

Gastronomic Practices and the Reshaping of Ethnic Identity in Italian-American Writing

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the representation of food in a sample of Italian-American works as a lens through which it is possible to analyze the ethnic identity of Americans of Italian ancestry and the re-elaboration of their sense of belonging over time. Drawing upon a notion of ethnicity as a social and cultural construction that is subjected to hybridization, the essay addresses how the depiction of food and its consumption in fictional and autobiographical writings can provide insights into the diverse stages in the transformation of Italian Americans' self-perception: localistic allegiance, an identity based on national extraction, assimilation, and the rediscovery of ancestral roots.

KEYWORDS: Italian Americans, food, ethnic identity, autobiographies, fiction

The cover of the first edition of *Wop!*, a 1973 reader collecting pieces of U.S. anti-Italian literature published between the late nineteenth century and the early 1970s, displays a gangster-like and overweight individual eating spaghetti (LaGumina). In one of the best-known and most quoted scenes from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather I*, after the killing of Paulie Gatto, who is shot in the head because he betrayed Vito Corleone, as Peter Clemenza prepares to depart the crime scene abandoning the corpse of his target in a car, he hints at a box of cakes on a seat and tells the hit-man: "leave the gun, take the *cannoli*," a typical Sicilian pastry filled with sweetened cheese. His wife asked Clemenza to bring home some dessert and he does not want to come back to his family with empty hands. Mafia-style murder and food – namely, Sonny Corleone's orders to murder his father's traitor and Mrs. Clemenza's craving for cakes – come hand in hand (for scholarly attention to this scene, see Russo 263-64; Santos).

These two citations are representative of Italian Americans' perception in the eyes of their adoptive society. Actually, Mafia connections and a passion for the pleasures of the table have long been the paramount stereotypes in the representation of Italian Americans – both the

immigrants and their progeny – in the United States (Kich). As Michael M. Grynbaum suggests, “cold-blooded murder and hot Italian meals stand side by side” (183) in the U.S. public construction of Italian Americans over the decades. Indeed, in the early 1890s, in his own autobiography Adolfo Rossi – a journalist for the New York City-based Italian-language daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, who was to become the head of Italy’s Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione, the state agency supervising emigration, a few years later – listed *maccheroni* and *brigante* among the leading code words that were used to define Italian newcomers on the other shore of the Atlantic ocean (171). In the mid 1970s, “the Mafia, pizza and other food” were the most common responses that author Richard Gambino received when he asked people of other-than-Italian extraction what words they associated Italian Americans with (352). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the racket and pasta still came hand in hand in poet Sandra Mortola Gilbert’s harsh rejection of the hackneyed portrayal of her own fellow ethnics as criminal macaroni-consumers in the view of the U.S. public opinion:

Frank Costello eating spaghetti in a cell at San Quintin
 Lucky Luciano mixing up a mess of bullets and
 calling for parmesan cheese
 Al Capone baking a sawed-off shot gun into a
 huge lasagna –
 are you my uncles, my
 only uncles? (146)

Cuisine and crime are definitely the quintessential identifiers of the Italian experience in the United States. Yet, despite Gilbert’s bitterness, the culinary cliché is much less controversial than the other commonplace in Italian-American communities. Generally, to Italian Americans, while Mafia-related innuendoes are a cause for deprecation, traditional ethnic gastronomy is a source of pride. According to Regina Barreca, unlike crime-related activities, the orientation toward food is a stereotypical but truthful component of the portrait of Italian Americans that very few members of this national minority itself would challenge (xvii). Indeed, poet Joseph Tusiani agrees in his memoirs that Italian Americans would not be Italian without macaroni (169). Likewise, in the view of Angelo Pellegrini, who wrote an introduction to a collection of autobiographical sketches by six immigrants to the United States in the mid 1950s, both recipes and “discussion of wines” (4) are representative features of the Italian newcomers’ lives in America.

