomes a character, an unpleasant one, an entity that seems to be working against Man. However, Job provides food: Geremio, whose death at the construction site sets off the major events in this semiautobiographical novel, does not protest his supervisor's ill decisions to cut corners because he knows that he might lose his job. Additionally, thanks to the job, before the accident, Uncle Luigi, Geremio's brother-in-law, who is left in charge of the family, also needs his job which is likened, by the narrator, to the act of "chopping stone into bread" (46).

A job is what puts food on the table and without a man that can work, Annunziata, Geremio's wife, is left to wonder what to do with the little food left in the pantry:

Through the dining room and into the dark kitchen she dragged her feet. She felt in the cupboard and found a loaf of fresh bread, half a loaf of stale bread, two onions, a handful of old potatoes, and a can of evaporated milk. She fingered the food mechanically. She would not eat. And still that leaves eight. With three meals each, the day requires twenty-four portions. Who would bring into the house the great necessity? What magic power would supply twenty-four portions each day? (50)

Thus, her oldest son, Paul, will take matters in his own hands. He is forced to quit school and go to work as a bricklayer. A job means that his family will not starve: "Paul pushed himself into mortar and brick knowing how sweet would be the bread his flesh had earned, how mother

and children would glorify with their appetites the good meat and fruit . . .” (82). The thought that his family will not go hungry allows him to accept his new destiny and the brutality of his new job. There is a clear religious undertone that highlights this sacrifice: like his father that sacrificed his life, Christ-like, Paul is going to be the one sacrificing for the welfare of his family. Will he be the next sacrificial lamb? His flesh will earn the bread/food that will feed his family, and he is making the ultimate sacrifice: he must quit going to school even though he is a good student with a potential bright future ahead of him. However, being the first born he must provide for his family and his fate will be forever changed because of his family’s situation.

Kitchen

In general terms, the kitchen is where the homemaker does her magic. Gian-Paolo Biasin, in *The Flavors of Modernity. Food and the Novel*, recognizes the importance of the place where food is prepared: the kitchen (23). He posits that the word *cucina* encompasses many meanings, not just the physical place, but also the furniture, the equipment, the stove, the appliances, the plates, the act of cooking, the way the food is prepared, and the foods themselves. However, in Italian American texts, the kitchen encompasses so many more meanings, elevating its relevance and importance in the daily life of the immigrant family: it is the site where food is prepared, consumed, and at a later date, also enjoyed. Characters, real or imagined, have at their disposal a kitchen, where they can cook and where their immigrant family comes together. It is also the setting where the immigrant family deals with everyday issues, resolves problems, and shares the wealth.

The Italian immigrants felt safe at home where they could control their diet, their lives, and their entertainment. Andrew Rolle, in his essay “The American Italians,” argues that Italian immigrants underwent a sort of trauma once they landed in America. He states that many

immigrants felt inadequate as they knew that they were “to perform” (106). To survive the demands of the new land, they had to find a coping mechanism, “to overcome pressing anxieties” (107). He claims that the Italian immigrant found solace in the privacy of his home, where he could listen to operas or listen to the radio. And maybe, this is one of the reasons, Italian American authors use the kitchen as a favorite setting. It is the place where they often place the radio; the wife is preparing the food, and the children are at the table maybe playing or studying. Authors witness the use of the kitchen in their families and want to display what gives immigrants a piece of mind: their homes, namely the kitchen, represented what American society could not yet regulate.

The Italian immigrants have control over what happens in the kitchens, unlike in the outside world, where they are asked to perform and assimilate. The public sphere, at the beginning, must be confronted, but the Italian immigrants feel safer in the private sphere that is the apartment or the kitchen, where he or she has control. Especially for the women that do not work outside the home, the kitchen gives them a role as homemaker and agency. Mainly, they fulfill their most important role, that of the mother and wife, as it is expected that she feeds her children and husband.

In Italian American literature, the kitchen defines also the complicated role of men. Some authors have placed male characters, real or fictitious, in the kitchen as cooks or as business people, such as pastry chefs or bakers. On the other hand, for other Italian American male characters, the kitchen is the place where they eat and where they are served and revered. This expectation is what relegates women to the role of provider of the cooked food, a definite subjugated position in the household.

Additionally, Italian American authors place their characters in the kitchen to give their readers a more authentic rendition of what an Italian household would have looked like and felt like. It is important to notice, that in many texts, a detailed, physical description of the kitchen is missing. One can surmise that the authors' intention was to showcase more relevant aspects of the Italian American immigration experience, such as the hardships Italian Americans had to endure, but also the happy times that highlight the coronation of their dream, that is to be part of *Lamerica*. In Italian American texts, the kitchen plays an important role as authors employ it as the setting, the backdrop of many powerful and intimate stories. Sometimes, it is just a kitchen, where delicious meals are prepared and enjoyed; other times, it is the place where characters confess their sins and lies, or their joys and successes. Here is where the family grows and spends time together, fighting, laughing, and playing. Most importantly, the kitchen is where the Italian American immigrants can share their successes and display their ethnic pride. Conversely, the kitchen is sometimes a place where "bulimic" abuse is, maybe involuntarily perpetrated, and a confessional where bad experiences are shared. Furthermore, even if, in some cases, the kitchen defines and restricts the role of women, it should not be devalued. Italian American texts show that at the beginning immigration, Italian women are happy to have a place where to cook and perform their roles as mothers. When, gradually, their position in American society begins to evolve, they become a little more restless and spend less time in the kitchen, changing the feeding habits, as well. However, Italian American women, in the more modern texts, seem to have come to a compromise. Now, women can juggle a successful career and being in the kitchen. Spending time in the kitchen becomes a way to reconnect to one's past and roots and to create meals that identify them as Italian.

In Louise DeSalvo's *Crazy in the Kitchen*, the kitchen becomes a classroom where comparisons are drawn between Southern Italy and the U.S. For example, DeSalvo learns that in her grandmother's village, women would use seawater, as salt was too expensive and the water of the wells contaminated. The grandmother narrates about the lack of jobs and opportunities, but she also remembers the "bounty beyond imagination, even for the poor" (23), until when the lands were taken from the poor and the exploitation of land and workers commenced. These intimate moments De Salvo shares with her grandmother allow her to build a sort of camaraderie that she is unable to create with her mother.

Even if DeSalvo's relationship with her mother was not the happiest and the most normal one, she still shared some happy moments with her mother in the kitchen: "(b)ut no matter how bad my mother felt, she usually managed to pull herself together to help me do my homework" (36). DeSalvo is willing to recognize that, even with depression, her mother had her good moments: "(s)he'd sit next to me at the kitchen table, helping me sound out words to spell them. She'd make me write my homework over if it was sloppy. She'd help me with my math . . ." (35). She also used rice or beans to make "product maps" (35) for geography projects. During these scarce intimate moments, the kitchen becomes a classroom, an American one, where the mother pushes her daughter to make a success of herself (36) and allows for a truce between the two.

Years later, mother and daughter share another intimate moment. When DeSalvo has her first child, she and her mother seem to develop a relationship: "(d)uring those weeks, we were closer than we ever were before, closer that we ever would be again. We were joined in a conspiracy of bottles, blankets, diapers" (155). And it is in the kitchen that they share these moments: "(w)e would sit at the kitchen table, stirring our tea, in those precious moments of silence when my baby was sleeping . . . And during those moments, my mother spoke to me of her lost

mother, of her loveless relationship with her stepmother, of her unrealized dreams, of how difficult it was to care for me as a child” (156). The kitchen, which used to be a place of contention for mother and daughter, now serves as a confessional, where real feelings are shared and memories restored.

However, for DeSalvo, the kitchen is a very problematic realm. First, it is the place of contention for her mother and step-grandmother; second, it is a place where good and bad memories are created; and third, it is the place where the author, now an adult, wants to be. The book opens with the description of the generational feud between DeSalvo’s Italian American mother and the Italian step grandmother. In the kitchen, the grandmother prepares the fresh bread, while the mother refuses to eat it, preferring the American bread. When one is in the kitchen, the other exits. Additionally, the use of the kitchen and the ingredients by the grandmother highlight the schism that regulates DeSalvo’s mother and grandmother’s relationship. The bread, of course, is used as a motive for the feud, but the hatred DeSalvo’s mother feels for her stepmother has deeper roots and has been caused by years of missed opportunities to develop a real daughter-mother’s relationship.

The feud setting is mainly the kitchen: “(t)he kitchen is my mother’s. . . when my grandmother moves in with us, she needs to cook, for she will not eat my mother’s food” (43). When her stepmother needs to cook, DeSalvo’s mother regards this as “an attempted coup, a potential usurpation” (43). And to spite her even more, she refuses to give her any room in the cupboards, refrigerator, or the pantry. The step mother is not perturbed by all this and finds other places to store her things: the basement, the cellar, and her own closet. This, of course, infuriates DeSalvo’s mother even more: “Two women in the same kitchen . . . Dear God, why have you done this to me” (43). DeSalvo wants her readers to feel sorry for her grandmother, because her

relationship with her own mother has always been problematic. Her narration is mostly skewed in favor of the grandmother and the readers are forced to see only one side of the story. In many occasions, DeSalvo points out how her mother did not like to cook, what she called, “the drudgery of making meals” (44), preferring to use canned food. DeSalvo’s mother uses the kitchen to hurt her stepmother and considers the kitchen and its modern gadgets a symbol of success.

On the other hand, for DeSalvo, the author, the kitchen is a place for coping and surviving. In fact, it becomes a multifunctional room in her house. Cooking in the kitchen is closely linked to her writing. In fact, her studio is next to the kitchen, and she admits that, without cooking, her writing would not be possible. The kitchen is also the locale where she and her husband find common ground and where the act of cooking makes them closer. This modern text is a sample of how the kitchen becomes a place of choice, where men and women can cook together and the woman is not completely in charge, unlike the women in the earlier texts.

Unlike De Salvo’s happy kitchen, the kitchen in *Christ in Concrete*, Pietro Di Donato’s novel, is a dark, sad place, a place where even Annunziata does not want to be. Her reluctance is caused by the knowledge that there is nothing to eat; her husband has died in a horrible accident on the job, and she does not want to face what she already knows: the family will go hungry as there is no one that will be able to provide for them and that she will not be able to fulfill her task, as the food preparer. The realization is overwhelming: the number twenty-four, that is twenty-four hours, is repeated by Annunziata and her son, Paul, as they sit at the table staring at the little food still available, the few potatoes and the two onions. Di Donato’s narrator masterfully lets Annunziata’s and Paul’s silent thoughts run on the page, like a stream of consciousness, which emphasizes the state of confusion and desperation they both are feeling. The whole breakfast scene

has a quasi-cinematographic quality, as if a camera were moving from person to object, from object to person:

Two onions. Four potatoes. On-two-three-four-five-six large crumbs one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven small crumbs. Paul Annina Lucia Giorgio Joseph Adela Geremio two onions four potatoes. Who will tap on the door to put baskets of food on Geremio's table? Who will come quietly and feed the family of Geremio day upon day week upon week month upon month year upon year until they are strong men and women and I join Geremio? (51)

The emotions are overwhelming the two characters that understand the dire situation the family is about to face: without the bread winner, who will feed all these children? The atmosphere in the kitchen is suffocating and so desperate that one might think that there is no hope for this family.

However, di Donato allows for better times in this household: Annunziata's kitchen, and the house, as a whole, become a happier place beginning with Annunziata's brother's welcome home party. In fact, the apartment, not very different from others in the tenements, undergoes a change: no longer dark and sad, it becomes the place where work is getting done and where parties are given. The kitchen becomes "a small gathering place where the widows sat in a circle busily through rolls of embroidery" (146). Di Donato also allows love back into this home. Uncle Luigi works together with the women that do piece work with Annunziata and falls in love with one of them, Cola. Not only does he notice her beauty and presence, but he also notices that "(s)he was the first to bring out from oilcloth shopping bag the bottle of wine, the bread, or cake" (146). She provides food and this act of being first renders her more appealing and fascinating, so much so, that Luigi asks for her hand.

Michele Fazio, in his essay ““Vomit Your Poison”: Violence, Hunger, and Symbolism in Pietro Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*” suggests that “di Donato transforms the kitchen from a place of unpaid domestic labor to a work site where actual wages are earned” (120). The women are working for very little, but he claims that being at home “protects the women from having to work in a dangerous factory” and allows the women to build a “female-centered community” (120). Additionally, the food that Cola brings to the table allows these immigrants to “effectively control their social environment through the food they eat” (121). Using ethnic foods, di Donato informs his readers that the immigrant can claim his or her belonging to something that is not American.

In other Italian American texts, the kitchen is not as gloomy as DeSalvo’s childhood kitchen or Di Donato’s *Annunziata*’s. In Mari Tomasi’s 1949 novel, *Like Lesser Gods*, for example, the kitchen is Maria Dalli’s domain and is a major setting in her novel. Most of the times, Maria’s kitchen is a happy, welcoming place. The kitchen is the safe place where everyone gathers and where guests are welcomed and fed. But Tomasi also uses the kitchen as the place where characters face and share problems and hardships. When Pietro, Maria’s husband, finds out that he has unfortunately contracted TB and must come to terms with the news that he will die, he returns home and goes directly into the kitchen. Tomasi successfully sets off the kitchen as “warm, cheery” (182) and furnished with all the amenities, a refrigerator, a white sink, and a white stove, things that his job afforded his family, giving him a sense of pride. The warmth of the kitchen stands in contrast with what Pietro is feeling: his heart is cold with fear and concern. He repeats the usual ritual of getting undressed and shaking off the dust before entering but does not share what he has just found out. The cleaning ritual could be an act of contrition or an act of respect: the kitchen has status, it is a sacred place, his wife’s kingdom. He does not want to taint it with the

dust from his job, a job that she despises; thus, he cleans himself and leaves the dirty clothes by the kitchen door.

After Pietro tells his wife of his disease, Maria breaks the news to the family, during breakfast, in the kitchen: “Remember, act no differently toward your father! Be as cheerful as you always were. I will not have him see your pity, your grief. I will not tolerate a single long face under this roof” (190). She, then, breaks down, sitting on the rocking chair, by the stove. The kitchen is her kingdom and the chair her throne. Tomasi thought it was fitting to place her in the kitchen where she shows her strength and power. At the same time, the kitchen gives her a place where to let her emotion freely flow.

Often portrayed in the kitchen and as strong willed as Maria, Lucia Santa, in Mario Puzo’s novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, is described a few times cooking, but her domain is the kitchen; there, she can think, reminisce, and make decisions. Consequently, most of the action in the book happens in the kitchen. This is where important decisions are made, where people are welcomed with coffee, and where conflicts and quarrels are started and resolved. Puzo, though, uses the character of Lucia Santa, based on his own mother, to show how this Sicilian immigrant family was on its way to becoming assimilated, while at the same time, retaining many cultural characteristics intact. In *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, Donna Gabaccia points out that the Sicilian families began allowing “outsiders to eat and sleep together with nuclear family members” (82). She argues that “(t)heir choice signals a significant and conscious departure from Sicilian ideals about nuclear family solidarity in its competition with others” (82). One can surmise that this openness is important for the assimilation of the immigrant, because these families now opened up and “accepted new kinds of cooperation at the very center of family life” (82). Lucia Santa is still very much Italian but she is now willing to open her house to outsiders, even guests

that profess a different religion. Lucia Santa's kitchen is in fact the place where two religions, Catholic and Protestant, meet over coffee: Frank Corbo, Lucia Santa's second husband, meets another Italian, Mr. Colucci, a Protestant minister, and brings him home to meet his family. The guest and his family are welcomed and made feel at ease with coffee and cake.

Carmolina, *Paper Fish's* "part-time" narrator and protagonist, finds the kitchen to be a happy place, as well: "(t)he kitchen was filled with the thick feelings of food; she walked in and the food touched her face. The soup was steam and blushed her skin, nose, mouth, and made Carmolina feel that this room was like no other room in the world" (14). The kitchen becomes a welcoming place where the food itself becomes alive, 'touches' her face, and makes her feel at home.

In this semiautobiographical novel, Carmolina's young family is never alone. In fact, the narrator's grandmother, Doria, lives across from them and can see the kitchen and what goes on in her son's house. Doria knows that something is going on: "(t)here was something wrong in the house, the wife sitting by the kitchen window in the yellow electric light, doing nothing" (12). During a conversation in the kitchen, Doria reveals that she knows that things are not going well for the married couple. She is not the stereotypical, nosey, and overbearing mother-in-law, but she communicates that she is well aware that Sarah and Marco are not as happy. Observing from the window, Doria seems to be invading Sarah's space and violating Sarah's privacy. In fact, Doria's matriarchal power "spills" over Sarah's kitchen: Doria is the only one that "could call a meeting in Mama's kitchen" (67), gently usurping Sarah's of her role in her own kitchen. In one instance, a special meeting is called by Grandma: the family must decide if Dorian, Carmolina's older and disabled sister, should be put away. However, the narrator begins setting up the kitchen as the good place, the place where tough decisions must be made. The positivity of the setting is even

highlighted by the contrast the narrator makes between the kitchen that is lit bright yellow and the outside, that is so black that “no one could see past the screens” (67). The hyperbole and the yellow and dark colors accentuate the difference between the inside and the outside: in the kitchen, there is light (and the family), while the outside is ominous. After setting up the scene in a safe and positive environment, the family members discuss the business at hand.

