

Prejudice, Assimilation, and Profit: The Peculiar History of Italian Cookery in the United States

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The cultural impact of large scale immigration is a topic that is currently much discussed both in Europe and North America and while the issue is hardly new in Europe, it has a particularly long and complex history in the United States, a country which is regularly referred to as a “nation of immigrants.” In recent times, there has developed a range of views regarding cultural assimilation both among members of the older, resident ‘mainstream’ populations of countries receiving immigrant populations and among immigrant groups themselves: on the one side, there are those who believe immigrants must be encouraged and helped, even forced, to assimilate culturally to the mainstream and, on the other side, those who believe immigrants can be integrated into their new nations’ societies with only partial cultural assimilation, the former view being the assimilationist or ‘melting pot’ model and the latter the multicultural or ‘salad bowl’ model. Of course, the older metaphor of the melting pot had nothing to do with food but rather with metallurgy, which seems particularly apt for the period of its coinage in the 19th century, when there reigned in the United States a close relationship between the process of industrialisation and the nation's need for immigrant labour. But the melting pot metaphor has gradually come to be reinterpreted by many Americans as a culinary one: rather than a crucible in which different metals are transformed into a new and presumably superior alloy, the pot is thought of as a grand soup kettle in which the ingredients have been thoroughly blended and culinarily harmonised. Thus reinterpreted, the older metaphor has given rise to the newer one, the salad bowl, which by contrast represents — as an ideal or as an unwelcome reality — a different outcome for a society receiving immigrant groups, namely, as a collection of identifiably distinct and even disparate elements.

In the 19th and early 20th century, during the period of the great waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe to the United States, there was a widespread sentiment that the foodways of immigrant groups, no less than their languages, religious practices and other cultural attributes, were not just alien and undesirable but also essentially ‘un-American’. While some mainstream Americans (including often enough the descendants of immigrants who came in the just mentioned great waves) now harbour similar negative feelings toward more recently arrived and still more or less unassimilated immigrant groups from Latin America, Asia and Africa, it is noteworthy that contempt for alien languages, religious practices, etc., remains intense but seems at most vanishingly rare with regard to these newcomers’ foodways. This partial change in attitude is not a reflection of some fundamental difference in the characters of the immigrant groups’ foodways in the two periods but rather a change in the culinary culture of the American mainstream.

In considering the history of an immigrant group's cuisine, it is naturally important to consider that cuisine both in relation to the traditional cuisine(s) which the immigrants have brought with them and the cuisine of the society in which they make a new home. But what do we really mean by the term 'cuisine'? In common parlance and also in many works by food scholars, the term is thought of simply as a "style of cookery" but in practice it is commonly conceived in rather concrete terms, as a set of dishes, ingredients and cooking methods. Obviously, these perceptible realisations of food and its preparation are a proper focus for our study of a given cuisine, but if we conceive of cuisine as a cultural subdomain, as I believe we must, then we must recognise that these surface manifestations are the expressions of a wide array of learned ideas about food that exist in the minds of the members of the community that share a culture, ideas which, if the cuisine in particular and the culture more generally are to continue to exist, must be transferred from the one generation to the next.

That the culinary culture of the United States has been influenced by the cuisines of a number of its immigrant groups is well-known and indisputable, and among the more influential of the immigrant cuisines has been that of the Italian Americans. Consequently, the history of Italian-American cuisine in the US has been much discussed both in popular and scholarly food writing. And yet, in many respects, the subject has been poorly understood, in part on account of the fact that most of the discussions have been written by people who themselves are not Italian American and therefore have a limited understanding of the most crucial part of the community's food culture, namely, the domestic. But misunderstanding of Italian-American cuisine has been deepened by a widespread misappreciation of the nature — even a denial of the existence — of the mainstream American cuisine that Italian Americans encountered upon their arrival in the US. Finally, misunderstanding of the subject at hand has also arisen from a more basic short-coming, namely, a too superficial notion of what cuisine is and how it is structured and evolves over time. In this paper then, I offer an analysis of the history of Italian-American cuisine informed not only by an intimate knowledge of the community and its foodways but also by a more careful consideration of mainstream American culinary culture, an analysis that is furthermore based on a more sophisticated conceptualisation of cuisine.