Sociologist Patrick J. Gallo holds that “food is a particularly important source of identification” for Italian Americans (8), while the editors of *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* contend that it is a leading component of *italianità* (Tamburri, Giordano, and Gardaphé 6).

Over the last couple of decades, studies in the social sciences, history, and literature have highlighted the centrality of food to the Italian-American experience in the United States. The conclusion of this growing scholarship is that cooking, eating, and gathering at mealtime are all kinds of behavior and rituals by which Italian Americans express their sense of belonging, social status, and economic standing, as well as negotiate their own place both in the immigrant community and within the broader U.S. society as a whole (Giunta and Patti; Diner; Cinotto; Koger). More generally, Alan M. Kraut suggests that culinary practices enable the members of ethnic minorities to assert their identity. Especially in the case of Italian Americans, as historian Donna R. Gabaccia colorfully contends, “we are what we eat”.

The awareness that foodways are strictly linked to ethnic identity usually spreads outside the ivory tower of the Academia among Italian Americans. On the one hand, for instance, writing about her own experience as an immigrant from Italy, scholar Patrizia La Trecchia remarks that “my taste in food has become a way to maintain and sustain my sense of ethnic identity and cultural belonging, to rediscover my Italian-American heritage, to communicate information about myself to others” (45). On the other, chef Nancy Verde Barr, who is of Italian ancestry, maintains that “food was always about more than eating” (v). A Sicilian-American actor, Vincent Schiavelli, also had acknowledged that “food is, after all, edible culture” (10).

Narrative – both fictional and autobiographical—offers proper sources to analyze the inner meanings encoded in Italian Americans’ gastronomy-related behavior. As Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta argue, “food-writing and life-writing in Italian American culture are interconnected, for to examine our relationship to food is to examine ourselves, as well as the relationship between these selves and the family, the community, and society at large” (8). From a broader perspective, Gian Paolo Biasin similarly remarks that “culinary signs in gastronomy [...] constitute an integral part of the technique used for representation, narration, and characterization” (11). Likewise, in a brief introduction to a collection of essays about American ethnic literature and cuisine, Fred L. Gardaphé and Wenying Xu state that “[i]n the United States [...] ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food productions and services” (5).

The purpose of this essay is to explore the representation of food in a sample of works by Italian-American authors as a lens through which it is possible to analyze the ethnic identity of Americans of Italian ancestry and the reshaping of their sense of belonging over time. To this end, the following pages draw upon a situational notion of ethnicity as an ever-changing social and cultural construction that—as scholarship nowadays holds (Ferrante and Brown)—is subjected to hybridization and negotia-

tions in dialectic situations of confrontation, competition, and conflicts among the diverse cohorts of any given society. Against such a backdrop, this article addresses how the depiction of food and its consumption in autobiographical writings and fiction can provide insights into the diverse stages in the transformation of Italian Americans' self-perception. Specifically, it focuses on the trajectory from an initially localistic allegiance and the subsequent elaboration of an identity based on national extraction to the later longing for assimilation and the eventual rediscovery of the ancestral roots by the immigrants' offspring.

Food as an Ethnic Identifier

Helen Barolini remarks that "*Mangiando, ricordo*. My memory seems more and more tied to the table, to a full table of good food [...]. Food is the medium of my remembrance – of my memory of Italy" (*Festa* 13). Specifically, she points to her mother as an instance of how culinary tastes and practices show the ties connecting Italian Americans to their native land and, thereby, help disclose one's identity. She also argues that "starting in her kitchen, my mother found her way back to her heritage, and this, I suspect, happened for many Italian-American families" (*Festa* 52).

Actually, in many other Italian Americans' recollections, sharing meals, in particular the Sunday dinners, is a means to strengthen family and community links within the "Little Italies" as well as to revive the reminiscences of the native land. For instance, banquet gatherings provide an opportunity to tell stories about Sicily in Jerre Mangione's *An Ethnic at Large* and, thereby, to commit eaters further to their ethnic heritage (15). Likewise, according to her grandson John Allan Cicala, preparing *cuscuszu*, a Sicilian variation of the north African couscous, offers first-generation immigrant Leonarda a chance to recall her past and to hold her family together by means of culinary regional roots. As Loretta Baldassar and Donna R. Gabaccia maintain, for Italian migrants and their descendants cuisine is a notable way of expressing a connection to one's ancestral place (22).