However, for Sarah, Carmolina’s mother, the kitchen is not a happy place. She is first introduced in the kitchen, washing strawberries “at a sink yellowed by all foods, all liquids, yellowed” (2). Throughout the book, the reader sees Sarah almost imprisoned in the kitchen. In fact, when Sarah cooks, it is never described as a pleasant activity but as a chore, done very mechanically, without interest: “it was something she did every day of her life, something she would do every day for longer in the future than she dares imagine” (9). Because she is not happy in her marriage and because she has given birth to a beautiful but mentally disabled child, her life is unbearably sad. Her cooking is a job, it is what is expected of her, especially because she has married into an Italian family. The narrator is not specific in telling her readers what ethnic group she belongs to, but one can surmise that this character is based on the author’s own mother, who was Lithuanian-American. Being in the kitchen reflects her lack of happiness in her life. The kitchen seems to suffocate her and relegates her to a domesticity role that she does not want.

Nevertheless, the kitchen holds something magic for her daughter, Carmolina. Young Carmolina does not understand much of what is going on around her. Because she is so young, she is naturally unable to explain how food is made, but the omniscient narrator tells the readers that she thinks it is a magical thing: “The food that turned by magic into dinner was in the icebox” (14). It is also magic because Carmolina is too short to reach the door of the icebox, so that the contents remain a mystery to her.

John Fante puts some magic in the kitchen of *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*, as well. Henry, the narrator, describes his mother's dominion, the kitchen, with a quasi-delirious tone:

The kitchen. La cucina, the true mother country, this warm cave of the good witch deep in desolate land of loneliness, with pots of sweet potions bubbling over the fire, a cavern of magic herbs, rosemary and thyme and sage and oregano, balm of lotus that brought sanity to lunatics, peace to the troubled, joy to joyless, this small twenty-by-twenty world, the altar a kitchen range, the magic circle a checkered tablecloth where the children fed, the old children, lured back to their beginnings, the taste of mother's milk still haunting their memories, fragrance in the nostrils, eye brightening, the wicked world receding as the old mother witch sheltered her brood from the wolves outside (55).

The kitchen becomes a magical cave, where the mother, a good witch, with all her potions, can still make her grown children come back to the table and eat her food. Like every respectable witch, she has an altar and a magic circle. She extols her powers over her children, like a witch, and not like a fairy would do, and protects her children from the evil forces of the outside world. The kitchen, then becomes a safe place for all.

Especially for Henry, his mother's kitchen is his own safe place. In fact, he recounts how, when he was younger, he would sit at the kitchen table and read: "I used to sit with library books piled on the kitchen table, desolate, listening to the call of the voices in the books, hungering for other towns" (60). In this instance, the kitchen is the place where he traveled with his minds to faraway places. It is the place that after long hours of picking almonds, he goes back to read books. Most likely, this is the place where he became a writer.

Even for Gino, Lucia Santa's son, in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, the kitchen represents safety from the ugly forces that govern people's lives in the outside world. After a visit to his friend's house, Gino is relieved to be at home. Joey's parents have lost all their money due to the bank crash, and Gino's visit turns into a torment. When he finally gets to leave and go home, he is met with food and the warmth of what is familiar to him: "How good it was to come into that warm kitchen that smelled of garlic and olive oil and tomato sauce bubbling like dark hot wine in the pot" (152). Food is ready and he is at peace. The narrator's intention is to highlight Lucia Santa's kitchen as a safe place, in stark contrast with the other house, where desperation is taking over and the atmosphere is heavy with fear and worry about the future.

Vincent Schiavelli, in his 1998 memoir/cook book, *Brucolino, America*, remembers his family's kitchen with fondness, as well. Throughout the book, he tells personal anecdotes about eating and cooking in the kitchen and sharing the libations with relatives and neighbors. Sharing with outsiders is, in fact, a common phenomenon amongst Sicilian families. The Schiavelli's kitchen surely resembles what would have happened in the *cortile* in Sicily. In his memoir/cook book, Vincent Schiavelli highlights how the kitchen was the center of his family's life but also of the neighborhood's. He remembers how his grandmother prepared the coffee and how her friends would come to visit and gossip. The kitchen, though, was also a place where the women shared their lives; it was, in fact, "a forum for medical and marital advice and information about pregnancy, birthing and child care" (39). The illiterate guests would bring their letters to be read so that they could find out about their relatives in Sicily. Thus, this particular kitchen becomes such an important and vital place for the neighborhood, where women have agency and find support and comradeship. It is an important place for these Italian women, because it is here that "the camaraderie and compassion of this sisterhood" (40) is found. Being in this kitchen allowed

these women to function in American society as best as they could, and even if with limitations, they were able to recreate what they had left behind, in Sicily.

For Schiavelli, being in the kitchen with his grandmother and the other women is a sort of rite of passage and, as in many other texts, the kitchen becomes a classroom for the author. When he is a young boy, his grandmother and her friends allow him to sit under the table. He reassures the reader that his interest is not sexual but “(i)t was mechanical” (41). In fact, he is just simply very interested in the “tangle of garter clips, straps and girdles” (41). It is “as wondrous as architecture as that of the Brooklyn Bridge” (41). On the floor, he would also listen to the women talk and because he is so young they think that they do not need to “censor their activity” (40). The reader is left to guess what kind of things the women do talk about that needs to be censored, but one can guess that during these visits, young Schiavelli probably discovers a lot about life.

Schiavelli also remembers how the family eats the Sunday dinner around 2 o'clock. There are eighteen of them, and they all fill the kitchen, while grandpa fixes the food. Schiavelli's grandma is not the only one that cooks, but her husband, a real chef, takes the reins and prepares delicious food for the family. At the table, Schiavelli, now older, and his cousins share their “dramas of adolescence between courses” (284) and ask their older cousins for advice. But it is the food that brings peace and happiness: “The comfort of Papa Andrea's food always turned the drama into farce, and we laughed, surrounded by the warmth of our family” (284).

The kitchen is the room of the house that serves as the main stage for many of the Italian American stories. In Italian American literary texts, characters spend part of their days in the kitchen where they feel at ease and safe. Writers use the kitchen as a setting not just as the place where food is prepared. They want their readers to witness how the kitchen is the place where the Italian immigrant family thrives, plays, fights, of course, eats, and where children learn important

life lessons from adults. Additionally, it is also often used as a confessional where characters share their secrets and dreams. Lastly, it is the place that defines the role of women as matriarchs and men as the patriarchs. Some authors describe their own families' experiences, others retell stories they heard, but they all have created characters that give a voice to those that have sacrificed, fought, and finally succeeded in assimilating. Shared moments, either happy or unhappy, are part of the narrative and become part of the collective history of assimilation. Italian American authors want to ground their stories in a place that would show either sacrifice or success. The kitchen is that place.

See also Il cortile and Nostalgia

Kitchen Floor

In *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*, the kitchen floor becomes the stage for the dramatic fainting spell Mrs. Molise has after all her kids are present and she finally has some spectators to witness the act: "My mother, never one to waste a dramatic improvisation, in the presence of her children, promptly passed out on the kitchen floor" (6). The readers are not sure if this is a real fainting spell, or just a ruse to have her children on her side. In fact, this spell has supposedly been brought on by a physical fight with her husband. After they use garlic to revive her, she goes back to her role in the kitchen, the food provider: "she began to stagger around, bringing wine and Genoa tarts to the table, where a discussion of her problems with Papa ensued" (6). The kitchen is the soul of this households, the place where the family gathers for succulent dinners cooked by Mrs. Molise. Even after the fainting spell, she reassesses the situation and starts feeding, an action that shows how she is still much in control. Because she wants her children to feel sorry for her and wants them on her side, she knows that she can accomplish that with food as she is cognizant that her kids, even as adults, cannot say no to her cooking.

La via vecchia

Much of the dynamics in an Italian immigrant family is regulated by the old ways, where food is part of the ‘commandments.’ Jerre Mangione and Ben Monreale in *La Storia* explains what *la via vecchia* is:

1. Fear God and respect the saints or else you will repent it.
2. The father is the father and he is experienced. The son will never fail if he imitates him.
3. The elders are prudent and experienced: do as they do and you will learn and prosper.
4. Always honor and obey your parents, then even the stones will love you.
5. If you don't listen to your helpful mother, everything will turn to shit right in your pants.
6. Father is the master.
7. Experience gives power.
8. Work hard, work always, and you will never know hunger.
9. Work honestly, and don't think of the rest.
10. Whoever doesn't want to work, dies like a dog. (233-234)

Not only did these rules regulate the relationship between women and men, but some of these rules were responsible for the conflicts that arose between first and second generation (234).

Men and women, in Italian American literature, traveled together on the road to equality. Forsaking the “old ways” definitely helped women to be able to go outside the home and work. However, Italian and Italian American female characters, even if oppressed, show that they are intelligent and that they have a mind of their own. Some of them are calculating and omnipresent, some of them are meek and obedient, but Italian American authors still show them as thinking, pondering, and with agency. Additionally, women are given agency through food. Even if some men know how to cook and they do not mind cooking, in Italian American texts, women are, with

some exceptions, the food preparers and this chore is what allows them to control the family dynamics. With food, they rule in the kitchen, tame their husbands and children, and keep the Italian food traditions alive. After the initial resistance to the American way of living, Italian American families have to change to be allowed into mainstream America. As shown in literature, only when Italians begin moving out the tenements and the isolated ghettos of Italian neighborhood, they finally succeed in becoming more American and are forced to take on the habits and the value system America wants them to adopt. However, as shown in many texts, many Italian Americans have not forsaken their ancestors and their roots: mothers and fathers, to a certain extent, have passed on the 'cooking torch' and, through food, families continue to remember the past and allow for future generations to keep their *Italianità* alive.

Lamb

In *No Steady Job for Papa*, Marion Benassuti describes how the narrator's mother displays her strong personality ordering for the family lamb to be butchered, a decision that is usually left to the man of the house: "Mama has also made arrangements with Mr. Cavanna and Mr. Leopoldi to butcher the lamb. The lamb had grown fat and would make wonderful eating for the months to come" (203). However, the children are not happy, as they consider the lamb as one of their pets. But Mamma knows best, as she understands that she needs to feed her family. Thus, she devises a plan: she sends the little kids to a relative and the narrator to school. While everyone is gone, the slaughter happens. The slaughtering of the animals is mostly a man's job, but in this case the woman is put in charge. Mamma has married a man that sometimes fails to understand the importance of having a steady job that can provide. She needs to step in to make sure that her family will be able to eat.

Lamb is considered a delicacy in *Vertigo*, Louise DeSalvo's other autobiography. However, eating the eyes of the lamb carries a deeper meaning. During an Easter family dinner, where lamb is being served, DeSalvo's paternal grandfather plucks one of the eyes of the lamb "[w]ith great ceremony" (69) and offers it to DeSalvo. She refuses: "I can't imagine putting such an offensive thing in my mouth, much less swallowing it" (69). Her father tries to convince her telling her it is an honor and it is for good luck, but she does not budge. Nevertheless, the act of offering the eye to her signifies that her family has chosen her to "carry all the hopes for success of the family" (69). She feels singled out and does not feel the excitement that such an honor has been bestowed upon her. This is usually reserved for the boys of the family, but in this case, she has been the chosen one.

Like Lesser Gods by Mari Tomasi (1949)

In *Like Lesser Gods*, Mari Tomasi tells the story, tribulations, and successes of Pietro Dalli's family in Granite Town, a fictional town in Pennsylvania. Pietro works in the local quarry as a tombstone maker. His wife, Maria, dotes over him but wants him to quit his job, as many of the stonecutters die of stonecutters' TB. This is the main conflict that drives most of the story: Maria, the wife, is determined to make her husband quit and throughout the book, she tries to convince her husband to open a grocery store out of their house. However, she will fail in this endeavor. In this particular novel, there is a constant pedagogical concern: in some instances, the readers can truly sense that Tomasi's intention for writing this book was to teach Americans about Italian immigrants. She does a good job of representing the Italians as non-threatening and quite inventive, praising them for their sacrifices and successes.

Liver

Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of Italian Immigrant*, is aware of the changes in taste that occur throughout her life time in the U.S.: “(t)he liver was cheap in that time-they were throwing it to the cats and dogs. (Not like now, huh? Now it’s the style to eat liver)” (215). What it used to be dog food has changed into a delicacy that Americans enjoyed. Rosa is always looking for an empathetic ear and wants the listeners to focus on the forlorn condition of her family, especially the children: “[m]y children, when they got that good supper-oh, I wish you had seen it! They thought it was the king’s wedding!” (215), Rosa wants to communicate that her children do not need grand things, and liver is good enough for them.

Mafia

In *The Godfather*, spaghetti is used to welcome new members into the Family. Tom Hagen, who will be the Don’s attorney and confidante, is an orphan, and unlike his sister who was taken into foster care, at the age of eleven, lives in the streets. Sonny, the Don’s son, demands that his family take him in (56). Not only is he given a bed to sleep in, but he is also offered food, “a hot dish of spaghetti with oily rich tomato sauce, the taste of which he had never forgotten” (56). This kind gesture of feeding and the tasty food leave a mark in Tom Hagen: he feels welcome and he will repay with his eternal gratitude in serving the Don and the Mafia family. Additionally, offering him the spaghetti signals that he will be accepted into the Family, even if he is not Italian.

Spaghetti is used again in another scene. After the attempt to kill the Don has failed and he is recovering in the hospital, the gang is at the compound. When Michael, the Don’s other son, arrives, he is met with Clemenza, one of his father’s men “cooking up a huge pot of tomato sauce” (137). At this point, there is no woman in the house. Thus, it is up to the men to cook up “the spaghetti for the troops, just like the army” (37). Michael is amused by Clemenza’s cooking, but

Sonny is not: “Tell him to cut out that crap and come on in here, I have more important things for him to do. . .” (137). Clemenza does not see anything wrong in cooking for the men; he is maybe craving normalcy that is now being shattered by the attack on the Boss or to create a familiar and cozy atmosphere to obliterate the chaos and turmoil that are about to take over the Family. However, the role in the kitchen, is, at this juncture, inverted. The tough Mafia man busies himself in the kitchen, like a woman, and, in Sonny’s eyes, the macho stereotype is shattered by the mere act of cooking.

Manhood

Men, in early Italian American texts, expect their wives to prepare meals and with that expectation relegate the women to the kitchen. However, men work to provide the ingredients that will be used to prepare the food. When a man cannot provide for his family, his manhood is at stake. The ability to provide food is used to measure the worth and value of a person: Uncle Luigi, in *Christ in Concrete*, loses his leg because of an accident on his job and now is unable to support his sister’s family. He realizes that he will not be able to work because he is a “man disjoined” (139) and because his limbs are whole, he cannot “give bread to mouth” (139). Sadly, he does not feel that he is a whole man and measures his worth by his ability or inability to provide food. Thus, he questions his manhood.

Even Paul, his nephew, seems to measure his worth by the same parameter: “(he) was proud that God had given him hand, back, and eye to bring home food, proud that he earned almost as much as the thick-wristed men, proud that he studies blueprints and construction, proud that he felt beauty in his form and soul, proud of his wonderful family” (157). Paul, unlike his uncle, is whole and can provide. He is a real man, a man that can keep up with the hard work in construction,

but who can also use his brains to read the blueprints. Because he can provide for his family, he feels pride and worth.

In later texts, in some households, preparing the food is not a chore that only women do, but also men. Some men also take care of yards where some of the food is grown and are often portrayed as butchers, bakers, and pastry chefs. However, there is definitely a difference: Bob Ashley et al. quoting a study by Marjorie DeVault, argue that, in modern times, when men cook, the act is seen as “primarily as a leisure, rather than work” (132). Additionally, DeVault claims that in her studies, “the men felt little of the anxiety and guilt that women associated with feeding the family” (132). Additionally, Ashley et al. posit that some researchers have described the “caring work women do in feeding the family” (132) as an outside ideological imposition. On the other hand, DeVault claims that with the act of feeding “women reproduce gendered identities” (132). In fact, she argues that “(b)y feeding the family, a woman conducts herself as recognizably womanly” (133). And because the act of cooking has always been linked to femininity, men have distanced themselves from it. These claims seem to support the description of the male behavior towards cooking in Italian American literature: in the very early texts, some men expect the women to cook and take care of the home, but, in later texts, men begin to spend some time in the kitchen, as, at this stage of the assimilation process, they probably did not feel the same anxiety and societal pressure.