The culinary reputation of the United States around the world and especially in Europe is generally rather negative, a judgement that derives in large measure and somewhat paradoxically from the incredible success of the American-style fast foods that have for several decades been purveyed globally by US-based restaurant chains and their non-US based imitators. Of course, the United States is very large and socio-economically complex; alongside the widely consumed processed and junk and fast foods, there is a great deal of very good food to be had there, with respect both to high quality ingredients and to sophisticated cookery. A further important source of complexity in American culinary culture is the country's ethnic make-up, adding the culinary sub-cultures of both earlier and more recent immigrant groups to a landscape in which the older, pre-20th century American regional cuisines (e.g., Carolina Low Country, Coastal New England, Mid-Atlantic, Gulf Coast Creole, etc.) have diminished greatly and in some cases all but

disappeared. Consequently, for those who know the American food scene well and bear no overarching prejudice toward the nation or its population, appreciation of the complexity and variety of American foodways renders it very difficult to reduce the whole to a simple caricature, negative or otherwise.

Indeed, caricatures and facile generalisations aside, it is devilishly difficult even for food scholars to analyse American culinary culture. For beyond the complexity of interaction between identifiable sub-cultures, such as the aforementioned vestigial old regional cuisines, the many immigrant cuisines of various ages and states of health, as well as newer regional cuisines which themselves are linked to regionally important immigrant cuisines, there is a plethora of other factors that affect production and consumption in the US, from the layering of socio-economic diversity onto food culture with the ostensibly opposing trends of the continued expansion of industrial foods over-against the important upscale foodie or global-gourmet scene, on to the ever-increasing number of ethical or health related food movements (veganism, the Palaeolithic diet, the organic movement, etc.). Out of this all arises the question: if we wish to examine the relationship of a given American culinary sub-culture such as ‘Italian-American cuisine’ to the American culinary mainstream, how do we define that mainstream?

One of the more insightful broad discussions of American culinary culture appears in the book *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (1996) by the anthropologist Sidney Mintz, himself an American and an astute student of foodways from a cross-cultural perspective.¹ Though written already some twenty years ago, his analysis remains remarkably fresh and surely no less provocative for most Americans today than when it first appeared. Mintz argues at length that the United States does not possess a national cuisine. This claim follows directly from his own definition of the term ‘cuisine’, which he gives as (1996: 104):

“Cuisine,” more exactly defined, has to do with the ongoing foodways of a *region* [emphasis added], within which active discourse about food sustains both common understandings and reliable production of the food in question.

Thus, for him, the United States’ lack of a cuisine is actually not anything out of the ordinary and, indeed, he also argues that there is no such thing as ‘French cuisine’ or ‘Italian cuisine’, terms which, despite their popular currency, are just abstractions based in large measure on restaurateurs’ and cookbook authors’ and other food enthusiasts’ inclination to present to their audiences collections of dishes from a given nation’s regional cuisines as if they did together represent a single, focussed national cuisine (p. 104):

A “national cuisine” is a contradiction in terms; there can be regional cuisines, but not national cuisines. I think that for the most part, a national cuisine is simply a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system, such as France or Spain.