Nancy Verde Barr remembers that "when my father was living we had to have Sunday dinner and supper. It was a must. We had to be there and had to sit throughout the meal" (308). Food is the fabric that usually revives Italian-American traditions. It has its rituals such as the "secret formula for making alcohol out of the grape stems" (115) in Mari Tomasi's novel *Like Lesser Gods* or the meticulous description of the various stages to turn one hundred boxes of grapes into "three fifty-gallon barrels of wine" in Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (184). Culinary practices are so solemn that they come close to acquiring a nearly religious dimension. For instance, Giacomo Comigo, a fictitious wrestling

champion in the short story "Hungers," points out that "[f]ood was religion in our house" (Romano 3). Likewise, but this time in real life, poet and performing artist Annie Rachele Lanzillotto writes that "gravy stains" were the equivalent of "the Italian women's stigmata" (31). Similarly, Gina Cascone's memoir stresses that "cutting spaghetti is a sacrilege". (147) In his autobiographical novel *Mount Allegro*, Jerre Mangione also contends that "a meal was more than a meal; it was a ritual and only adults were allowed to carry on any conversation. They were the high priests, and if a child dared open his mouth without first being addressed by one of them, it would surely cost him a scolding and possibly a meal" (17). Richard Gambino, too, notes that, when he was a child, his immigrant parents taught him that "meals were a 'communion' of the family and food was 'sacred' because it was the tangible medium of that communion" (17).

Consequently, the holiness of the foodstuffs also extends to the table where meals are eaten, which in turn comes to represent the solidity of the newcomers' ethnic roots. For instance, in one of her cookbooks, Marcella Hazan, an immigrant from Cesenatico who settled in the United States in 1955 and became an authority on Italian food in the 1970s, points out that "[t]he family table, worshipfully called *il sacro desco*, was an inviolable place, the one still spot in a turning world to which parents, children and kin could safely cling" (3).

In view of the rituality and sacredness of cuisine in Italian Americans' eyes, when the preparation of dishes is disrupted, so are the ethnic values that underlie cooking. It happens allegorically, for instance, in Lynne Vannucci's "An Accidental Murder." In this short story, interference with the Christmas Eve dinner ritual results in the killing of Bennie by her husband Emilio, who thereby violates the sacredness of the family, namely, one of the most persistent traits of the Italian-American culture. By the same token, yielding to U.S. "bland mass-prepared food on the run," as opposed to the meals prepared with care by female relatives according to traditional Italian recipes, "is seen as sacrilegious" (Gambino 17).

Italian Americans' ethnic identity usually takes shape through a metaphoric association with Italian food. In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's evocation of her Italian roots, espresso – the Italian style coffee – is a distinguishing feature of her Italian-American family (60-61). Similarly, Edward Albert Maruggi looks back to his formative years in Rochester's Little Italy through the lens of the fundamental function of food in growing up Italian. To Maria Laurino, in Proustian terms, her Italian descent has "the tastes and aromas" of "the sweet scent of tomato sauce simmering on the stove [...]; the paper-thin slices of prosciutto, salty and smooth on the tongue; and my own madeleine, oil-laden frying peppers, light green in color with long, curvaceous bodies that

effortlessly glide down the throat" (24). In Tina De Rosa's novel *Paper Fish*, Carmolina, the author's fictional alter ego, expresses her own ethnic heritage by establishing a symbiotic relationship with her ancestral country's foodstuffs:

The 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. Baked apples twitched her nose; applesauce touched her skin, nose, mouth and made Carmolina feel that this room was like no other room in the world. (14)

In particular, Italian food becomes a *topos* whenever the immigrants' descendants travel to Italy to rediscover their national origins. This is the case of Maria Troia's short story "Food, Women, and Love." Her aunt's recipes are Maria's "greatest heirloom" upon return to the United States from Sicily because these cooking directions are the means by which heritage, culture, and traditions are bequeathed from a generation to the following one (Troia 73).