Memoirs of a Beatnik by Diana Di Prima (1969)

In this book, the main character, Diane di Prima herself, is completely assimilated into the American subculture, the beatnik generation. In fact, she identifies herself as Italian in just one page, where she describes her family. However, she seems to really enjoy the life that she has chosen for herself, dropping out of school and relishing a life of free love, alcohol, and drugs. Di

Prima describes her personal growth. At the beginning, her narrating is quite impulsive, immature, and completely worry free. Later, her tone has somewhat matured, her voice is more poised and calm. It also a story of a feminist: she is fighting, in a sense, the traditional view of women (her refusal to continue college, sharing sex with women and men, and the complete absence of a committed relationship show her contempt for the traditional image). However, she works as a model which could be seen as contradictory, as she allows others to exploit her and her image. She is also looking for an identity and agency. She lives the life of a beatnik to the fullest, she does not have to answer to anybody, but during some moments in her life, she seems to be longing for a more stable life. For example, when she moves in with three men, she enjoys staying at home and being a sort of wife (sort of, because she sleeps with all of them), or when she feels that she wants to get pregnant. Additionally, her willingness to share her house and her life with other “misfits” shows her inner desire to belong to a more traditional style of life. In other words, she creates her own family that is certainly not traditional but shows her desire to be somewhat surrounded by others, like in a family.

Memory

In Italian American households, the act of eating and savoring the food, just created, triggers memories in the people enjoying the food. These memories are sometimes positive but also negative, as they stand as reminders of a past filled with pain and despair. For the younger generations, there are no memories attached to the food, as they never lived in the old country, but sharing the food with their families allow them to create new ones.

Lucia Santa’s kitchen, in Puzo’s novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, is the carrier of the memories of the time spent there by the characters. For Octavia, Lucia Santa’s older daughter, after her marriage, the kitchen is the place that helps her remember her childhood and the times

she spends with her mother at the kitchen table, sipping coffee. Even if their relationship is rocky, the kitchen is what ties mother and daughter. Everything in this kitchen from the clawed table to the ironing board is familiar to her, and “(i)t was a room to live in and to work in and to eat in” (224).

In *Paper Fish*, Doria, the narrator’s grandmother, finds solace in remembering the old times in her kitchen. As she listens to the “steel radio” with the oversized knobs, she remembers how she would listen to it when her husband, Dominic, was still alive. She talks to the radio and tells it “to make some sense or shut up but she loved it” (42). The radio is her companion as she does her chores. The English she hears gets mingled with her children’s voices and her husband speaking Italian to her. She knows that the radio is giving information “about the world outside her kitchen” (42). The radio, then, is her way to escape the monotony of her work in the kitchen. The kitchen also holds an important location and interestingly De Rosa places the kitchen on the second floor, as if trying to give Doria a superior role. “Beneath their own feet, beneath the floor of the kitchen” (43), the husband runs the “grocery store he had created out of his hands, with the small money he had brought from Italy” (43). There is a close connection between the two places but also a clear demarcation: in the evening, Dominic climbs the stairs up to “Doria’s kitchen” (43) and is reunited with his wife. They are close as he is just downstairs, but the kitchen seems to belong only to Doria. The store is Dominic’s responsibility, while Doria’s is the kitchen. Doria’s role in this family is defined by the kitchen where she is busy keeping it spotless and fixing food for her children.

Mixing Food

In *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, Rita Ciresi describes how during a the fourth of July party, when Angel Lupo, the narrator, is already an adult, the family eats hot dogs and hamburgers

but also eggplant parmigiana and lasagna (114), a mixing of food that signals that the Lupo family is assimilating into American society: allowing certain American foods into their diet, Italian Americans demonstrate that they are ready to come to the American table, as long as their foodways are also served.

Mothers and Wives

Mothers, and wives, are the basis of every Italian American households. Without them, chaos will ensue. They take care of the children and their husbands, do chores, shop and cook the food. In Italian American texts, the mother is an important, if not vital, element for the survival of the family unity. Some mothers are better than others in these chores, and when they are negatively portrayed, an explanation is always offered. In fact, when a mother does not commit to the role of the mother who feeds, she has a mental issue or is going through a difficult moment. Otherwise, mothers are defined as funny and caring characters who entertain the readers with their quiriness and ethnic traits.

Maria in *The Brotherhood of the Grapes* is the typical Italian housewife. In fact, she spends most of her time in the kitchen and uses her cooking skills to her advantage. She wants to be in the kitchen, because in the kitchen she has control and can control other people, especially her adult children. She coaxes them often with food and knows how to use her cooking spells on them. When her oldest son, Henry, the narrator, is in town during a visit, caused by a fight she and her husband had, she constantly uses food to convince her children to come to the house: “I fixed a nice dinner . . . Baked eggplant with ricotta cheese, gnocchi di latta, and veal. Remember the eggplant? It’s your favorite” (35).

She is very sly, too. When she talks about her husband to Henry, she mixes her concerns about her husband's erratic behavior while mentioning food in the same thread of thought: "Too much wine. Up and down all night to the water closet. I bought some nice mozzarella. Tomorrow I'll fix some croquettes. Mario loves them" (35). She knows how to use food to manipulate those around her. Even when Virgil, the other son, refuses her baked eggplant and gnocchi, because of his disapproval towards his father's behavior, he ends up going back: "He started the car and I stepped away and watched it move forward about thirty feet. Then it rolled back to where I stood. A foolish helpless smile crinkled Virgil's fat face. "Is the eggplant made with bread crumbs and Romano cheese? It sure is. Resigned, he turned off the engine" (55). Virgil is not able to leave: his desire to taste his mother's food is a lot stronger than his pride. Maria's cooking is quite powerful in itself, that even an adult man is left powerless. He is "spellbound, captivated, mooning over his great mother, enrapturing her with loving glances, even pausing midst his greed to lift her hand and kiss it gratefully" (56). Not only Henry realizes that Maria has won her son over, but he understands that her mother is aware of her powers: "(s)he laughed to see how completely she had woven her spell" (56).

When her husband, Nick, is in the hospital, gravely sick, she still prepares food for the family and expects all the children to be there. The main dish is *trippa Milanese*, "something plain and austere, in keeping with the grim occasion" (144). They are waiting on one of the brothers, Mario, who will never show up. She then orders them to begin eating. Henry recognizes that even if this dish was meant to be plain, it is indeed a masterwork: "(t)he trippa Milanese was neither plain nor austere, it was wild and ravishing, squares of honeycomb tripe prepared with rice, bell peppers and tomato sauce, sprinkled with Parmesan cheese and seasoned with butter and spices" (144). His mother has outdone herself once again. Not only did she cook something wonderful,

but she is aware of her husband absence: she in fact sets a place at the head of the table, “a sort of homage to him” (144).

During the visit at the hospital, she continues to play the role of a good wife, showing concern about her husband’s weight and diet. She is in fact appalled when she finds out that the hospital does not put any sauce on the asparagus and that her husband will not be able to eat any pasta because of his diabetes. A complete overhaul of his diet throws Maria off. Although she is still convinced that a little pasta and wine will not hurt him, her son Henry shares the same happy disposition: “How could he resist the siren fragrances wafted from his wife’s cauldrons? Every room in his house was scented with the good life, the Mediterranean life” (150). Once again, Maria’s skills as a cook are praised. Her cooking is irresistible, like a siren’s chant. Her magic is what gives her agency in the family. And even if her children are aware of the spell, they do not resist it but welcome it.

Jerry’s mother, Mrs. Amoroso, in *Mount Allegro*, exerts her powers through food, as well. Mrs. Amoroso is aware of the importance of feeding her family with healthy food: “she persistently fed us *verdura*, in the interest of health, usually dandelion or escarole or some other bitter member of the vegetable family” (49). She forces her children to eat even if they are not hungry or like the food. She does not care if her children do not like the food or complain because in her mind she is feeding her children for their own good. And if anyone protests, she gives them another helping. Because the story is told by one of her children, Jerry, Mrs. Amoroso is often depicted with admiration. Jerry admits that their family is poor as everyone else on his street, but his mother “was a better manager than most people” (45), knows how to listen to the advice from the neighbors, and uses her family to help. Not only does she plant roses in the front yard, but in the back, “she grew tomatoes, from which she made *astrattu*” (46). Mrs. Amoroso belongs to the older

generation that is still very much enamored with the mother country, more specifically with Sicily, and still tries to regulate relationships and behaviors with food.

Lucia Santa, in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, is a very complex character. She runs her household as a general and is omnipresent in her children's lives. She marries twice and even when she becomes a widow, she is resolute in surviving America. As every Italian mother, she wants her sons to marry Italian girls, because they know "from the cradle that man ruled, must be waited on like a duke, fed good food that took hours to prepare; . . . cared for the children and the house without whining for help" (204). But she is happy that her daughter, Octavia, is not marrying an Italian man. This is when Lucia Santa becomes an oxymoronic character. For her sons, she accepts the fact that women are to serve their husbands, but when it comes to her daughter, her outlook on the relationship is quite feminist:

What mother who had suffered under the masculine tyranny could wish on her tender daughter those guinea tyrants, those despotic greenhorns, who locked up their wives at home, never took them out except to a wedding or funeral; who made an uproar fit for wild goats if spaghetti was not steaming on the table at the precise moment their baronial boots crossed the doorsill; who never raised a finger to help their pregnant wives, and sat calmly smoking stinking De Nobili cigars while their big-bellied women stood on window sills, so top heavy as they washed dirty glass that they were in danger of tumbling like balloons to the pavement of Tenth Avenue (204).

In very few words, she described what an Italian American household might have looked like, hers too, maybe when her first husband was alive. She might also have observed other families in the tenements. The readers are not privy to that information, but they can surmise that Lucia Santa is knowledgeable on the subject. Her view on the dynamics regulating the relationship

between husband and wife is definitely feminist and this tirade leads the readers to believe that Lucia Santa is also assimilating into the American society, leaving behind the old ways.

Louise DeSalvo in her memoir *Crazy in the Kitchen* describes her mother's oddities and her failed relationship with her. DeSalvo's mother does not want to eat Italian food and refuses her stepmother's bread; she does not eat at the table but eats off other people's plates once they are finished; she does not allow anyone in the kitchen even though she does not really cook; and lastly, when she is interned, she leaves a food list that will last a month. However, DeSalvo's mother will surprise her daughter when DeSalvo brings her new boyfriend home. In fact, she prepares a real banquet and even fixes him his favorite dessert. Unfortunately, DeSalvo uses this anecdote to accuse her mother for not having allowed her to be in the kitchen with her and for not allowing her mother to share this private sphere: "Now I wish that my mother and I had cooked this meal together so that we could have shared time in the kitchen, which we never did- a source of grief now; so that I could have this memory of us cooking together on the occasion when my parents entertained the first time the young man who would become my husband" (196). DeSalvo recognizes her own pain: it is caused by the inability of her mother to allow the possibility of sharing moments in the kitchen, moments that would create happy unforgettable and happy memories to be cherished forever. Writing about this grief is cathartic for DeSalvo and allows her to recognize that their relationship is unusual and somewhat unnatural. She is partially jealous of the special treatment her mother is giving the boyfriend: DeSalvo realizes that her mother knows how to cook, thus she thinks that she has deliberately made her family suffer, refusing to cook real food.

Another mother that does not always fulfill her "duty" and her Madonna role is Giuseppina, in *I Love You Like a Tomato*. After her mother, Angelina, dies, she goes into a comatose state and

leaves her children, ChiChi and Marco, to fend off for themselves. Angelina was the pillar of this family and acted as a mother and father for the fatherless children, and when she dies, she takes away her daughter's will to live. However, when spring arrives, Giuseppina finally regains "consciousness" and the first thing she does is grocery shopping. She and ChiChi go to the grocery store and Giuseppina starts ordering: "the tortellini, the shells, the pancetta, the *abruzzi* sausage, olive oil, . . . the ricotta . . . brown eggs, cow milk . . . almond nougats" (91). Deep inside, she probably knows that she has failed in her role as food provider, but as soon as she hears her daughter say, "Can we eat, Mamma?" (91), she is ready to comply.

However, some mothers fulfill their duty, as doleful mothers and wives. In Italian American households, the wife has control in the kitchen. Because women do not work outside the house, they must attend to their chores in the home. When husbands are despotic or tyrannical, wives, for their own survival, learn how to use their skills as cook to manipulate and keep control over the household.

See also Women

Mining Camps

It was a common occurrence for Italian men, especially those who were "birds of passage," to contract a marriage when they returned to Italy. These men would work seasonal jobs in the United States and often went back to visit families in Italy. Sometimes, they would marry someone so that they could bring them to the United States to do the cleaning, washing, and food preparing. One of these women is Rosa. In *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, when Rosa marries Santino, a man from her village who works in the United States, she soon realizes that this arranged marriage is actually a work contract: she "has been hired" to work for the men in the mining camp.

This had been foreshadowed when Rosa was a little girl. She first learns about America from a man who is a worker that frequents her adoptive parents' *osteria*. She wants to marry him, but she is still a child: "I can't marry you. You're only a little girl. The men going to America need a woman to do their washing and cooking" (84). Ironically, that is what her future has in store for her. However, unlike other girls her age, Rosa is not taught how to cook because she begins working outside her house at a very young age. Additionally, her adoptive mother owns a restaurant, so Rosa misses out on the kitchen lessons and skips this stage that usually young women experience with their mothers. When Rosa first arrives in the United States, she is very worried because she realizes that she will have to cook and she does not know how (170). This unsettles her as she does not know how to play her role. She comes to the U.S. not equipped to do her work, in fact she does not fit the mold. In her situation, food causes her to worry, but, at the same time, gives her a role: ". . . the men wanted me to do the cooking and make their beds and clean their shacks and once every week wash their clothes" (174). She does not show any worries about the other chores, but she is worried about preparing the food. However, this lack of knowledge does not dishearten her. On the other hand, it gives her impetus to learn, to be accepted, and to be praised for her job.

Mothers-in-Law

Mrs. Corleone, in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, loves her daughter-in-law, Kay. Kay is not Italian and she is completely unaware of how to deal with the Italian family, not to mention a mob family. When Michael is sent to Italy after he kills his father's rival, Kay arrives at the Corleone's compound to ask about his whereabouts. There are no answers to her questions, at first, and Mrs. Corleone insists she eat something. She takes Kay in the kitchen and in no time, Kay is presented with bread, cheese, salami, and coffee. Like all Italian mothers, Mrs. Corleone forces Kay to eat.

The kitchen becomes the place where the two cultures meet and where the future mother-in-law breaks the news to Kay: “Mikey no gonna write you, you no gonna hear from Mikey. He hide two-three years. . . You go home to your family and find a nice young fellow and get married” (296). Kay, finally, understands that she needs to follow Mrs. Corleone’s advice, as she considers this source “unimpeachable” (296). Using the kitchen and the food, Mrs. Corleone succeeds in making Kay feel comfortable, even if the message is not what Kay wants to hear. Mrs. Corleone is the mother, and who is going to doubt her? In fact, Kay is not portrayed as nervous or upset, and because she trusts Mrs. Corleone, she will desist from contacting Michael in the future. Kay will get the same sweet treatment, when she goes back to the compound to see Michael, after he comes back from his exile in Sicily. Mrs. Corleone, once again, takes her to the kitchen and offers her food. It is obvious that the kitchen is the place that Mrs. Corleone uses to make people feel safe and welcome as if she wants to protect people from the violence of her husband’s business.

Likewise, in *Like Lesser Gods*, the two cultures also meet thanks to new family relations: the Dalli’s older son, Vetch, marries a girl, Peggy, outside the Italian community. His mother is not very pleased: “Maria wished Peggy could have been of Italian blood, and that the grandchild, the unborn baby in Peggy, would some day be able to chat with her in Italian” (183). She consoles herself with the thought that many other grandmothers of different backgrounds are probably wishing the same: children of immigrants are now marrying outside their ethnic group, facilitating the integration of the new Americans. Peggy knows that to be a good wife she needs to learn how to cook like her mother-in-law but feels under scrutiny. During a visit, she wants to show her mother-in-law that she knows how to make sauce. Peggy craves approval and is trying to create a bridge as she subconsciously knows that her mother-in-law is a little disappointed. In this case, Peggy is the one trying to reach out and constantly seeks approval from Maria. Even if Peggy is

not Italian, Maria likes Peggy and thinks she is a good wife for Vetch. Peggy attempts to get Maria's approval: "It looks easy to make that sauce. I'll have spaghetti tomorrow night and if Vetch doesn't rave about your spaghetti, I'll know I made it right" (183). But her attempt is met with a short remark: "*Sí*, that is the best way to make *salsa*" (184). This probably signals Maria's mixed feelings about Peggy's 'non Italianess' and does not want to show her disapproval. This exchange is a display of the hierarchy inside the family: Maria is the matriarch and must be respected and revered. Peggy, on the other hand, is the outsider that must receive approval to be accepted in the clan. And *salsa* is the way in for Peggy, i.e., to be accepted into the family, but mostly, be accepted by her mother-in-law.