This is not to say that Mintz equates the overall structure and dynamics of culinary culture in the United States with those of countries such as France or Italy or India. Rather, he clearly recognises that there is something peculiar at work in the US and more specifically discusses three aspects of American foodways that set it apart from those of many or most other nations, to wit, 1) Americans are exposed to a great many ethnic cuisines and are generally quite promiscuous in their eating habits, often consuming in a given week meals of very disparate origins, say, of Anglo-American origin one day,

Chinese, Mexican, Italian and Thai origins on subsequent days; 2) an extraordinarily high percentage of the meals they eat are not home-cooked but rather purchased already prepared for home consumption or eaten in restaurants; 3) despite a recent uptick in interest in local and seasonal foods, ‘industrial’ and seasonally independent imported foods purchased from grocery chains constitute the norm for the majority of the US population. Of course, what is ‘peculiar’ about the culinary culture of the United States is not just that there is an ever-growing presence of industrial foods and increasing consumption of prepared meals in restaurants or at home and an increasing exposure to ethnic cuisines from around the globe — these trends can be observed in all the richer nations of the world; rather, it is the fact that these three developments have been at work in the US already for a very long time and have advanced to an exceptionally high degree.

Though I agree wholeheartedly with most of what Mintz has to say about American culinary culture, including his remarks about its exaggeratedly modern, ‘global’ nature, I disagree strongly with his claim that the American mainstream lacks a ‘cuisine’ and no less so with his narrow definition of cuisine which denies the existence of any sort of cuisine but the regional. The contradiction in terms that Mintz sees in the term ‘national cuisine’ flows, to my mind, not naturally from the way that culinary cultures are structured but simply from Mintz’ own definition. As a linguist who has been active in the field of food studies for a long time, I applaud his inclusion in his definition of the rôle of communication — where a central element is “active discourse about food [which] sustains both common understandings and reliable production of the food in question” — but also as a linguist I find it bizarre that he limits the possibility of such discourse to a regional level: it is akin to a student of language claiming that the only real linguistic systems are regional dialects and that standardised, supra-regional, national languages are something fundamentally different. The differences between what we linguists consider dialects on the one hand and supra-regional or national standards on the other hand are from a sociolinguistic standpoint many and important but the two kinds of ‘lects’ are not fundamentally different in a great many respects as well, particularly with regard to their structural characteristics.

Analogies between cuisine and language have a long history but for the most part, they have been carried out by food scholars with at best only a rudimentary understanding of how language really works. For example, attempts to draw close parallels between specific structural domains such as morphology and syntax to cooking techniques and meal structure respectively or parts of speech — nouns, adjectives, etc. — and different kinds of foods, such as staple fats, starches, spices, etc., as suggested by Montanari (2006:100ff.) are unworkable and give us insight neither into the internal structures of cuisines nor into the real relationship between cuisine and language, which is that they are parallel, highly structured sub-systems of cultural knowledge that are shared within a given community. As such, both language and cuisine have broadly speaking two levels of structure which in turn have their own internal organisation: there is the level of the readily observable surface manifestations of a cuisine — the ingredients and composed dishes and meals — and the deeper, more abstract, underlying system of, as it were, grammatical rules which govern the choices a given culinary community makes regarding ingredients and the composition of dishes and meals. These rules are in part aesthetic in nature but in part too they are governed by and in dialogue with other

cultural institutions, including religion, agricultural practices, market structures, the technology of food preservation and preparation, etc. And the dynamics of a culinary system, of a cuisine, is in a crucial way affected by the means by which it is propagated, by which it is learned by new generations of the community.

It is here that we must consider again Mintz' very narrow definition of the term 'cuisine'. While it is quite clear from his discussion of American foodways that Mintz, like most food scholars, recognises the existence of the sort of 'grammatical rules' just mentioned, he also falls into the common pitfall of giving precedence to the surface manifestation of cuisine: for him, the aforementioned promiscuity of the American palate, the fact that American cooking and consumption routinely includes a jumble of ingredients and dishes from a wide range of traditional regional cuisines, renders it for him a non-cuisine. But this openness is a learned behaviour, an aspect of culture, and itself an integral part of the American culinary grammar. Indeed, if one analyses the foodways of mainstream America, one finds that it has a grammatical structure not all that much less complex than that of any of the regional cuisines that Mintz accepts as genuine cuisines.