The loyalty to Italian culinary practices also discloses Italian Americans' ethnic pride against pressures toward Americanization. In the pages of her son's memoirs, Italianness and food are strictly intertwined in the eyes of Joe Vergara's mother. Indeed, she thinks that pizzerias serving junk spaghetti and meatballs do "more damage to the Italian honor than all the combined membership of the Mafia" (Vergara 47). In Helen Barolini's semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman*, *Umbertina*, immigrant women make fun of U.S. foodways in a display of allegiance to Italian traditions. As one of them contends while claiming her own Italian heritage,

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

Likewise, third-generation immigrant Robert Louis Chianese stresses his own Mediterranean roots by contrasting his Italian-style bread with that of his U.S. schoolmates. His own sandwich was "made from the end of a large torpedo loaf, filled with cold cuts, home grown varieties of lettuce and exotic condiments," while the American students ate "crustless wedges of white bread brushed with peanut butter" (Chianese 210).

Especially at the time of mass immigration, most Italian newcomers were destitute laborers who struggled daily at the bottom of the social ladder. Yet, the consumption of ethnic food also offered Italian

Americans a sense of pride that helped them offset marginalization and poverty as well as reclaim their dignity in the adoptive country in the face of a hostile and nativist environment. For instance, novelist Mario Puzo remarks that

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

To Italian Americans, cuisine—including its implications in terms of opportunities for reunions of relatives at mealtime—generally turns out to be a more durable ethnic identifier than their native language. For instance, Beat Generation poet Diane Di Prima recalls that her parents did not let her speak Italian at home but “[a]s a family, we kept the foods, the large festival gatherings with all the cousins” (25). Italian journalist and emigration specialist Amy Allemande Bernardy suggests in her travel reminiscences about the 1920s and early 1930s that familial Italian-style cuisine was a channel to galvanize patriotic sentiments among the members of the Little Italies abroad. In *Passione italiana sotto cieli stranieri*, she writes that gatherings around *risotto* and *polenta* fortified community ties and nourished the immigrants’ devotion toward their fatherland (Bernardy 186).

Regional Food and Subnational Identities

Italian Americans were latecomers to the notion of an ethnic identity based on their common national ancestry and elaborated such a self-image only out of pre-existing subnational self-perceptions. Due to the belated achievement of political unification in their native country, which did not begin until 1859 and was not completed until the end of World War I, the Italian people long retained a parochial sense of regional, provincial, or even local attachment (Dickie 19-20). Such an attitude—which is better known by the term *campanilismo*, after the Italian word for bell tower—usually confined people’s allegiance to their respective hometowns or, as the Italian expression indicates, within an earshot of the bells of their native villages (Manconi). Separated by disparate dialects and traditions as well as by the legacy of the Old World’s antipathies and animosities, immigrants from different geographical backgrounds in Italy, were unable to think of themselves as members of the same nationality group upon settling in the United States between the early 1880s and the mid 1920s, the decades of the mass transatlantic tide (Malpezzi and Clements 27-35). As an anonymous informant from Campania pointed out a few years later, “for me,

as for the others, Italy is the little village where I was raised" (as quoted in Williams 17).

As a result, the retention of ties to the ancestral land occurred along subnational lines at the very beginning. This is the case of *cannoli* for Jerre Mangione's immigrant father in *Mount Allegro*. A newcomer from Sicily, Mangione carries his Sicilian identity to Rochester and cherishes it by eating this traditional regional pastry (*Mount Allegro* 128-30). Consuming *cannoli* also offers fictional Vincent Donitella an opportunity to strengthen his ties to Sicily in Camille Cusumano's *The Last Cannoli*.