Mount Allegro by Jerre Mangione (1942)

The book, written by Jerre Mangione, was published in 1942 and narrates the story of the Amoroso family in Mount Allegro during the 20s. As indicated by the author, the novel is semiautobiographical and the motive for writing the book was to collect memories that would have, otherwise, been forgotten. Mangione also hoped that he "could produce a book that might dispel some of the more spurious clichés pinned to the image of Italian Americans by an uninformed American public" (302) and that he could write an informative memoir, but his publishers insisted on publishing it as fiction. However, it can be argued that he often fails in "dispelling" the Italian American stereotypes but contributes to the ridiculing of Italian Americans, oftentimes describing his characters as mere caricatures. Nevertheless, he writes entertaining anecdotes about the semi-fictitious Amoroso family and, at the same time, he also chronicles the Americanization process of this Italian American family. Many of the stories Mangione narrates revolve around food and how food has helped his family and his neighborhood to first resist a complete assimilation into American society.

Moving Out

In *Mount Allegro*, Jerre Mangione portrays young Jerry's conflict, being an American with an Italian family that has a quite different value system than the American one. He states that many of his relatives "were cynical about the *Americani*" but at the same time, they "feared and respected" them and even tried to emulate them (223). A way to be more American is to leave the old neighborhood and move into the suburbs. This is not only the case for the Sicilians in Mount Allegro but it was a widespread calculated move in Italian American enclaves. Many first and second-generation Italians moved out not only because the neighborhoods are changing, i.e., other ethnic groups are moving in causing a change in the dynamics of the neighborhoods, but also because, away from the city, they "could enjoy the luxury of a vegetable garden" (207). Thus, food is also a reason for the Italian families to find a better place to live in. Additionally, the action of moving away from the polluted cities to the suburbs also signals that Italian families are undergoing the Americanization process. In the case of Mount Allegro, Italian Americans come back to the neighborhood to visit and bring, literally, the fruits of their labor, fruits and vegetables, but Jerry observes that as the neighborhood undergoes a change, behaviors and habits also begin to change. Those Sicilians that move away and stay away develop "strange habits and tastes" and begin to "drink juices for breakfast and tea with supper and drink whiskey with soda" (207). Thus, for some Italian Americans, moving away from the Italian neighborhood causes minor changes in their diet. The separation from the old neighborhood aids the assimilation process, even though, it is not a complete capitulation as witnessed in literature. In fact, food retains a stronghold in Italian American families and ties generations and histories together.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms are a delicacy that the Dalli family, in *Like Lesser Gods*, enjoys: with Mr. Tiff, the old teacher from Italy that is now living with them, they participate in the fall mushroom hunt. It is not just about foraging for food, but it is a family event where even the children and their friends are involved. They pick the easy to spot mushrooms while the adults search for “choicer delicacies, especially the coral fungi with their pale yellow branches and whitish throats” (138). Once again, the narrator pays homage to Maria Dallis’ cooking skills: she uses the mushrooms for omelets “that melted on the tongue” (138), while she uses the dried ones for giving flavor to the roasts during the colder seasons. The narrator is very specific in describing the custom for drying the mushrooms: the Dallis’ backyard, probably like many other yards in Italian American neighborhood, is full of upside boxes covered with mushrooms, left there to dry. Unlike the Southern Italians’ yards, that would have had tomatoes, the Dallis’ yard is representative of the yard belonging to a Northern Italian.

Neighborhoods

Once on American soil, the Italian immigrants are forced to live in the tenements allowing the government to control their every move. Later on, when the Italian immigrants’ economic status begin to ameliorate, they take over entire neighborhoods and become very protective of them, creating regional enclaves, called Little Italies.

Kym Ragusa, in *The Skin Between Us*, longs for the safety that her father felt when living in East Harlem. Back in the day, East Harlem was populated by Italians who recreated an Italian neighborhood. Not only do they surround themselves with relatives, but “*cumpari* and *cummari*, neighbors, and friends would constantly flow into each other’s homes” (119). They recreate what the old village would have looked like. During the visits, they drink a cup of coffee and share their

heartaches and news from the old country. Ragusa, through her father's eyes, witnesses how her great grandmother would send Ragusa's father to get the wine from the neighbor, "who made his own, fermenting the grapes in jugs in the basement" (119). The women would also gather during feast days to make pasta and let the pasta dry on the chairs (119). What Ragusa seems to long for is the safety and the "fantasy of total community" (119), something that growing up, within two cultures, is not afforded to her.

No Steady Job for Papa by Marion Benasutti (1966)

In this novel, Marion Benasutti narrates the story of a family from Northern Italy, Trentino. The readers witness the coming of age of Rosemary, the narrator, and her family's lives during the 1920s and 1930s. The readers follow the family from the Pennsylvania mines to Philadelphia. Rosemary's father seems to be unable to keep a steady job, and because the family needs the money to provide food and dwellings, Rosemary begins to take care of an elderly lady in the neighborhood at a very young age. When Mrs. Pierce dies, Rosemary begins to write and going to business school. The book has a humorous tone throughout, but the narrator also highlights some of the prejudices her family and herself had to endure because of their nationality.

Nostalgia

For first generation Italians, living in the United States is oftentimes painful and difficult. In literature, characters express their nostalgia in reminiscing about the old country, sharing their stories with the young, and hoping to, someday, return. The Amoroso elders, in *Mount Allegro*, are still enamored with the motherland, Sicily. They consider Sicily a better place, superior to the United States, and food is used to describe it as an Eden-like place: "a beautiful park, with farmland around that produced fig, oranges, pomegranates, and many other kinds of fruit that refused to grow in Rochester. The air was perfect in Sicily, neither cold or nor damp as it was in Rochester .

. . the wine was better and you could pick almonds and olive off the trees... everyone was much happier there” (18). The descriptions are used to set up a contrast between Italy and the U.S.: in Sicily, you can pick your food off the trees, the food is better there because the air is better, everything seems to be in tuned with nature, unlike the United States where everything is damp and not tasting good. There is a sense of pride in being Sicilian that they are trying to instill in their children. The mother land was better, but they had to come to this “*maliditta terra*” (19) out of necessity: they sound like they are trying to apologize for leaving Sicily and praising the land of origins helps in squelching any resistance and objection that the children might show. In fact, Uncle Nino, one of Jerry’s uncles, is quite adamant about the causes that lead people to leave: people were poor and the government just took advantage of them, so people came to the United States to work in factories and in ditches (19). Even if he never worked there, he places himself in the midst of the millions of Italians that did those jobs because his intention is to give the youngsters a history lesson. Even if the narrator’s comment is sarcastic, the reason why Italians came to this country was because people were hungry and even if the work is hard, their first need, food, is now satisfied: “All that journeying and all that work just so that we might lie and die with our bellies full” (19). To make his point stronger, Uncle Nino digs his fork into a piece of sausage. With this act, Uncle Nino wanted to dramatically call the youngsters’ attention to his point: the stabbing shows the angst about having to leave his beloved country but it also shows how now he can afford food.

Nostalgia sometimes equates longing for the Old Country, but it can also refer to longing for a place that is familiar and safe. In *Paper Fish*, when the young narrator, Carmolina, runs away, she fondly thinks of her family’s kitchen. She fantasizes what could be happening at that moment: “(s)he could be washing dishes . . . There would be Mama just wiping off the kitchen table or

stirring something in a pot on the stove. . . The kitchen walls would be so yellow, there would always be a chip in the porcelain pot” (104). The reminiscing helps to realize that she belongs at home with her family. This time, when she sees a police officer, she runs up to him, giving up her quest, and is finally reunited with her family.

See also Euphoria

Nursery Rhyme

In *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa makes an interesting observation. Her father shares the first three lines of a nursery rhyme that his grandmother, Luisa, had taught him. It is the Italian version of “The Little Piggie”: “I vogliu pane, nun cin nare, va rubare” (137). Ragusa points out that this version is very different from the “rosy-cheeked Anglo version” (137). In that version, one can choose to eat roast beef or not, go the market or stay home, be a good child or not. In the Calabrese version, there are no choices: I want bread, there is none, so go steal it (136). Ragusa points out that this song is representative of the desperation and poverty that leads one to steal. She also asserts that “[i]t’s also about dry-eyed resourcefulness and practical rebellion; the law exploits and excludes you, so it doesn’t deserve respect” (138). Thus, it is ok to steal so that you can survive. This attitude goes hand in hand with the Italian adage “La fame aguzza l’ingegno” (hunger sharpens intelligence) and to steal one must have a plan. The criminal act of stealing bread is justified because of necessity and it is used as a way to get back at the government that is not taking care of its people.

Olive Oil

Olive oil is used to dress salads or for cooking, but it is also used to check for “malocchio,” the evil eye. In *The Skin Between Us*, whenever Kym Ragusa’s father has a headache, his

grandmother Luisa checks if he has the evil eye: “Luisa would drop olive oil into a bowl of water to see if he had been struck by *il malocchio*, the evil eye” (117). This is a common custom in the South of Italy, even to this day.

Paper Fish by Tina De Rosa (1980)

This semiautobiographical novel takes place in Chicago, during the 40s and 50s and is the debut novel for Tina De Rosa. Carmolina, the main character, describes poignant events that mark her childhood. She also allows her readers into the lives of her mother, Sarah, a quiet waitress; her father, a policeman, Marco; her special-needs sister, Doriana; and her Italian grandmother, Doria. She shares happy moments with her Italian grandmother, while her Lithuanian mother, Sarah, silently suffers because she feels guilty for her first daughter’s autism and because she must leave her Lithuanian family behind. When the family decides to intern Doriana, Carmolina runs away and is gone for three days. Luckily, she is safely returned by the police. Tina De Rosa uses this story to channel her own grief for the loss of her father and grandmother. However, this is also a story about displacement: Carmolina is a young child, but she wants to figure out what she is. Being a child of two different ethnic groups causes her to question her identity. Thankfully, her Italian grandmother offers her a refuge in the kitchen where they spend happy moments.

The Patron Saint of Ugly by Marie Manilla (2014)

In an interview with West Virginia University Press, Marie Manilla, the author of *The Patron Saint of Ugly*, states that the novel “is about a woman who may or may not be the descendant of a 16th-century Italian saint, and she may or may not be able to perform miracles”. She also adds that she has tried “to channel” two of her favorite magical-realism writers, Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez in this novel. The book consists of twenty-one “tapes” recorded by the narrator and main character, Garnet Ferrari, and by her grandmother Diamante and

aunt Betty, so that the readers are allowed to hear different sides of the same story. The “tapes” are meant to be used by the Vatican to prove that Garnet is a real saint, i.e. she can perform miracles. What is striking about Garnet is that she has beautiful red hair and has port-wine stains all over her body: these stains are not just stains, but they are an exact replica of the countries and continents of the world. The readers, like the Vatican emissary will do, listen to the story of the Ferrari family in Sweetwater, West Virginia. From humble beginnings, Garnet ends up living in a mansion with her paternal Sicilian grandmother and aunt where she helps the locals and the poor.

Pasta

Pasta is now considered to be the Italian dish par excellence. However, its origins are still unknown. In *Food in History*, Reay Tannahill argues that pasta was not brought back from China by Marco Polo: Marco Polo, in fact, had not discovered pasta but had discovered that Chinese had something similar to it. Some historians believe that the Etruscans might have had pasta, but Tannahill refutes this idea. Instruments found in the Etruscan tombs might have been used to make pasta, but she believes that the Romans knew pasta as “the Apician cookery book certainly included recipes using lasagna” (234). She considers lasagna as “the parent of most pasta shapes” (234): being very similar to flat bread, she posits that other shapes of pasta, such as *tagliatelle* and noodles, would be “an obvious enough progression from it” (234). Tannahill also points out the surprising fact that pasta is ubiquitous: not only the Chinese are familiar with pasta, but also the Arabs and the Indians. The stuffed pasta, which dates back to around the middle of the thirteenth century, has some similar counterparts in China, in Russia, in Tibet, and in the Jewish kitchen (235). According to Ken Albala, the first mention of pasta can be found in a Genoese document appeared in 1279 (101). Additionally, the word pasta was not the noun used to describe it, but it

was *macaroni* and every region had a different idea of what macaroni would look like, as it could have been a flat strip or a hollow tube (101).

Unlike popular belief, pasta was not common on the tables of poor southern Italians. According to Simone Cinotto, dry pasta became popular only in the eighteenth century, in Naples. In *The Italian American Table*, he claims that it became popular once other staples, such as meats and vegetables, became scarce after the population boom: thus, pasta was to become a substitute for other foods. Pasta had been made in Italy since the sixteenth century with the mechanical press and kneading machine; however, in the eighteenth century, pasta became popular and affordable, thanks to the introduction of steam power. Only in 1830, people began using tomatoes as a sauce, instead of cheese: the popular belief was that tomatoes were poisonous and were only used as an ornamental plant (119). In *Pomodoro! A History of the Tomato in Italy*, David Gentilcore states that tomatoes were not used right away when the Spaniards brought them to Europe. In fact, tomatoes began to appear in recipes only three hundred years later and the famous “combination of pasta with tomato sauce” became a dish only in the late nineteenth century “by coincidence around the time millions of Italians started crossing the ocean to the New World where the tomato originated” (X).

In Italy, outside the area of production, pasta was considered a luxury food. Simone Cinotto posits that pasta became the Italian cuisine staple for Italians with moderate means in the United States, thanks to the transatlantic migration. It became popular for three reasons: first, pasta was a food staple that all Italians knew; secondly, the food import business was in the hands of the Genovese, Sicilians, and Neapolitans, where pasta was mainly being produced; and finally, even if somewhat suspicious of Italian food and diet, New Yorkers began to enjoy *macaroni*, as they would refer to pasta in general, in Italian American restaurants. Thanks to the subsequent demand

by middle class Americans, pasta became a popular staple in Italian cuisine and “established the role of cuisine in the ethnic identity of Italian immigrants” (119).

In *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, John Mariani states that, in 1929, there were 550 pasta factories in the United States, second only to Italy, a quite big number that proves the demand for this food staple in the United States (35). Pasta is often presented in Italian American texts as the favorite food of many male characters. Pasta becomes a way to show approval, but also as a way to reconnect with one’s heritage.

In her effort to “explore” her ethnic roots (220), Louise DeSalvo explains in *Vertigo*, that she buys a pasta machine and begins making pasta. However, she realizes that making ‘traditional food’ enslaves the women that try to prepare it. Moreover, she is cognizant that she is not making pasta like she should but uses a metal pasta machine to cut it, which according to the purists makes the pasta “slightly slippery” (220). And this is problematic because this quality is equaled to being unfaithful to your husband. She also makes a tongue-and-cheek comment: “(w)omen who really care about their families make it fresh every day” (220). Thus, the women, who, like her, do not make it every day, are not good women as they do not care enough for their families to make that sacrifice. It is not clear if she feels enslaved by her role of pasta maker, but she affirms that any recipe that reads “take a mortar and pestle” drives her into a frenzy (220).

See also Approval, Chitarra, and Lasagna

Passing the Cooking Torch

Passing the cooking torch is a common custom in Italian families: secret recipes can only be passed on to the daughters that will do the same with their own daughters. In Kym Ragusa’s *The Skin Between Us*, the passing of the torch is a little unusual: grandmother Luisa teaches her

grandson, Mr. Ragusa, the author's father, how to cook. Later, the author learns from him. According to Ragusa, her father learns to cook at an early age thanks to his grandmother Luisa and uses this skill to survive Vietnam. Additionally, "[f]ood has been the only way he knows to communicate, to show his love. And it is also a mask that he hides behind, a kind of bravado that disguises his fragile sense of his own worth" (229). In this Italian household, Mr. Ragusa is accepted as the cook and his daughter recognizes that her father comes alive when he is in the kitchen and that the act of cooking allows him to think he is worthy.

The passing of the cooking torch is a little forced on Mr. Ragusa: during a Thanksgiving dinner, as he is not feeling well, Ragusa decides to cook the dinner: "My first Thanksgiving dinner, after years of watching my father cook" (229). Ragusa is confident and is up to the challenge, but she is also aware that her father feels uncomfortable. He watches "helplessly" (229) sitting on a chair by the kitchen door, offering advice that he thought was pertinent, such as using the right pot or adding more salt (229).

Probably unconsciously, she also decides to film her father while he is cooking, because not only does she want to "focus on the life he led in the kitchen, of his love for cooking and eating" (225), but also because she is trying to chronicle the act of cooking. Being on film, the act itself is forever captured and can be seen by many, but especially by the author. This video will remain for posterity to watch and enjoy.