So wherein lies the difference between these regional cuisines and the sort of culinary culture we find in mainstream America? Clearly, it lies in the method by which the cuisine is propagated, which is to say, how the culinary community is structured and how its "active discourse about food" is constituted. In a traditional regional cuisine the central locus of that discourse is the family, then the extended family and circles of friends and then the broader local, sub-regional and regional communities. Such discourse is not 'closed' and thus the cuisine remains to a degree open to external influence and change, but the higher the degree that culinary knowledge is passed on within familial or very local circumstances, the more it will show continuity across generations. A reasonable name for this sort of cuisine might be an 'endo-cuisine', not in the limited sense that Levi-Strauss (2008: 42) first used the term, but rather to express the idea that the network of communication and culinary discourse that supports a cuisine is focussed locally:

Definition of 'Endo-cuisine' (Traditional Regional Cuisine)

A given community's traditional system of (primarily but not exclusively) domestic cookery which is based on a relatively closed set of principally local ingredients and involves specific dishes, styles of dishes, methods of food preparation, procurement and preservation, and the gustatory aesthetics and cultural constraints (religious, technological, etc.) that govern their use and moderate the incorporation of new ingredients, dishes, etc.

Standing in natural contrast to the endo-cuisine would be then the 'exo-cuisine', a cuisine supported by a network of communication and discourse that is more outward looking and diffuse, in which much of the transfer of culinary knowledge is not face-to-face and in the family kitchen but rather through the written word or television and commonly crosses ethnic, socio-economic and even national boundaries.

In the case of mainstream America, there has been a wide range of socio-economic factors at work for a long time which have led to looser familial bonds, greater mobility of individuals and nuclear families, and increased reliance on commercially prepared

foods. In addition, some of the forces, *mutatis mutandis*, that Appadurai (1988) describes at work in the formation of an Indian national cuisine in the 1970s and '80s were also at play in the development of a bourgeois supra-regional American cuisine earlier in the 20th and even in the 19th century. And finally, there has been in the US a long-standing and pervasive intrusion of corporate marketing in all levels of food discourse. Thus, if we are to allow for the existence of national cuisines, then mainstream American cuisine can be seen as a somewhat precocious and extreme version thereof, a quintessential exo-cuisine. But amending our definition of an endo-cuisine to better suit the nature of an exo-cuisine, the definition remains by and large the same, with the main difference residing in the differing natures of the communities and their culinary discourses:

Definition of 'Exo-cuisine'

A given community's evolving system of domestic and commercial cookery which involves a relatively open set of ingredients, dishes, styles of dishes, methods of food preparation, procurement and preservation, and the gustatory aesthetics and cultural constraints (religious, technological, etc.) that govern their use and moderate the incorporation of new ingredients, dishes, etc.

Before moving on to the question of Italian-American cuisine, let me briefly call attention to some of the salient grammatical rules of mainstream American cuisine.

First off, regarding taste inclinations, mainstream America has a particular love of the sweet, which extends well beyond the boundaries of desserts and sweet snacks and is a marked characteristic also of American savoury cookery, where sweet sauces and glazes are used to a remarkable degree, as discussed by Barthes (1970: 307). There is also a general aversion to the bitter, largely absent in traditional Anglo-American cookery and now accepted with reservation as vegetables such as Belgian endive and *broccoli di rapa* have become trendy. Along similar lines, American beers have traditionally been rather sweet with little hops flavour and bitterness, a taste-profile now countered with a fad among microbrewers of making extremely hoppy, bitter beers. The same process of exaggerated use of a flavouring agent formerly absent from the Anglo-American repertoire can also be seen in the popularity of dishes with a great deal of garlic or extremely high levels of chilli-induced piquancy. Related to the last mentioned, there is a pervasive fondness of table condiments, from hot sauces to ketchup to soy sauce to grated cheese to seasoned olive oil, which is to say that it is normal for individuals to alter cooked dishes according to their tastes at table. There is also an overarching aesthetic of 'more is better', which extends beyond the extreme use of single flavouring agents such as garlic and also beyond the famously large portion sizes of American eateries — it also can be seen at work in adaptations of dishes from other cuisines, where there is a marked tendency to 'improve' recipes with numerous additional ingredients.