The power of food in allowing immigrants to keep alive their subnational identities, however, is not confined to Italian newcomers from Sicily or some other southern district only. Adelia Rosasco-Soule's mother in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Florida provides an additional example: although she lives in a wooden house in the wilderness out of Pensacola, this immigrant woman from Genoa, in northern Italy, holds to the flavors of her hometown. *Pan dolce*, *pesto*, *minestrone genovese*, *zuppa di ceci*, and *bourrida* are available to satisfy the demands of her husband's "Genovese stomach" (Rosasco-Soule 102). Likewise, Celeste A. Morello's aunt contrasts her own Neapolitan-style "tomato sauce with the consistency and flow of a gravy" (6) with its Genoese counterpart, which she regards as being "extremely thin, almost watery" (20). Similarly, Umbertina – Barolini's fictional family matriarch from a small Calabrian village – makes her husband's pizzas "with onions, or with potatoes and rosemary, or with pieces of scamorza cheese, or olives and anchovies – but never with tomato sauce as the Neapolitans did, for that disguised the good taste of fresh dough and turned it soggy and soft" (*Umbertina* 93-94). A full-fledged Calabrian, she also refrains from following the cooking directions of the *Abruzzesi* and does not make ravioli mixing cheese and spinach (*Umbertina* 95). By the same token, Joe Vergara's immigrant mother from Campania turns any recipe she prepares into a Neapolitan dish: "if she started out to make corned beef and cabbages – a most unlikely choice – it would end up tasting like a Neapolitan specialty" (89). Michael Parenti contends that the bread his father made was "the same bread that had been made for generations in Gravina," a village in Apulia (116).

Regional varieties in tastes easily lead to regional pride and rivalries. For example, uncle Mario in Vincent Panella's *The Other Side* contends that "Sicilian olives were bigger and tastier than those further north" and that "Sicilian table salt was superior" (123). Likewise, in "Cavadduzzo of Cicero," Tony Ardizzone's Chicago baker of Sicilian extraction thinks "there's no bread on earth as good or sweet as Sicilian" (239). To Jerre Mangione, too, Sicilian bread is "finer and tastier than any other Italian bread" (*Mount Allegro* 133). By the same token,

according to Joanna Clapps Herman's grandfather, who is from Avigliano, a village in the province of Potenza, the *Aviglianese* soup "sets a soul straight when the world is all wrong" (29).

In turn, regional pride can also yield to the exploitation of differences in culinary habits to elaborate derogatory epithets. As an example, Joseph Tusiani's father—an immigrant from Apulia who cannot stand northerners—calls his son's prospective family-in-law from San Vito al Tagliamento, in the province of Pordenone, *polentoni*, with reference to the widespread consumption of polenta—a mush made of cornmeal—in northern Italy (323). As a result, Tusiani himself sadly remarks that "not even at table do North and South manage to agree" (325).

Cuisine and the Construction of an Italian-Based Ethnic Self-Perception

Americans of Anglo-Saxon lineage and members of other ethnic minorities were usually unable to perceive the differences among Italian immigrants from various regional, provincial, and local milieux and ended up placing all newcomers from Italy and their children within the same group, often referring to them by disparaging epithets (Connell and Gardaphé; Tricarico). This type of ethnic bigotry contributed to making Italian Americans aware that they shared something notwithstanding their diverse geographical backgrounds in the native country and encouraged them to develop a mutual identity that was rooted in their common national ancestry (Pretelli 71).

Traits of such an experience emerge, as well, from narratives of Italian Americans and food. For instance, Fred L. Gardaphé remembers that his mother associated Italian identity with food-related stereotypes resulting from the anti-Italian American bias of U.S. society. Her self-image and perception of her son linked traditional Italian dishes with disparaging terms Italian newcomers and their offspring were usually referred to: "I'm a dago, you're a wop; I eat spaghetti, you eat slop" (Gardaphé, "Breaking and Entering" 182).