See also Men

Patriarchal Society

Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, before moving to the United States is taught about the patriarchal hierarchy that rules Italian society. In fact, not only does she become

aware of class division but she is also taught where her place in a patriarchal society is. When she asks her aunt, Zia Teresa, why men are always mean, her aunt responds “the woman is made to be the servant of man . . . The man is the man and the woman must obey him, that’s all” (80-81). The priest also teaches her a little trick on how to be quiet in the presence of a man that is fighting you: “The magic is in filling your mouth quickly, whenever your husbands starts to scold, and letting nor one drop fall out until he has finished” (81). When Rosa asks why a woman should not talk back, the priest tells her that: “God gave the man the right to control the woman when He made him stronger . . . It’s a sin for the wife not to obey. Only God and the Madonna come first. Only when the husband wants his wife to sin against God and the Madonna she must not obey him” (82). To that, Rosa responds: “If I ever have a husband who wants me to sin against God and the Madonna I will not obey him even if he kills me” (82). Rosa is poor and a woman: the message she receives is that she is valued less because she is female and has a very constricted role in her society. This kind of teaching is of a different kind and will scar her life: she will endure physical and mental abuse by her first husband, but her negative experiences that were caused by her aunt and priest’s teachings about women surely helps her to toughen up and to develop skills that will help her survive and, later, after many tribulations, be able to enjoy life.

See also La via vecchia

Pedagogical Intent

In *Like Lesser Gods*, Mari Tomasi scatters the outings to search for food and cooking methods throughout the book. This allows her to teach and explain to non-Italians the eating customs that might have been considered odd by most Americans. The eating habits also indicate the passing of time and of seasons, demonstrating how simple the life of Italian immigrants is and how closely related it is to the agricultural culture. Additionally, the narrator wants to make sure

that the Italian immigrants are viewed as welcoming and open as possible. They often invite non-Italians to their homes and picnics, and this openness is highlighted as a virtue that Italian immigrant possess.

In Italian American households, parties are a reason to celebrate weddings, birthdays, or any other special occasions, such as welcoming a guest. In the earlier Italian American texts, authors create many occasions where the characters display the art of hosting and having a good time. The characters also follow certain protocols, such as offering food and coffee to guests, or forcing their children to be at the table for supper. Undoubtedly, writing about parties and Sunday dinners has two main pedagogical purposes: authors are trying to educate the American public and are attempting to normalize these customs that might have been judged by Americans as weird and primitive.

Picnic

Before the Sunday dinners, Italian immigrants, in the rural area hold picnics with their countrymen. The close-knit Italian community of Granitetown, in *Like Lesser Gods*, organizes Italian picnics on Sundays and everyone in Pastinetti Place, the Italian neighborhood, contributes. Mari Tomasi uses Petra, the Dalli's daughter, to highlight the preparation of ravioli the night before the big picnic: "(h)er mother knead flour into raw egg yolks and mashed potato, cutting the rolled dough into little diamond shapes that would be flapped over into triangles to seal a meat filling" (71). As food is being prepared, the whole house is smelling "deliciously of the rich red sauce made of olive oil, butter, garlic, onion, sage, rosemary, tomato paste, and tomatoes" (71). Tomasi makes sure to list all the ingredients that would be found in an Italian household, and, at the same time, she wants to peak the reader's attention. There is no tone of superiority in this instance, but the underlining purpose is to educate her audience about the Italian immigrants and their customs.

Petra also marvels at the quantity of food that her family is about to take to the picnic, “a carton containing a jar of pickled mushrooms, a long arm of *salami*, and hundreds of thin slices of *prosciutto*” (71). She asks her mother: “Gee whiz, we going to eat all that?” (71). Maria points out that many people will be coming to the picnic, and not only Italians but also people from all over town, signaling an opening to outsiders. Petra is questioning, but she is still very much Italian and not embarrassed about her heritage. In fact, she asks for permission to invite her friends. There is no fear of being ridiculed because of the food, but there is pride and a desire to share.

The picnic is probably the forefather of the Sunday dinners, when Italian *mammas* prepared banquets that would have fed armies. Unlike the later Sunday dinners in American cities, this picnic is communal. Tomasi seems to feel the urge to showcase the immigrants’ willingness to leave the domesticity of their home to participate in a communal ritual. The women bring their portion of cornmeal and only one of them, Mama Gioffi, is in charge of making *polenta*.

Another type of picnic happens in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* by Rita Ciresi. The young narrator, Angel Lupo, is going with her family to the Statue of Liberty. She describes what her mother takes with her in a paper bag: “seeded rolls, a wheel of Auricchio provolone cheese, a foot-long stick of pepperoni, a serrated knife, a box of Ritz crackers” and other items, such as aspirins and toilet paper (49). Ciresi highlights the mother’s preoccupation with food: Mrs. Lupo does not care if people laugh at her and question the “big brown bag” she is bringing. She knows that she will have the last word: in fact, when Angel says she is hungry, her mother goes “straight into action” (67) and proceeds to feed the group. Mrs. Lupo creates her own kind of picnic. She mixes Italian cheese with American rolls and crackers, but no canned food, as she calls it “Alpo food” (113). The big brown bag allows her to fulfill her role as mother and food provider and vindicates her reasons for bringing food for the short trip.

A more somber location for the picnic is the cemetery, in *Paper Fish*. During the winter and the summer, Carmolina's family attends to the plot that was purchased when the family had money. In the eyes of the little child, this outing is normal and fun, and quite the affair: "On Sunday, they pack a picnic lunch and go to take care of the grave" (18). It is an occasion to spend time with family and, also, to reminisce about Grandpa. They bring loaves of Italian bread, baskets filled with tomatoes and onions, and wine (18). Some family members busy themselves with the cleaning of the tombs, while others enjoy the summer sun and the food. These picnics are not major productions; after all, they are in a cemetery and to maintain a respectful behavior, the food is not elaborate, but it is tasty and Italian, and somewhat mirrors the simplicity of the cemetery.

Pizza

In *Come back to Sorrento*, on their first date, Joey's father takes his future bride to eat pizza: for Joey's mom, Maria, eating pizza is "just as good as being engaged" (7). In fact, after this date, she is the one proposing flipping the roles: this foreshadows Maria's role in this relationship. In fact, Maria will have her way with her husband, Patsy. Joey, the narrator, makes clear, from the beginning of the book, that his mother, Maria, will take care of her husband, and she will do it through his stomach, making food her greatest ally. In fact, much of the relationship husband and wife have is regulated by food.

Polenta

In Italian American literature, polenta marks the provenance of the characters: northern Italy. Polenta is a main dish that is served as a meal. For example, *Rosa in Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* is from Lombardy and the food she eats is mostly polenta with wine and onion soup.

Even in *Like in Lesser Gods*, Mari Tomasi's characters are from Northern Italy, and they share their polenta during picnics. Tomasi offers a very detailed explanation of the cooking the *polenta*: the author, once again, uses her writing to teach her readers about the process, a process that might have been unknown to her readers, and not only Americans, but also other Italians. Tomasi probably witnessed this scene many times in her Italian community of Barre, Vermont, and describes it with few, yet very effective, details. She puts Mama Gioffi in charge and describes with a sense of awe and admiration: "Mama Gioffi kept a constant vigil at a great iron *polenta* pot . . . the salted water in the pot must be boiling rapidly before she allowed each housewife to sift in into her portion of cornmeal . . . Mama Gioffi tested and stirred . . . It required a practiced eye and touch to anticipate correctly the final thickness" (72). Mama Gioffi is also a purist: she "would turn up her nose at those who sliced the *polenta* with knives" (72). Her slicing the *polenta* with a cord is meticulously described: "(s)he stretched a fine, yet strong cord between her hands. This she slipped under the *polenta* and drew upward, cutting neatly through the mound lengthwise and then crosswise, to form, long, thin slabs" (72).

Prejudice

In *Christ in Concrete*, Geremio's job conditions are not safe: he is aware that the American construction company is cutting corners and the building his Italian crew is working on is not strong enough. However, when he voices his concern, he does not push the issue, because he does not want to lose his job: "(t)he new home, the coming baby, and his whole background kept the fire from Geronimo's mouth and bowed his head" (9). He needs this job, because thanks to his job he can feed his family, so that his family will not feel the "hunger" and her bastard child, "the fear of hunger" (8). His job becomes bearable that day because his crew members begin talking about going to buy food for the Easter banquet: ". . . first we stop at Mulberry Street, to buy their biggest

eels, and the other finger-licking stuffs. . . the juicy clams . . . uhm, my mouth waters like a pump” (12). Hunger and the fear of hunger are what push Geremio to continue working and stand the name calling and disrespect he experiences every day on his job.

Production Techniques

In *Food and Cultural Studies*, Bob Ashley et al. state that “a Gramscian account of massifying food culture begins with a change in productive techniques” (20). This change allows the creation of two superstructural issues: the psychological dimension of hegemony, that is, what will be internalized of the hegemonic society into the subordinates and becomes part of their identity, and the ways the changes become part of civil society, which also impact the productive process itself (20). Even if Ashley et al. use McDonald’s as their exemplar, Italian food can be an example in a much smaller scale, as well. Once Italian food began to be mass produced, Italian Americans were on their way to be “internalized” into American society. They began to change their identity, no longer Italian, but Italian American, while their eating habits began to shift as well. Thus, structures and outside forces have shaped the assimilation of Italians into mainstream America.

See also Assimilation, Acculturation, and Industrializing Italian Food

Processed Food

Italian American households resist assimilation into mainstream America, rejecting the food they consider not to be healthy, such as canned food or food that is not freshly made. In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo describes her mother and step grandmother’s attitudes towards sweets. DeSalvo’s mother loves to buy desserts from Mr. Dugan, “apply pies, blueberry pies,

lemon meringue pies, pumpkin pies (in season), seven-layer cake, pound cake, chocolate-covered donuts, and crullers” (16) because she wants to satisfy her husband’s sweet tooth. DeSalvo states that her father’s sweet tooth gives her mother hope: according to DeSalvo’s step grandmother, Italians don’t eat much dessert, thus, there is still hope that DeSalvo’s father can turn out to be American American. DeSalvo’s mother also stocks up with all the sweet food that can be frozen and buys too much. Her mother has picked up this American American habit of over stocking and to have a surplus in the home.

DeSalvo’s grandmother, on the other hand, thinks that everything that her step daughter buys from Mr. Dugan is “merda” (17). DeSalvo herself is not fond of pre-packaged food, stating that it tastes like cardboard. She likes the fresh food and she’d rather eat a piece of fruit.

DeSalvo’s mother loves canned food, that DeSalvo calls “fake food” (17). The mother thinks that these canned foods are healthy and a good way to feed her family, because they were canned “at the peak of the freshness” (17). The canned pasta is also a way to quickly feed the family. However, neither DeSalvo nor the grandmother want to eat this food. In fact, the grandmother calls these foods, “the devil’s work” (17).

Relationships

Relationships, in *Crazy in Kitchen*, are regulated by what is happening or not happening in the kitchen. Louise DeSalvo’s mother who throughout the book is described as not willing to properly feed her family stands in contrast with the author herself. Because she was deprived of the proper Italian meals and of the love that is shown in preparing the food, DeSalvo’s purpose in life is to have her own kitchen. She narrates how as a young teenager she would dream of boys and sex, but also about food:

I imagine the food I will make someday when I have my own kitchen. Sautéed garlic, a tiny bit of lemon juice, a few twigs of steamed asparagus sliced on the bias, a bit of heavy cream, some salt and pepper, twirled through some fresh pasta like the one my grandmother cuts on her “guitar”. Fennel and anise seeds mixed together, crushed, sprinkled on top of nice pork-chop, pan-seared on the top of the stove, finished in the oven, served with a sauce made from the drippings laced with red vermouth, served on a bed of caramelized fennel (48).

DeSalvo wonders how her own imagination can come up with these dishes: “Where the ideas come from, I don’t know. I don’t read cookbooks; we don’t get magazines” (49). She does not tell her readers where she gets these ideas; she simply says that she thinks about them when she walks into food stores. Most importantly, she affirms that she would like to cook these foods, but she knows that her mother “would never yield her kitchen” to her efforts (49). DeSalvo uses this power struggle to show that the relationship with her mother was somewhat regulated by food and by the inability to use the kitchen. She tries to convince her mother to let her cook, but she is chased away, from the kitchen, by a wielding- can-of-ravioli mother.

However, DeSalvo is able to build her relationship with her husband, Ernie, through food, as they share the same interest in cooking and the same kind of uninterested mothers. As a young couple, they begin their culinary relationship in DeSalvo’s mother’s kitchen. They want to cook for some of their friends and to DeSalvo’s surprise, her mother lets them use her kitchen. According to DeSalvo, her mother is more willing to comply because “she really wants” her “to marry this guy” (199). He is going to be a doctor, after all, and her mother is approving of her daughter’s choice. They will prepare an international dinner for their friends and they “are both eager to emigrate” from their mothers’ kitchens, “to enter the world of good food” (200). In fact,

they share the ill luck of having mothers that do not cook well or choose not to cook well. The choice of the word emigrate is quite interesting. Both seem to consider the ability to cook as a rite of passage, a way to leave their homes, to gain independence, and to be able to travel to far-away places. During their marriage, the kitchen is the place where DeSalvo and Ernie fight but is also the place where they find solace and camaraderie. In fact, reading recipes and preparing food will become their foreplay (200).

Additionally, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, DeSalvo narrates generational clashes regulated mainly by food and her coming of age, a process aided by food. This memoir reveals the author's love for food and how food regulated her family dynamics. However, the dynamics in this family are a little askew: DeSalvo's mother and step grandmother cannot stand each other, and DeSalvo feels contempt for her own mother. This inability to have a normal loving relationship creates a helter-skelter atmosphere that is increasingly detrimental and does not allow a normal childhood for DeSalvo and her sister.

Regional Differences

Italian American authors consider food an important tool that allows the meeting of the Italian immigrants and the receiving culture, but it also highlights the coexistence of Italian immigrants from different regions, as well as with other ethnic groups of immigrants. It is important to stress that when Italians, especially the ones from Southern Italy, come to the United States, they are not really aware that they belong to a country, but they think that their country is their region, such as Sicily, Campania, or Calabria. Thus, their food reflects that origin. In fact, many times, food carries the name of such a region, or city: *pesto alla Genovese* or *pasta all'amatriciana*, even if now they are ubiquitous, they carry their origins in their names, Genoa and Amatrice. According to Ken Albala, "(a) national cuisine . . . is something indigenous,

recognized throughout a nation and by outsiders as typical and as expressive of that nation's culture" (*The Banquets* 122). However, for Italian cuisine, this was not the case, at least at the beginning of the diasporic experience in the United States but also on Italian soil. The lack of cookbooks about an Italian cuisine goes back in time (126), and only with Artusi's cookbook, *La Scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene*, Italian cuisine is summarized in one single book but still maintains the regional or city origin labeling.

Rosa, in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrants*, wants to make sure that her readers know that there are differences that mark the Italian immigrants. Gionin is the one of the men she first meets when she arrives at the mining camp. He is from another region but patiently gives her instruction and her first 'cooking lesson,' how to make coffee. He also tells her that she will learn how to prepare pasta: "Angelina will teach you everything-even how to make the spaghetti and ravioli like the people in the South Italy" (174). At the camp, there are men from different Italian regions and Rosa must learn how to cook for all of them.

Once in Chicago, she describes how many Italians do not speak Italian, but dialects, and sometimes, communication between two Italians from different regions is basically impossible: "Most of those Italians, they were not Italians-they were Sicilians" (234). What is also interesting is that she does not consider the Sicilians as Italians. Additionally, she observes how the coexistence sometimes is rendered difficult by the cultural customs. She describes how the Sicilians do not get along with the Irish in the tenements: the Sicilians leave the tomato sauce out in the air to dry, while the Irish hang their clothes to dry. The Irish put a pillowcase or a piece of paper on the chord so that the clothes would not get stained, but when they take off the pins, the pillowcases and pieces of paper fall on the tomato sauce. A fight between the Sicilians and the

Irish would, then, ensue. Rosa witnesses first hand these encounters and, as a story teller, chronicles the challenges and difficult times the first immigrants to this country had to endure.

See also Coexistence

The Right Thing to Do by Josephine Gattuso Hendlin (1988)

The novel is mostly about the generational and cultural clashes between a Sicilian born father, Nino Giardello, and his American, rebel daughter, Gina. The story takes place in Queens, New York, but the period is uncertain: it could be the 70s or the 80s. Nino still lives according to the old ways and considers himself the head of the family, more like a dictator. Thus, his daughter and wife, Laura, must obey his every command. However, his daughter will not abide by the rules and will move out, while his wife will stay in this unhappy and constricting marriage.