Thus, an analysis of food culture and culinary-related behaviors helps highlight that the major ethnic divide concerning Italian Americans is not among the various subnational groups within the single "Little Italies," but between the different regional components of the broader Italian-American community as a whole, on one side, and the larger host society, on the other. In John Fante's semiautobiographical short story "My Dog Stupid," for example, noisy mastication at table distinguishes Henry J. Molise, the protagonist of Italian extraction, from Harriet, his wife of Anglo-Saxon lineage, although they share the same wine and *lasagne* for dinner (65-66).

Italian Americans faced discrimination in the United States because

of their national descent and, therefore, often turned their backs on their native country in the pursuit of assimilation. Food choices, too, reflected this attitude and the rejection of an Italian diet epitomized the longing for social inclusion and acceptance by the adoptive land. Joanna Clapps Herman's mother, for instance, who is born of immigrant parents in the United States, begins to clip recipes from *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Day* in the attempt at "studying to be an American" (107-8). As Barolini recalls about herself and her relatives, "We didn't want to be identified with the backward Italian families who lived on the North Side and did their shopping in grocery stores that smelled of strong cheese and salami" ("A Circular Journey" 111). To a lesser extent, in Guido D'Agostino's *Olives on the Apple Tree*, a novel about the risks of pursuing assimilation too fast, purchasing canned food, instead of preparing dishes according to traditional Italian recipes, equals a longing for Americanization (28). Likewise, in chef Anthony Di Renzo's opinion, the slow disappearance of the *soppressata*, a kind of Italian salami, from the U.S. market because Italian Americans no longer eat it offers better evidence of the accommodation of the immigrants' progeny within the host society than any scholarly treatise (25). Remarkably, the role of foodways as a mirror of Americanization is not confined to the newcomers who settled in the United States during the decades of the mass transatlantic influx and their children. Maria Bottiglieri, a war bride who moved to the other shore of the Atlantic after marrying a U.S. soldier at the end of World War II, writes that she became "more American" because she "ate the American style" (27).

However, unlike U.S.-born individuals of Italian ancestry, newcomers were more likely to resist the lure of the Americanization process in foodways as well. Italian-born Umbertina, for example, "had never taken to the American Thanksgiving and its strange food." She also grows beans and tomatoes in her backyard to keep alive the tradition of a Summer picnic that was the annual family reunion with her married daughters (Barolini, *Umbertina* 142). Indeed, alienation from their ancestral roots characterized especially the immigrants' children in the interwar years. In their struggle to distance themselves from their Italian extraction to prevent discrimination, second-generation Italian Americans even clashed with their own parents (Child). Hasia R. Diner contrasts "the harmony in Italian homes in America over food" with "a deep generational chasm between immigrant parents and American children over much else in their cultural repertoire" (82). Some works do emphasize the function of cuisine as a pacifier. One of Rose Quiello's short stories, for example, contends that "food is a resolution to controversy" (471). As Mangione puts it in *Mount Allegro*, "[s]ome of the longest and fine meals I have ever eaten were results of quarrels that had recently been settled" (28).

Food Consumption as an Identity Battlefield

A close scrutiny of Italian-American narratives shows that foodways are not a conflict-free sphere as it concerns generational relations. Michael Dante, Joseph Tusiani's younger brother, seeks accommodation within U.S. society by declining to eat Italian-style food. After his neighbors refuse to play with him because he is Italian, he calls the traditional Apulian bread with aromatic herbs and olive oil "junk" and asks for an American-style sandwich (Tusiani 199, 221-22). Michael Dante's real experience, as reported in his brother's autobiography, is not different from the fictional case of Arturo Bandini. In John Fante's novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Arturo dissociates himself from his Italian heritage by stigmatizing his father's behavior at breakfast:

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

Italian food was "a source of great embarrassment" for Lynne Rossetto Kasper, a third generation immigrant of Tuscan and Venetian extraction. She recalls that

I desperately wanted to be able to have Wonder Bread and chicken pot pie and frozen vegetables. And I'd go to my friend's houses and they had all these things that I was just not allowed to eat. I couldn't have any white flour or white sugar. Which meant no soda, no cake. White bread took on an aura of being the holy grail for me. (as quoted in Wolf)

In her autobiographical work *Vertigo*, Louise DeSalvo makes her mother's traditional dishes the symbol of an Italian heritage and identity she rejects. DeSalvo argues that "I don't like anything my mother cooks" (201). She adds that "for years, my mother cooked things that I believed no one should eat, things that I certainly couldn't eat, Old World things, cheap things, low-class things, [. . .] things I was ashamed to say I ate, and that I certainly couldn't invite my friends over to eat" (*Vertigo* 204). As Donna R. Gabaccia remarks, "[t]o abandon immigrant food traditions" (54) means disavowing one's ethnic community and heritage. DeSalvo further reelaborates the generational conflict over food in a subsequent volume, *Crazy in the Kitchen*, where cooking becomes the battleground between her step grandmother and her mother. The former struggles to recreate an Italian-style cuisine—making, for example, a "thick-crust, coarse-crumbed" "peasant bread"—and the latter resorts to convenience food such as gristly meat for ham-

burgers and fatty sausages that she covers with Worcestershire sauce. In particular, bread is the epitome of the conflict between the retention and the rejection of ethnic roots, as the author's step grandmother makes her own bread following an Italian recipe. Conversely, DeSalvo's mother buys American bread from the Dugan store. The Italian-style bread is "a bread that my mother disdains because it is everything that my grandmother is, and everything that my mother, in 1950s suburban New Jersey, is trying very hard not to be." Instead, with reference to her American bread, DeSalvo's mother "thinks that eating this bread will change her, that eating this bread will erase the embarrassment of a step-mother – all black dresses and headscarves" (*Crazy in the Kitchen* 9-10). Sandra Mortola Gilbert's attitude toward her ancestral land's traditional food expresses her mixed feelings toward her own ethnic heritage. When she argues that "I want to be an American, / I want to have a name that ends in a Protestant consonant / instead of a Catholic vowel!", she adds that "I have never [...] drunk red wine / never tasted olive oil," two centerpieces of the Italian-style cuisine (147-48).

Overeating is one of the commonplace components of Italian Americans' relation with food. Vincent Panella writes in his memoirs that "[t]he consistent custom of an Italian family is to feed its guest and overfeed itself [...] A scarcity of food produces an obsession with eating. In America this obsession could be satisfied" (123). Likewise, in Tony Ardizzone's novel *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, after suffering from hunger in native Sicily, the Girgenti brothers can eventually enjoy a lavish meal in adoptive Chicago on St. Joseph Day (292). Conversely, as eating abundantly equals achieving some material success in America, "[b]eing on a weight loss diet was considered sacrilegious" in the family of Anthony Sciolino and Marian Pellegrino. In their home "mealtimes lasted approximately four hours" and their father's favorite expression was "one doesn't age while eating a meal" (167). The hours spent over dinner even become as many as five in Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (248). In *Mount Allegro*, too, Mangione's father encourages his household members and guests to overeat by maintaining that "food is the only thing you can take with you when you die." Large meals characterize weekdays: "But on Sundays and holidays it was assumed that your appetite became gargantuan and, besides soup and salad, you were expected to stow away at least three different courses of meat, four or five vegetables, along with celery and fennel, all topped off with pastry, fruits, and nuts" (Mangione, *Mount Allegro* 131). Conversely, lack of a frame for eating or cooking denotes Americanization. In *The Soul of an Immigrant*, Constantine M. Panunzio describes his participation in feast banquets while he was a boy in native Molfetta, a city in southern Italy. But, after he lands in the United States, references to any meal gathering disappear from this autobio-

graphical account that was written in the early 1920s to stress assimilation on the part of an Italian-born individual and to disprove nativist theories that Italian newcomers could not be integrated within U.S. society. Abstention from food is further dramatized in DeSalvo's *Vertigo*; in this case the rejection of the Italian heritage in a culinary perspective passes through the celebration of anorexia because the refusal to eat food is the author's escape from her Italian roots (200-18).