Rosa, *The Life of an Italian Immigrant* by Marie Hall Ets (1970)

Rosa, an Italian immigrant from Northern Italy, narrates her life story to Mrs. Marie Hall Ets, a social worker she meets in Chicago. Rosa's story is quite telling of the lives of the first immigrants to the United States. It is also an interesting account that narrates the lives of poor Italians in the Lombardy region of Northern Italy in the late 1800s and the dynamics that led so many to leave the motherland. The book could be divided into two major sections: Rosa's life in Italy and Rosa's life in the United States. She arrived in the United States in 1884 and through her eyes, the readers get a glimpse of what Chicago would have looked back in the day. Born in 1866 or 1867, Rosa was adopted by the owners of an *osteria*, a sort of restaurant that also served wine, in a small village in Lombardy. Rosa is insatiable and the constant preoccupation about food will be her companion throughout her life. Rosa is an immigrant that did not get rich but succeeded in

surviving hunger and poverty. Her constant hunger defines her and her concern for her children drives her. She seems untouched by desperation and her strong faith in God makes the hardest of times bearable. Her story is a story of survival and an example of how immigrants adapted to the new world. She took advantage of the help the new country offered and overcame setbacks and sorrow.

Roseto, PA

Roseto, Pennsylvania, offers a clue as to why enclaves were so important for the survival of Italian organic systems. In their book, *La Storia*, Jerry Mangione and Ben Morreale illustrate the story of this small American town, where Italian families were the object of a medical study: “a picture of healthy, prosperous, long lived and remarkable cohesive community with . . . a low rate of coronary disease among the living, despite the fact, the conventional coronary risk factors were found to be as prevalent in Roseto as in the two neighborhood control communities included in the study” (453). It was not because of their diet, but the researchers attributed this phenomenon to the traditional values brought over from Italy: it seemed that these Italian American found their nourishment in their families and close-knit community. Once the value system changed, and the inhabitants began to take on some American habits, the healthy Italian enclave began to disappear and began to suffer heart ailments. The history of Roseto is quite telling about the Italian assimilation: here food might not have played a role, but the value system and land of origin did. Once the value system began to change, assimilation could finally occur.

De Saussure, Ferdinand

Bob Ashley et al., in *Food and Cultural Studies*, argue that Ferdinand de Saussure is the father of structuralism. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure begins with the smallest unit in a language, the sign. Then, the sign is separated into two elements: the signifier (that is a word,

spoken or written, that is also used to recall an image, a sound, or a smell) and the signified, i.e., the mental concept of the meaning (3). Saussure believed that the relationship between the two is arbitrary and the meaning is “wholly a function of difference within a system” (3). Additionally, the units are differentiated by their negative content, that is what they are not in the system; for example, a pig is not a cow. However, what happens when one must learn another language? An extra step is added to the system. The 1890s major wave of Italian immigrants had to learn English: first, they had to learn the unit, that is, “pomodoro” is tomato; then the signifier (they first thought in Italian of the word, then translated it into English); and the signified (they correlated the word tomato to the fruit). Thus, the unit, “pomodoro,” can be translated, but according to the Italians, American tomatoes were not the same as the ones in Italy. Thus, the signifier is split because the word tomato does not satisfy the image or taste of the fruit that the Italians had in mind: it is obviously a tomato but not the juicy, bigger, and flavorful Italian tomato.

Sex, Food as

There is a close correlation between food and sex. Food allows humans to have energy to procreate, thus allowing the survival of the human species. Walter Belasco also points out that “(b)oth food and sex require sustained use of the mouth” (*Food: The Key Concepts* 36). He also classifies flavors according to the “complexities of love” (36): candies and pastries are the food of innocence romances, while meat and fish “are the staple of sex” (37). Belasco argues that the high-caloric content of diets is important because for reproduction, humans need calories.

See also Banquets

Shopping

Shopping for food is a chore that is cherished by the immigrants that have now means and usually takes place in Italian neighborhoods in stores, that thanks to the demands of real Italian food staples and ingredients, are run by *paesanis*, as they are the only ones that can be trusted. Italian American authors employ this activity to describe intimate and important moments that help in the development of the characters, allowing the readers to get to know them.

In *The Skin between Us*, during an outing with her father, Kym Ragusa describes the two Harlems she sees. On the bus, on the way to the *salumeria* to buy some groceries for her great grandmother, she notices how Italian Harlem is so different from the black one: “. . . the buildings were smaller, fitted tightly together, block after block, like people huddled against each other for warmth. There were many more shops and restaurants . . .” (132). Ragusa is aware that the two cultures are different: the closeness and the availability of food set the Italian Harlem apart. She is not claiming that one is better than the other one, but she revels in the difference because she understands that she is part of both. When they arrive at the market, her father tells her that the market is called *salumeria*. Ragusa makes the connection with *salame* and the father is very proud: “*Very good! What a smart girl!*” (132). She is, of course, delighted that she has made her father happy. When they enter, she is “struck by the saturation of color and scent. The blood-red of dried peppers hanging in corners, waxy, pendulous cheeses shaped like breasts and teardrops behind the refrigerated glass case. And intimate, pungent smells, as if we were inside a human body, witness to its most secret, private places” (132-133). One can argue that this is the first time Ragusa enters an Italian food establishment, but she does not seem to be overwhelmed by it; she is enjoying the sights and the fact that she is sharing this moment with her father, building another bridge to her *Italianità*. This is literally a feast of the senses which culminates in tasting some *sopressata*: “I put

it in my mouth, and sucked on it, savored it: a concentrated saltiness, dense with *pepperoncino* and little chunks of fat” (133). However, Ragusa realizes that this shopping experience is not just about shopping for food, for favorite items, such as anchovies and lupini beans (133). Her father brought her, a biracial child, to the neighborhood: “I didn’t notice the suspicious, disapproving looks being cast our way, a woman’s voice muttering, *vergogna*. My father simply ignored them” (133). In fact, he claims her as his own, when the store owner asks him. Ragusa is thankful that her father had the courage to return to the old neighborhood and to claim her, his illegitimate biracial child, in such a public space. She now understands what was at stake in this simple shopping venture.

A less positive experience is described in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* by Rita Ciresi. In the first story in this collection, the narrator recalls a shopping outing with her very ethnic Italian mother. I argue that the author has decided to use this story as the first one because she sets the tone, as she often makes fun of her mother who is very much Italian but also somewhat odd. During this outing, the narrator is nine-years-old and is forced to accompany her mother to the butcher, Mr. Ribalta. The shopping experience is used to describe how the narrator’s mother, Mama, is cheap and embarrasses her daughter with her behavior: she does not trust the butcher and is convinced that he is trying to “turn her into a big spender” (3). Her daughter likes Swiss cheese, but she refuses to buy it because she does not “pay good money for holes” (3). When the shopping on the list is done, the usual question is asked by Mama: “Any scraps today?” (5). What ensues is a charade: her daughter accuses her of cheating Mr. Ribalta, making him believe that they have dog. He gives her bones, giblets, and hearts, and Mama haggles with him about the price to the point that he gives up. When it is time to pay, the narrator recalls how her mother is very happy when she catches mistakes at the cash register, run Mr. Ribalta’s mother. The whole experience is

humorously depicted, but the readers can also sense the embarrassment the narrator experiences because of her mother's assumptions, unpleasant attitude, and unsavory behavior.

These two experiences are sort of telling of the younger Italian American generations. Kym Ragusa is looking for a place that she can call home instead of being torn by her two ethnicities. She is happy to be shopping with her dad in a store that is Italian. Her shopping experience with dad could have turned out for the worst, but her father's stepping up to defend her and claiming her as his own helps her to connect to him. In other words, she is proud of him and is thankful that he stood up for her. Rita Ciresi's narrator, on the other hand, displays her shame: having a very ethnic mother will only lead you to embarrassment. The narrator is not proud of her mother, and the readers can sense her contempt in the way she describes her mother's behavior. Because Ragusa is searching for her identity, she actually loves being in the Italian side of Harlem and being with her Italian dad, but Ciresi's narrator is quite the opposite. It is not so much about being labeled as Italian that bothers her, but she reminds the readers of all the second generation children that are caught in the middle: the more ethnic your parents are, the more you wish you were an American.

See also Prejudice

Sickness

In some Italian American texts, authors highlight the close relationship between the kitchen and its mistress, as if one becomes the other, in a perfect symbiosis. In some cases, when the homemaker is sick, the sickness pervade the kitchen, as well.

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Lucia Santa's kitchen is the center of the family life but it also seems to become one with its inhabitants. When Lucia Santa gets sick, "the supper dishes were

scattered all over the table, the yellow oilcloth dotted with scraps of French-fired potatoes and eggs” (167). Her children do not do their chores and the kitchen is not presentable, as Lucia Santa is not there to attend to it. Without Lucia Santa, the kitchen seems to get sick along with her. When she gets better, the narrator puts her back into the kitchen ironing clothes: back in her kingdom, she resumes her chores, ordering her children around and expecting obedience.

In *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, Mrs. Lupo’s kitchen suffers from the absence of its mistress, as well. Angelina comments how her mother’s house “always had been spotless before” (122). Now, because her mother is in the hospital, the house is dirty and dusty: “dust covered all the knickknacks, coffee stained the counters, and white mineral deposit dulled the faucets” (122). Without her mother there, the kitchen loses its status as the main room for the family: the daughters are gone, the mother is gone, and the father spends most of his time in the living room. The father does not care and does not keep up with the house chores. No one is there to cook now, thus the kitchen looks like a “natural-history museum” (121) as it has lost its main function inside this family’s house, that is the place where the cooking took place.

***The Skin Between Us* by Kym Ragusa (2006)**

Published in 2006, *The Skin Between Us* is a beautifully rendered memoir written by Kym Ragusa. In this “Memoire of Race, Beauty, and Belonging,” Ragusa, the child of an African American woman and a Sicilian American man, is raised by her grandmothers who give her stability, something that her parents are unable to give her. However, as she grows up, she has many questions about her origins and what it means to grow up biracial in the United States. She tells her readers about her angst of not being able to fit, to fully belong to either group because both groups have prejudices against one another. Ragusa depicts her life, her struggles, but also her joys of belonging to two different cultures. Her grandmothers show her the way, when finally,

they eat a last meal together, putting aside the preconceived notions they have of one another. In this book, ultimately, she pieces together her life memories: in her acknowledgements, she says that she has “woven a narrative out of many bits and pieces” (7). In fact, she has put together pictures, interviews, what she remembers of her childhood, and her interpretation of the events that unfold throughout her life.

Smell

The omniscient narrator in *Christ in Concrete*, by Piero di Donato, is not only interested in showing good hearted regular people, that stand in contrast to all the U.S. institutions that are supposed to help, but very skillfully describes each floor and the different smells and odors that float in the air in Annunziata’s tenement, painting for the modern reader an effective picture of what it might have felt living in the tenements: “(e)ach flat had its distinctive powerful odor. There was the particular individual bouquet that aroused a repulsion followed by a sympathetic human kinship; the great organ of Tenement fuguing forth its rhapsody with pounding identification to each sense” (98). The use of the words “bouquet” and “rhapsody” is important because it shows that the narrator, instead of denigrating the other ethnic groups in the building, shows some respect for other cultures. The description, then, can be read as a diplomatic commentary on culture: each floor, each apartment has a distinct food smell that could be revolting for some but inviting for others. Most importantly, the smells and the odors level the playing field as the inhabitants understand that they are in this together and are “sympathetic.” Additionally, the narrator accentuates the idea of the “Tenement” as something alive, like an organ, and like any other organ, it gives away odors. This personified organ, though, with a capital T, belongs to the government that uses the tenement to keep certain groups on the outskirts of society, making this description a social commentary on the status of the poor and the immigrants.

Additionally, Di Donato, wants to highlight the sympathetic human kinship that allows these families to be able to live together and to learn how to accept one another. A nice example of how the author praises acceptance is the food odor that comes from the Donovans' house "(t)he Donovans' tunnel caught the mouth and the nostrils with a broad gangrenous gray that overwhelmed the throat, but on acquaintance nourished into a mousey buffet" (98-99). The narrator skillfully describes an odor using colors: he employs the color gray and gangrene to give the readers an idea of how horrible and revolting, the smell was, as it hits not just the nose but also the mouth. Then, when people get acquainted with the smell, the smell changes hue and becomes a mousey gray, not so dark as gangrene, and something that looks tasty like a buffet. The lesson learned here is that when one is hungry is not that picky and eats what is available.

Socialization

The Italian American immigrants display their success showing off the results of their hard work on the table and eating together with family and guests is a way to show they were getting closer and closer to becoming "Americanis." Massimo Montanari, in *Il cibo come cultura*, argues that the table is a metaphor for life and the meaning of the word "*convivio*" supports this idea: living together (*cum-vivere*) is also eating together. (130). He also states that "(a) tutti i livelli sociali, la partecipazione alla mensa comune è il primo segno di appartenenza al gruppo. Questa può essere la famiglia ma anche una comunità più ampia" (at every social level, the participation to the common table is the first sign of belonging to a group. This could be the family but also a wider community) (131). Thus, food consumption results in "eating together". In Italian and Italian American households, as described in many Italian American texts, eating together is a rule that is rarely broken. Children, young and old, know that, for supper, everyone must be at the table: if you are out at night, that means that you are up to no good. Thus, one must attend to the dinner.

Montanari recognizes that eating together is an important food function: gestures and the way one consumes food become a way to read and recognize culture as well (129). Additionally, eating at the common table allows the participants to be part of that particular group; at that table, the participants claim their collective identity (132). The table can communicate and define the relationships of the participants: this is true, in fact, for many Italian and Italian American families, where the husband sits at the table, when possible at the head of such a table, while the wife is ready to serve, eating her food standing.

Even Ronald Barthes, in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” states that “food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations . . . to eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (33). If we take the idea that in modern life food is not just the final dish prepared according to the rules of cooking of that specific country, but it also entails a protocol, we understand how food is more than food. Barthes uses the business lunch as an example: food is enjoyed but other aspects need to be considered, such as comfort, the business talk, and the idea of enjoying a lunch with other peers. Thus, as the invited enjoy the food, the prepared dishes can also “stimulate the euphoria needed to facilitate the transaction of business” (34).

Sometimes I Dream in Italian, by Rita Ciresi (2000)

This humorous collection narrates the stories of the Lupu family. The parents are still very prideful Italians, while the daughters, Angel, the narrator, and Lina, feel trapped in this authentic Italian and traditional family. Lina gets married and has children, while Angel is still single and unable to have successful love relationships. As adults, the two sisters cannot shed the presence

and influence of their mother, even after her death. She leaves an unforgettable mark, which her daughters will carry for their lives.

Sunday Dinner

With the newfound food abundance in the New World, Italian and, later, Italian American families can show off their skills in the gardens and kitchens. The kind of food consumed by the family is a means for the family to show that they had made it. During the Sunday dinners, food is so abundant that it could feed armies. This awesome production of food for just one day is, indeed, another way to show to the neighborhood that the family can afford the food. Additionally, according to the rules of *fare bella figura*, Italian American mammas cook and cook so that the unexpected guests can enjoy the feast, as well, because not having enough food would have been a major faux pas.

In the semi-autobiographical *Mount Allegro*, Jerry, the narrator recalls Sundays afternoons when his father and uncles play *briscola*, before picking up the more American card game of poker. After the game, children are sent to the saloon to fetch some beer, while the women set the table with “fried Italian sausages, pizza made with cheese and tomatoes, and fried artichokes” (16). Guests would get very quiet because they are very hungry and busy tasting the flavorful food. The narrator points out that “a meal was more than a meal: it was a ritual and only adults were allowed to carry on any conversation” (17). There were rules that had to be followed as every ritual has. Adults become “high priests” (17) and dictate rules for their underlings, the children. There is a strict hierarchy that keeps everyone in their place and teaches respect for the elders. Meals are used to teach children manners and to discipline them: if one of them talks without being addressed first, he or she will be scolded or will even lose a meal. On Sundays, this rule does not apply, but

adults do not answer questions until the meal is over and coffee and fruit are served. The meal is a ritual, and as such, people honor and respect it.

Jerry remembers the Sunday nights with fondness and describes these events as an important part of his upbringing: he recalls that all his relatives would come to his house twice on Sundays and bring food. On these nights, they listen to music, and only the Sicilian neighbors join in with hopes to be invited next time. Wine is served and used as an excuse for convincing guests to stay longer. Unlike other ethnic groups, the Sicilians are quite clannish. And Jerry's family is the typical example of a family that considered any event as "the signal for family festivities" (24). Additionally, Jerry states that "the cult of American individualism eventually damped their exuberance" (24) but at this juncture they are still free from the quiet social habits of the Americans. It seems that Mangione makes the effort to highlight how gathering around food helps this community to stay closer and to resist assimilation. Only as an adult, Jerry sees the crossing over to the American ways as a negative: now, he recognizes that the "exuberance" is not something to be ashamed of but something to be proud of.

Table

See Eating Together

Table Cloth

In Camilla Trinchieri's short story, "Kitchen Communion," Louisa, the narrator, offers the readers glimpses of her mother's cooking and of the kitchen. Like in many other kitchens, some items or gadgets are of some significance. In this story, the table cloth, a gift from the recently deceased father, gets some attention from the children. According to the narrator, her mother "has never let a stain stay on it for more than a couple of hours" (51). However, now, "it's covered with

this past week's food splatters" (51). The refusal to send it to the cleaners and even the objection to change the napkins are not normal behaviors as the mother was famous for being a "Santa Nettezza . . . Saint Clean" (51). One of the children says that she is trying to make it unrecognizable. But it is the narrators that gives the best explanation: "(m)aybe she wants to keep a record of this week. The three of us with her, eating through her grief" (52). The tablecloth becomes like an album: the different stains from the different meals she prepared are a tangible proof that her children had been with her, had eaten of her food, and had been in that kitchen.

Tackeril

In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, when Lucia Santa is upset, she mentions the tackeril and how she could use it to discipline her children. However, the tackeril is not Italian and not even Sicilian dialect. Because she wants to use it to rectify a situation, one can surmise that it is probably the rolling pin or some sort of wooden spoon. However, Mario Puzo, in another book, *The Last Don*, translates it as the razor strop (502).

Taste

Taste is considered the simplest of our senses. However, when we savor food, we use more than the sense of taste. Namely, our sight, touch, and smell senses are on alert, as well. Nicola Petrullo, in his book *Il gusto come esperienza*, rejects the idea that taste is the simplest and the least interesting sense we possess (18). He claims that all other senses are involved and the brain completes the process. In fact, because the brain is now involved, other stimuli are engaged, such as culture and education. Additionally, he calls the senses of taste and smell as "*organi di percezione*" (organs of perception). Consequently, he states that when we taste food, we not only enjoy food with our senses of taste and smell, but "noi letteralmente *percepiamo*, cioè utilizziamo funzioni - come memoria, riconoscimento e apprezzamento - che riguardano alcuni processi

celebrali” (we literally perceive, that is, we utilize functions – such as memory, recognizability and appreciation – that involve some cerebral processes) (19). Perullo also recognizes another important characteristic that is linked to the sense of taste, that is the convivial element. In fact, the need one feels to share taste seems to be a biological necessity as well as a cultural value that is intrinsic to our being (58-59).

In the political realm, more specifically in the hegemonic structure, taste defines class. Ronald Barthes, quoting a study done by P.F. Lazarsfeld, states that taste varies according to the income level of the population. Lazarsfeld’s study showed that lower income people like “sweet chocolates, smooth materials, strong perfumes” (30), while the upper classes like “bitter substances, irregular materials, and light perfumes” (31). Barthes calls our attention to signification: signification refers to the social status, low and upper, and not products, but to flavors. Thus, the sweet and bitter flavors create an “opposition in signification” (31). Consequently, we can add other classes of units, such as “dry, creamy, watery” (31). One’s nationality, then, must play a role in the signification as well. When a group of immigrants arrives in another environment, their taste is immediately under attack as the receiving culture tries to absorb the incoming one. Thus, a conflict arises: food is now used to show one’s food superiority in a battle of the tastes. Only with complete assimilation, the incoming food and practices lose their signification as they are wiped out by the act of capitulation. However, with integration, food maintains its role as the savior of vital significations that allow the incoming culture to retain some cultural traits even in a foreign land. This organic system can also be used as a tool to coerce and influence other organic systems, so extrinsically linked to ethnicity, such as value systems and culture, but also politics.

See also Acquiring a Taste

Trauma

Through the act of feeding, humans show their love and caring for other humans. Mothers and wives make sure that their families are well fed and that the food they prepare is healthy and appropriate. However, when a mother does not comply with this chore, her refusal causes trauma in the family unit, with lasting effects.

In *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo confesses that her family is not the typical Italian American one. Their meals consist mostly of burned toasts and canned food (123). She even compares the food her mother prepares as the meals served in “a badly run prison” (123). No one can cook something else, because the kitchen belongs to her mother. DeSalvo is aware that her upbringing in the kitchen has been different from other Italian American kids. She reminisces how in her home no family style dinners are ever served and most importantly “(n)o happy Italian family gathered around the table stuffing themselves with meatballs and spaghetti, sausage and peppers, everyone talking at the same time”(123). This lack of real Italian food and customs around the table caused trauma in young DeSalvo, and she begins to harbor a perennial hatred towards her mother.

See Kitchen

Traveling

For the third or fourth generation Italian Americans, traveling to Italy and tasting the real Italian food on Italian soil is an important rite of passage as it allows a real way to reconnect with the past and with their families.

Louise DeSalvo, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, describes her first trip to Italy, to Puglia, the land of her ancestors. Being on Italian soil, the soil that her grandfather had worked on, reconnects her

to her grandparents. She is staying at a *masseria* that back in the day would have been the house of the landowners. However, now, the *masseria* is a hotel and she is vacationing there, savoring the food that this rich land has to offer (140). The irony is not lost: this is where the landowners, the ones that probably had exploited her ancestors, had lived. But now, because of her ancestors' sacrifice, she has the privilege to enjoy a vacation in the same place that forced her grandparents to move to the U.S.

Umbertina by Helen Barolini (1979)

Umbertina is a story that takes the reader from Italy to America. It is a story of success, if success can be measured by the material wellbeing of man. It is story of an immigrant who makes it in the United States, a strong woman who is able to control and create her own and other people's destiny. The book is divided into three parts: Umbertina, Marguerite (Umbertina's granddaughter), and Tina (Umbertina's great granddaughter). Umbertina, the Italian matriarch, is willing to forget her country and recognizes the new land as her own. Unlike other characters, she feels no nostalgia for her motherland and recognizes the new country as her own. Her granddaughter, though, is unable to share her family's contentment and leaves the U.S. in search of something that she will never find. Hers is probably a search for an identity, that could define her as Italian. In her quest, she allows men to define her, instead. She goes to Italy because she feels Italian at her core, something that her assimilated family cannot understand and makes her feel like an outcast. Tina is an extension of her mother, but she has even more serious identity problems: she is the daughter of an Italian American and an Italian living sometimes in Italy and sometimes in the US. She struggles to figure out what she is. However, she does not want men to define her as they did with her mother. She wants to be her own person and, in the process, she almost destroys her chance for love. Fortunately, at the end, she realizes that Jason, the American

boyfriend, is the right choice for her as he respects her autonomy and her desire for a career. It is quite ironic that Umbertina, the Italian, is more pragmatic, more American; Marguerite the one who has been raised in the U.S. by Italian parents who only consider themselves Americans, is the most Italian of them, or at least plays that role. She is a wife and a mother and is very obedient. Even when she separates from her husband, she cannot stay away and goes back to him. Her affair with Massimo only leads her to fall into another trap, another fixed role, the one of the lover. Only with Tina, we see a resolution: Tina finally finds herself and when she does she is ready to commit to a man without giving up her career.

Utensils and Objects

Utensils and objects are important elements in any household: a pasta maker, a wooden spoon, a *chitarra* (used to cut pasta), the various knickknacks that belong to that particular family inform the readers about the provenance of said family. Objects function at two levels: one is the utilitarian function and the other is the communicative or representational function (Miller and Deutsch 181). For example, a *chitarra* is used to cut the pasta, instead of using a knife, as the *chitarra* can cut the dough more precisely and finely. The *chitarra* also communicates and represents because it informs us that the *chitarra* owner is probably Italian and is from the center/south regions of Italy, as it would be very rare to find a *chitarra* in the North of Italy. Depending on the cost, the *chitarra* might also communicate how wealthy this person is and if we take the *chitarra* to the modern times, it can show how serious this person is about creating a product that is authentic and connected to the past.

In *The Brotherhood of The Grapes*, the kitchen and its utensils help Harry, the narrator, reminisce his past. One day after having changed into some of his old clothes, he is having breakfast. All the objects in the old kitchen make him think about his own identity and his

childhood. Additionally, he sees these objects as an extension of his mother: “the same knives and forks of my youth, the same plates, the smooth worn handle of the same bread knife, the aging crucifix hanging above the stove—all things old and smooth and soft as the inside of my mother’s hand” (81). All of this grounds him and gives him an identity, as Mrs. Molise’s son, and a past. What is noticeable is the word choice in this paragraph: there are many words that begin with an “s,”—same, smooth, stove, crucifix, soft— and it seems that as one reads this, the narration slows down, almost to a halt. Harry is thinking about his past, and even if he does not want to admit it, his childhood had been a happy one, in a place that was quiet and safe.

Objects are also present in Mrs. Lupo’s kitchen of *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, Rita Ciresi’s 2000 novel. During a visit, her daughter, Angelina Lupo, the narrator, steps into her mother’s kitchen. Mrs. Lupo had a stroke and now is living in the nursing home. Angelina has never really had a good relationship with her mother and is often embarrassed by her erratic ethnic behavior in public. The kitchen is her mother’s place and it is full of all the things Mrs. Lupo holds dear to her heart. However, Angelina considers these objects worthless. Angelina says that stepping into that kitchen is “like entering a time warp” (121). Magnets, salt and pepper shakers, the four majolica canisters, the baby shoe, the plastic Pietà on the TV, the crucifix made with shells, the Last Supper plate, just to name a few (121), are the knickknacks her mother collects throughout the years. Observing these objects help Angelina remember how she and her sister used to play “Name That Ugly Thing” where they tried to outdo one another in naming all the ugly objects in the kitchen. Unlike Octavia, Angelina does not recall happy moments spent with her mother, but she seems to be very uncomfortable and uneasy. The kitchen becomes the symbol of her failed relationship with her mother, somewhat similar to DeSalvo’s experience.

Additionally, Angelina uses a mocking tone in her description which is telling of her relationship with her mother. Some of knickknacks are chipped and just plain ugly. And most are souvenirs from places that her mother never visited. They are telling, mostly, of her mother's *Italianità* as they could easily be found in many other Italian American households. However, Angelina is ashamed of them. Sadly, Angelina does not understand that these object in her mother's kitchen are a painful reminder for her own mother that she had not been able to go to those places that other relatives had the fortune to visit. Her world consisted of her kitchen and to make it bearable, we assume, she tries to surround herself with objects that she finds pleasant to look at. Angelina describes the objects with very few details, but the description is enough to allow the readers to be in the kitchen, observing the "tasteless" (121) things with the narrator. Angelina is more engaged in ridiculing her mother and leaves off the memories of the meals her mother prepared in the kitchen. The comradery that was present in Octavia and Lucia Santa's relationship is lost here. In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, even if mother and daughter fought, they loved and respected one another. Furthermore, Octavia is second generation and often irritated by the Italian customs her mother still believes, but she still respects her mother and her authority. Domesticity was still very much present in family relations and the children had to respect the old ways. In *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, Angelina is also second generation but she is a 60s child, and the desire to become American is even stronger. Furthermore, Angelina's mother was a little odd and very ethnic. Angelina is ashamed of that and she wants to keep as much distance as possible between her and her mother. There is no domesticity in this household and consequently, Angelina does not feel nostalgic about the kitchen, as no happy memories are linked to it.

The kitchen in *Paperfish* is not very pleasant to look at, either: it is yellow and dark, infested with cockroaches. Even the table is cold. It was "the one gift" that her husband, Marco,

gave her for the marriage (8). The table can be used as a metaphor of what kind of marriage this will turn out to be, cold and uninteresting. The table is the symbol of domesticity, and with this gift, the husband, willingly or unwillingly, is confining her to the kitchen. The reader is left to wonder if this is really the best he could afford. Is he subliminally telling her where her place will be from now on? Sarah shows no emotions when she is given the table: “When she first saw it, she scraped the small price label clean off with a knife and wiped the metal head of the salt cellar before she put it on the table” (8). With the cleaning off of the label, she accepts the gift but she also accepts her role as housewife. The lack of description of any kind of emotions or dialogue stresses even more how unhappy and accepting of her role she is.

Vertigo by Louise DeSalvo (1996)

Vertigo is Louise DeSalvo’s first memoir. She is the daughter of Italian immigrants and is coming of age in the 50s. She rebels against her family and society conventions, first with her erratic behavior, then with her own writing. She painfully describes stories of abuse, her mother’s depression, her father’s rage, and her sister’s bouts with depression and her eventual suicide. From a working-class background, DeSalvo is able to move up and is able to create her own identity, becoming a woman on her own terms.

Waste

Faced with poverty and limited means, the immigrant had to learn how to do a lot with very little. Being frugal, then, is a quality, that shows inventiveness and practicality, even if it conveys the message that one has limited means.

In *The Skin between Us*, Kym Ragusa describes how her Italian grandmother, Gilda, would never throw away any food, unlike her other grandmother, Miriam, who is African American.

When Ragusa describes Gilda, the reader can sense that the author admires her because Gilda's frugality shows her strength and imagination. Ragusa describes how Gilda keeps "the heels of bread in an old coffee tin" (166) which she grates to make crumbs. Ragusa's great grandmother, back in Italy, also used bread crumbs on pasta, instead of cheese. This "pragmatism" (166) is due in part to having experienced hunger. Ragusa maintains that even if at the Italian table, graces are never said, there "was a deeply ceremonial, reverential aura around the food" (166). This reverence, obviously, is displayed with the refusal to throwing away food. Additionally, being hungry taught Gilda how to be pragmatic, and even if she does not say graces, she still respects the food on the table. What Ragusa also admires about her great grandmother, Luisa, and grandmother, Gilda, is their resourcefulness, a quality that is passed down to the future generations, from the Old World to Italian Harlem, and finally, "to the Promised Land of the suburbs" (166).

Wine

In many Italian American texts, wine is present on the tables of Italian American families. Many times, the wine is produced in the backyard or cellar, or it is store bought. John Mariani, in *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, states that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Italians used zinfandel grapes from California, and later on even from New York. What derogatorily was called "dago red" was made with grapes that "were crushed and fermented into cheap bulk wine" (36). Additionally, during Prohibition, thanks to the "dispensation" that allowed that grapes could be sold to make the "sacramental" wine for Mass, Italians were able to continue producing their wines (36). Later on, wine became a major industry here on American soil, see, for example, California, but it was also an item that was imported from Italy, which led to the creation of an export-import market.

In Italian American texts, wine is often used for celebrations, for welcoming guests, for feeling part of the same group or family dynamics. There are some events that call for a special wine that is kept hidden and is served only for special occasions, making wine a quite common staple in Italian American literary households. In *Like Lesser Gods*, during the picnics, wine is served too. The picnickers enjoy a barrel of Mr. Gerbatti's best wine "ruby red, clear, and extra dry . . . Each year the shed owner made it; and he was careful to use only the best grapes" (73). The wine is not only used as a refreshment during this picnic but to raise money for Mr. Tiff's return to Italy. Wine is also what unites the people of the small town and allows other characters, such as Lucia, to make a living. Generally, wine is considered a cultural marker-Italians drink wine- but it also helps to level the playing field: rich people and the poor can afford to enjoy a glass. What defines class is the quality of the wine, not availability.

The making of wine, in this instance, is communal: three families share the wine press used to crush the fine grapes that are bought, not grown. But not all Italians make wine the same way. Pietro and his friends do not agree with the methods used by their Southern Italian friends who "profaned the wine" (140) by just crushing it right off the train, without washing it and freeing it from "rot or twigs" (140). This subpar wine is considered inferior and abusive to the stomach, nothing to be compared to the refined wine, considered holy, as God himself "immortalized" it "in His miracle at Cana!" (140). Thus, wine allows the narrator to accentuate the difference between immigrants and the religiosity of the characters. Furthermore, not all wine is created equal: Pietro, in fact, bottles different wines for different occasions, the first wine for important occasions, then wine for daily use, and then, with a water addition, he makes vinegar that Maria will use for salads.

When Italians live in the cities, the wine is made in the cellar. In Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, grapes are delivered to the tenements, where the fathers download the goods

and share some of the fruit with their wives and children (133): the delivery happens “[i]n front of each tenement” (134). However, grapes are not delivered to Lucia Santa’s house, and this causes her son, Gino, to be “envious of the other children, those fortunate ones whose fathers made wine” (134). Fortunately, even if he is fatherless, other male figures are present in the neighborhood, such as the *panettiere*, who offers him and other children his grapes and awards them with pizza after they help him carry the boxes inside the store.

Louise DeSalvo’s grandfather, in *Crazy in the Kitchen*, makes his own wine, as well. He makes it in the basement with the help of DeSalvo’s father, because “only men can tread the grapes” (96) according to her grandfather. Then, he places it in oak barrels until it is ready to be bottled. She recollects how her grandfather was a real drinker, an alcoholic, and how often he is portrayed on camera as drinking. However, she discovers that his addiction to alcohol had probably been caused by other events in his life. For example, when he worked for the railroad, workers were encouraged to drink. DeSalvo figures out why: “Alcohol: antidote to rebellion” (99). However, his addiction might have started even before coming to America: in southern Italy, in the fields where he worked, water was scarce, so the workers would just drink their wines to wash down their “piece of bread and slice of onion” (99). DeSalvo’s commentary brings to light how the Italian immigrant workers were unfairly treated. At the same time, she informs her readers of the reasons why her ancestors, as many other immigrants, had decided to move to the United States, driven out of their mother country because of lack of opportunities and resources.