However, as sociologist David Riesman contends, "the Italian immigrant has to go through a gastronomically bleach and bland period before he can publicly eat garlic and spaghetti" (xv). The denial of Italianness is not necessarily a definitive disavowal of one's ethnic heritage, but it is sometimes a step toward the fulfillment of an Italian self-perception. Lynne Rossetto Kasper overcomes her initial embarrassment with her ancestral country's ethnic food and takes classes in Italian cuisine before publishing books of her own on the subject (*The Splendid Table*; *The Italian Country Table*). Robert Viscusi recalls that "[w]hen my family staged its first sit-down wedding in June 1955 with American food," his mother's cousin, "insisted on being served a plate of spaghetti and meatballs" (106). In the end, even Louise DeSalvo becomes reconciled with the Italian cuisine and her ancestral heritage. Food is key to her personal journey in search of her Italian background. When she makes up her mind to "explore" her "ethnic roots," she purchases "a pasta machine" and starts to prepare macaroni, the quintessential Italian dish. Learning "how to combine the ingredients for pasta, to roll out the dough, and cut it" becomes a symbolic initiation to her Italian identity ("A Portrait" 94). Likewise, feminist Susan Caperna Lloyd rejects her grandmother Carolina's seclusion in the kitchen – which is the typical plight of the housewives in the patriarchal Italian-American family – and, consequently, declines to participate in cooking the traditional meals. As such, her efforts to resist patriarchy by deserting the kitchen and refusing its related tasks reflect scholar Mary Jo Bona's vision of this room as a section of the house that, both practically and metaphorically, offers Italian-American women a place for contestation and liberation (Bona 172). Nonetheless Susan Caperna Lloyd cannot help cherishing her ethnic heritage by means of foodways, thus admitting that "I still hungered for the food and stories, and often, with my family, I would drop by my parents' house ten miles away to eat and recapture the past" (Lloyd 11). Similarly, to movie director Kym Ragusa, who is Italian on her father's side and African-American on her mother's, the kitchen and food are respectively a place and a means to reconcile her diverse and often conflicting ancestries. As she puts it, "I have my own kitchen now, and it is time for me to stop being the little girl nourished and silenced by my father's cooking" (Ragusa 281).

Likewise, in Barolini's major work, her mother, Marguerite, experi-

ences a "feeling of alienation and [...] anxiety as to whether you are American, Italian or Italo-American." Conversely, Tina, Umbertina's great-granddaughter, acknowledges her Italianness in the end, and so food is once again the vehicle for the expression of one's self-perception. A young American feminist in the 1960s, when she is introduced to readers, Tina travels to Castagna, Umbertina's native village in Italy, in search of her ancestral roots. Subsequently, she would also barter an "expensive dinner at the top of the World Trade Center" "for any number of little *trattorie* in Rome or Florence or Venice." But she does not achieve a full-fledged Italian-American consciousness until she plants rosemary in her home garden, the same herb her great-grandmother used for the pizzas and rolls of bread upon which she built up her successful grocery business after moving to the United States (Barolini, *Umbertina* 16-17, 372-87, 406, 423).

According to Werner Sollors and other scholars, ethnic literature reveals a constructionist viewpoint of identity for both the newcomers and their descendants (*Beyond Ethnicity*; see also Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*; Dowd; Singh et al.). In this perspective, narratives and other writings reveal that members of U.S. national groups do not inherit a set of stable cultural values and attitudes, but they form and develop their own sense of belonging during a continuous and historically dynamic process of interaction within their own minority, vis-à-vis the majority population, and in relation to other immigrant cohorts of the American society. The sample of the Italian-American autobiographical and fictional works in this article helps highlight that Italian Americans' self-perception through foodways is not static either, but it undergoes a number of transformations. Such changing features and contents of ethnic identity include attachment to the local roots of the native or ancestral place of origin, the elaboration of a consciousness based on one's national descent, the rejection of the motherland's heritage in the pursuit of accommodation within U.S. society, and the rediscovery of one's Italian extraction.

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