At her grandfather’s wake, DeSalvo does not recognize him and comments how he does not smell like him. When a neighbor asks what her grandfather smelled like, she answers “Like wine” (102). The thought of the smell of wine triggers her memory and she begins reminiscing about her grandfather in the basement, crushing the grapes and drinking the wine. The neighbor

laughs and calls her grandfather “Mbriago” which means a drunk, a quite offensive name, used even by the people in the neighborhood (102). Having such a negative moniker highlights that DeSalvo’s father not only enjoyed his homemade wine, but that he also might have had a problem.

In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Diane diPrima describes her family as noisy and unpretentious with a cupboard that was always full and with homemade wine always available. And her family only drinks wine, as “(t)o like to drink hard liquor was considered a misfortune” (48). Homemade wine is what labels this family as Italian American as the hard liquor was still considered an American drink.

For Henry in *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*, wine is a way to connect with his father. During what will turn in an ill-fated trip to the mountain, where his father has been contracted to build a smokehouse for one of his friends, Henry and his father drink themselves into a stupor. For six days, they tried to build the smokehouse and the only thing that helps them to keep going is the wine. On the first day, Henry tastes one of his father’s friends’ wine: “That wine! It renewed my mouth, my flesh, my skin, my heart, my souls, and I thanked God for Angelo Musso’s hills” (115). The wine seems to have regenerative powers and Henry feels like a new man. Defeated by what looks an impossible feat, father and son sit together “passing the jug” (115). However, they keep on working but the final product “didn’t look like a building at all, but more like a load old stone carelessly dumped there” (121). Father and son have worked for six days: “We were bearded and gray, we were drunk and we stank, for we had worked and slept in the same clothes” (121). It seems that during the week they have also undergone a transformation and the pain is making them feel like they are dead. This adventure allows Henry to feel some sort of closeness to his father, who had been very disappointed by all his children, as none of them had followed in his footsteps.

See also Courtship

Women

Reading Italian American texts, one can see how the role of women has changed and evolved. In fact, in the earlier texts, such as *Christ in Concrete* or *Like Lesser Gods*, women are assigned to the kitchen, where they must figure out how to feed the family with few ingredients. For some, it is easier than others, but they accept this constraining role, without complaining. However, many of the authors are male, thus the voices of women are somewhat silenced. Nonetheless, women are described with respect and admiration. In the early texts, women do not work outside the house, but they are in charge of the house chores, raising the children, and feeding the family, so that their focus is limited to the kitchen. Once women begin working outside the home and the assimilation into American society is at its apex, authors want to show that the kitchen becomes a place that remind women of their mothers or grandmothers' slaving over the preparation of food and house chores. Modern female authors respond in two ways: they either reject the "trite" and constraining role in the kitchen; or they occupy the kitchen, but by choice. Being in the kitchen, then, seems to become, for Italian American female authors and female characters, a way to reconnect with one's roots and family history.

In *Il cibo come cultura*, Massimo Montanari offers an interesting explanation as to why women are given "il ruolo di custode del sapere alimentare oltre che della sessualità" (the role of custodians of the food, in addition to sexual knowledge) (10): it was a woman, actually a prostitute, that showed men bread, for the first time. Additionally, he claims that researchers agree that the women were the first ones to observe and select the plants. This selection and observation led to the birth of agriculture (10). His explanation seems to elevate the position of women not just as passive food providers but gives them agency and ownership in the food and the sexual realms, as they are custodians of that knowledge.

More specific to the immigrant female's role in the domesticity realm, Thomas Ferraro, in *Feeling Italian*, argues that, at the base of the Southern Italians' migration pattern, there was a "subtle power dynamic of the Marian Catholic peasantry. He points out that outside the home, the man looked like he is in charge, "but it is the woman who more than likely solves the problems, makes the truly tough decisions and commands the allegiance of all, especially her sons" (77).

For example, Santa Lucia in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* cherishes her kitchen and does not mind being relegated to it, as she exerts an incredible influence on her children and husband, regardless of her setting. From our modern perspective, the kitchen can be seen as a prison, where women are expected to perform for their husbands and family, but, in Italian American texts, women have agency. In fact, their role in the kitchen gives them power over the family.

In the modern text, *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo longs to be in the kitchen, as well. She recognizes that she is crazy in the kitchen and tries to justify her behavior. At first, she admits that she is somewhat a perfectionist: "I hope that I can become, in the kitchen, the person I am in other places. . . Can work on it the way I work on perfecting my breads, my muffins, my minestrone, my pasta, my risotto. With care, attention, reverence, and discipline" (166). Then, she states that making the perfect food is more than being perfect: "With each perfect meal I make, I can undo the past. Undo that my mother couldn't feed me, undo her fury at my grandmother. Undo my father's violence. Undo my ancestors' history" (166). Cooking, then, has restorative powers, that allow the author to change her past and live in the present.

DeSalvo wants to be in the kitchen and unlike her mother, she has passed the cooking torch to her children and grandchildren. She is a far cry from the women in the early texts, where women were expected to be in the kitchen and were often considered just servants. The old ways, of course, do not exist anymore, and DeSalvo chooses to be in the kitchen because it gives her a purpose, and

not that of the homemaker. However, the “undoing” that she wants to accomplish with her role in the kitchen is practically impossible, because every time she cooks, she remembers the hard times that she is trying to undo. It seems that, at times, cooking is not cathartic for her; on the contrary, she relives, over and over again, the painful moments she experienced growing up in this somewhat dysfunctional family.

However, unlike other women who rejects the role of being in the kitchen, as a young woman, DeSalvo dreams about having her own kitchen. She understands that the only way to have a kitchen of her own is to get married: “I want to marry as soon as I can. Not to have a husband, but to have my own kitchen. One with a four-burner gas stove, an oven. Where I can cook and bake and roast whatever I want without anyone bothering me. Where I will have absolute control over what I make, over what I eat” (49). Because DeSalvo equates food/kitchen with love, at this stage in her life, she feels deprived and powerless. She opines that when she is the mistress of her own kitchen, she will finally be in control of her own life and feelings. When she meets her husband, Ernie, she finds a man that shares her same interest in food. And their kitchen becomes a place of contention but also a place that allows their marriage to survive. Interestingly, being in the kitchen does not restrain her but gives her freedom to express and live her relationship with her husband.

In *Food and Cultural Studies*, Ashely et al. posit that the feminist movement “came to see the home and the family as a key source of women’s oppression, and, therefore, political” (123). Feminists have also claimed that the positive qualities that are closely linked to the private sphere are only enjoyed by men and not women. Additionally, the work women do in the house is unpaid and “produces the positive experience of the home for other people” (124). These observations and claims are valid. However, in many cases, Italian American female characters do not mind

being in the kitchen and cooking the food. Surely, some are forced and know no better, but others, especially in the more modern texts, enjoy the cooking and taking care of the family. Probably, because in modern times, women have jobs outside the home, cooking has become more of a past time rather than a necessity and a forced chore.

See also Kitchen and Mothers

Conclusion

Lacreme napoletane (1925)

Mia cara madre,
Sta pe' trasi Natale
E a stà lontano cchiù mme sape amaro!
Comme vurria allummà dduje o ttre biancale!
Comme vurria sentì 'nu zampugnaro!
A 'e ninne mieje facitele 'o presepio
E a tavula mettite 'o piatto mio!
Facite, quann'è 'a sera d' 'a Vigilia,
Comme si 'mmiez'a vvuje stesse pur'io!
E nce ne costa lacreme 'st'America
A nuje, napoletane!
Pe' nuje ca ce chiagnimmo 'o cielo 'e Napule,
Comm'è amaro 'stu ppane!
Mia cara madre,
Che sò, che sò 'e denare?
Pe' chi se chiagne 'a Patria, nun sò niente!
Mo tengo quacche dollaro e mme pare
Ca nun sò stato maje tanto pezzente.
Mme sonno tutt' 'e nnotte 'a casa mia
E d' 'e ccriature meje ne sento 'a voce,
Ma a vuje ve sonno comm'a 'na Maria
Cu 'e spade 'mpietto, 'nnanz'ò figlio 'ncroce.
E nce ne costa lacreme 'st'America
A nuje, napoletane!
Pe' nuje ca ce chiagnimmo 'o cielo 'e Napule,
Comm'è amaro 'stu ppane!
Mm'avite scritto
Ch'Assuntulella chiamma
Chi ll'ha lassata e sta luntana ancora.
Che v'aggi' 'a dì? Si 'e figlie vonno 'a mamma,
Facitela turnà chella "signora"!
Io no, nun torno, mme ne resto fore
E resto a faticà pe' tuttuquante.
I', ch'aggio perzo patria, casa e onore,
I' sò carne 'e maciello, sò emigrante!
E nce ne costa lacreme 'st'America
A nuje, napoletane!
Pe' nuje ca ce chiagnimmo 'o cielo 'e Napule,
Comm'è amaro 'stu ppane!

Music by Francesco Buongiovanni

Lyrics by Libero Bovio

Neapolitan Tears (1925)

My dear mother,
The Christmas is approaching
And to be so far away is very hurt!
How I would like to light some Bengal lights!
How I would like to hear a bagpiper!
Make the Nativity scene for my children
And put my plate on the table!
Make Christmas Eve
As if I'm also here among you!

How many tears this America costs us,
Neapolitans!
For us, who long for the sky of Naples,
How bitter is this bread!

My dear mother,
What is, what is money?
For a man, who longs for motherland, it's nothing!
Now I have some dollars but it seems to me
That I have never been so poor.
Every night I dream my house
And I hear the voices of my children,
And you dream the Virgin Mary
With swords in breast in front of her crucified son.

How many tears this America costs us,
Neapolitans!
For us, who long for the sky of Naples,
How bitter is this bread!

You have written me
That my daughter Assuntina calls her mom
Who has left her and still stays far away.
What can I say? If my children need their mom
Make this "lady" come back!
I don't come back, I stay here
And I stay for working for you all.
I've lost the motherland, house and honor,
I'm a sacrifice, I'm an emigrant!

How many tears this America costs us,
Neapolitans!

For us, who long for the sky of Naples,
How bitter is this bread!

translated by Natalia Chernega

Italian American authors have described and chronicled the experiences of the Italian American experience in their texts. In the earlier literature, authors describe the arrivals and the subsequent settlements, and their stories offer quite a bleak outlook of the earlier experiences: once Italians arrive in this country, they are met by living conditions that, in most cases are no better than the ones they had left at home. In this song, *Lacreme napoletane*, written in the 20s, the story told reads like a letter sent from a son to his mother. Even if he has found fortunes, his bread tastes bitter because he is away from his family. He is missing out in seeing his children grow and realizes that his mother is also suffering, as she worships the Madonna with the swords in her heart. The nostalgic tone of the song is very telling of this *emigrante's* inability to feel at home in America as he longs for his home and the skies of Naples. In America, he is alone, and this country only gives him tears and he adds that other Neapolitans share his pain. This singling out of just the Neapolitans as the ones that share the same sad fate exemplifies *campanilismo*. This is also accomplished by writing the song in dialect. Additionally, it gives the listener a sense of what it means to be away from the beloved land and family and to live a life of sacrifices. Most likely, many Italian immigrants who listen to this song share the same sorrow and nostalgia for the motherland, especially if their immigrant experience forces them to be away from their family.

Many of the Italian immigrants, for example in New York, are forced to live in the tenements, sometimes two or three families living in the same apartment. Jobs are not scarce, but the living wages are not sufficient to afford them a decent life. These living conditions are vividly portrayed in *Rosa, The Life of an Italian Immigrant* and *Christ in Concrete*. These texts depict

shabby and dilapidated dwellings and living arrangements that, I posit, make Italians more resolute to succeed in this country. In fact, those who decide to stay, with determination and hard work, are able to live their American Dream and become doctors, teachers, lawyers, entertainers, writers, politicians, and entrepreneurs.

The millions of Italians that immigrate not only contribute in many areas of American society, such as the arts and politics, but also participate in the creation and the development of the food industry: from the carts pushed by the food peddlers in New York City to the wineries of Napa Valley in California, Italians see in food an opportunity to “make it” in America. They open grocery stores, establish wineries, start import-export businesses and enterprises such as Planters Nuts and Chef Boyardee. Thus, food affords upper mobility in American society to the Italian immigrants.

In Italian American texts, food is prepared and consumed in the kitchen and partially grown in the garden: the kitchen is the heart of the Italian family and the kingdom where women do their magic. This is where, around the table, the family discusses, argues, laughs, cries, and enjoys the food. This is where children do their homework, where the head of the family takes care of business and closes deals, or where guests are offered coffee or a glass of wine. The kitchen is the central and most important part of the house. While the kitchen is mainly the woman’s kingdom, the garden is mainly the realm of the head of the family. The garden usually is not intended as a pastime, but it is a place where the family grow the food. It is a way to feel safe: fruit and vegetables, that had been denied in Italy, are now at their fingertips. Here the land finally belongs to the family and many, like Umbertina in *Umbertina*, decides to leave the polluted cities to live in the country where they can own land. In the cities, the little *fazzoletto di terra* (a piece of land

that is as little as a handkerchief) gives Italians the opportunity to really own something and offers them the security that they can feed their families.

As evidenced in Italian American literature, the creation of so many food establishments, such as bakery, pastry, and butcher shops in the Little Italies in the U.S., allow Italian housewives to look for original ingredients to cook their regional specialties. In the Italian enclaves, on one hand, food becomes a symbol of nationality and a way to differentiate from the Americans. Food, in fact, is used as a way to feel superior, better than the Americans. On the other hand, it is a racial marker that must be hidden in public starting with the second generation. The shame felt by the second generation is very well and sadly portrayed by Jerre Mangione in *Mount Allegro* where he recounts episodes of feeling an outcast because of his somewhat odd Italian family and strongly feels the desire to be an American. However, many Italian Americans, like Joe Fante in *The Brotherhood of the Grapes* still enjoys the Sunday dinners and partakes in the libation. As John Fante's semi-fictional mother, Italian mammas do in fact "blackmail" and manipulate their children through their cooking. It is their way to keep them coming home and somewhat still control their lives.

As chronicled in Italian American literary texts, when Italians become more and more Americanized, food begins changing as well as Italian Americans' eating habits, because Italians of the second generation desire to be completely assimilated. As a matter of fact, Italian food is a matter of shame: smelly salami with garlic do not help you make friends at school! I believe that integration of Italians into mainstream America differ from family to family. Some families give in quicker than others and begin incorporating American food staples into their menu: more canned food appears in their kitchens and turkey is added to the Thanksgiving table together with spaghetti and meatballs. Consequently, food, in some Italian American households changes to better match

the American assimilation process. On the other hand, some Italian Americans of third and fourth generations maintain or, in many cases, rediscover a love for authentic Italian food and inadvertently allow the American public to learn about Italian food, a phenomenon that impacted American taste and demand, later.

Even if some Italians of the later generations want to become completely assimilated and want their eating habits to change, food remains a constant that, even to this day, is a matter of pride for Italian American families. Food also helps their mobility on the social ladder; in fact, in many of the texts, when the characters can better their economic situation and they start making more and more money, they choose to spend some of it on food. Thus, food becomes not just sustenance but something to enjoy with family and friends. One can see this trajectory in some of the literary texts: in the earlier literary texts belonging to the first wave of Italian American literature, characters are more concerned to survive hunger rather than relishing the food. However, in the later texts, characters have developed a better palate, can afford better food, are afforded better selections thanks to the expansion of the market, consider food a cultural trait that allows cohesiveness with their roots, and use it to communicate.

Nowadays, those Italian Americans that have retained a strong Italian identity still consume and prepare food like the ancestors. Italians have added “American” to their nationality but food has remained an element impossible to be completely assimilated. Even if certain Italian dishes have experienced a transformation-see for example spaghetti and meatballs or the Chicago deep dish pizza-or some have been created-see Caesar salad-food on Italian American tables has, undoubtedly, helped Italian family to resist a complete assimilation and acculturation.

In closing, this study is meant to spur researchers to initiate a discourse on food within Italian American literature and a cross cultural comparison with other ethnic studies. Partly, this

study was born because for most texts, there is not any scholarship, either on food or otherwise. I wanted to give my contribution and devised an encyclopedic tool that can serve as a quick reference for those who study food. Even though this is not meant to be a historical analysis, I attempted to give a general idea of the importance of history in the phenomenon that Italian immigration was and how history impacted the fate of the immigrants in the United States. In fact, the stories, real or fictional, are steeped in America and immigration's history. The handbook is obviously just a start in food studies for Italian American literature and is meant to be more like a living document: more entries can be added and other areas, such as poetry, art, and cinema, could be included. I tried to create a tool that can be easily researched and used entries that are common in the texts I chose for the literature analysis. Italian American literature is part of the American lore and deserves a place in the academic discourse, especially in a discourse that looks at literature with modern eyes and innovative methods of research.

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