Beyond such aesthetic features, there are naturally also well-established mainstream notions regarding what foods are proper to what meals of the day, as well as the canonical form of a proper main meal (soup or salad followed by protein, starch and vegetable served on one plate and followed by dessert) and so forth. One could go on but clearly there is a 'grammatical structure' in mainstream American cuisine, however varied the origins of its surface manifestations are.

Italian immigration to the United States was to a great extent focussed in the period from 1880 to 1920, when each year there were more than one hundred or two hundred thousand arrivals.² Of these, the vast majority were poor and hailed from southern Italy and especially from the regions of Campania, Sicily, Calabria, and Basilicata. Though the larger part of them had been agricultural workers, Italian immigrant communities took root primarily in urban settings, particularly in the cities of the Northeast, from Boston down to Baltimore, and to a lesser degree in the Midwest with a few outliers elsewhere, such as in New Orleans and San Francisco. The largest concentrations were in New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago, but many smaller cities also had large Italian populations, such as Newark, New Haven, Providence, etc., where there flourished very dense communities, the ‘Little Italies’, which survived until the urban upheavals of the 1960s and ’70s, when most of their inhabitants moved to less densely Italian neighbourhoods or the suburbs.

There are three remarkable aspects of Italian-American cuisine: 1) the degree of resistance shown by the Italian-American community to culinary assimilation; 2) its disproportionate influence on mainstream American cuisine; 3) the fact that this Italian-American culinary influence occurred in the face of widespread and deep prejudice toward Italian Americans: for mainstream America, southern Italians were dirty, emotionally unstable, untrustworthy and naturally inclined toward violence and criminality; indeed, there were extended public debates about whether southern Italians could be considered ‘white’, which in the context of the even more virulent prejudice toward African Americans in the US says a great deal. Southern Italian foodways, so different from those of mainstream northern-European Americans, were an additional source of horror and even well-intentioned social workers active in Italian immigrant communities commonly suggested that the newcomers might be saved from their barbarism if only they would abandon their unhealthy eating habits (Levenstein 1985), an opinion which is deliciously ironic in light of the current American obsession with the health benefits of the so-called ‘Mediterranean diet’.

Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that mainstream prejudice toward southern Italians served both directly and indirectly to strengthen the immigrants’ maintenance of their traditional culinary culture. And in this regard it must be said that food scholars from the US and Italy who have written about Italian-American cuisine — almost all outsiders — have grossly failed to appreciate the conservative nature of the group’s domestic cookery, commonly mistaking Italian-American restaurant food as representative of the cuisine as a whole. In my view, based on a lifetime of personal experience in New Jersey, New York and Chicago, Italian-American domestic foodways were remarkably conservative and fairly homogeneous across the US, evolving according to the shared culinary grammar that underlies all the regional cuisines of southern Italy.³ Increased consumption of dried pasta, meat and fresh fish do not constitute instances of Americanisation but rather exploitation of improved economic situations — all have direct parallels in the dietary evolutions of the sister cuisines in Italy during the 20th century. Even so, greater prosperity did not erase the traditional basic template of weekly meals, with, alongside the *de rigueur* Sunday celebration of pasta with meat sauce and possibly a roasted meat as well, dinners on at least two or even four days a week being

meatless, with a very significant and non-mainstream American focus on salted fish, organ meats and especially legumes, bitter greens and traditional garden vegetables such as eggplants, zucchini, artichokes, etc. A great many Italian-American families adhered to this southern Italian diet — and some still do — into the second and even third American-born generation, especially in places where there has remained enough of a community to support it.⁴

There are two key reasons for the exceptional degree of conservatism in Italian-American foodways and in both, mainstream prejudice played a rôle. The first is the centrality of intimate social networks in the formation of Italian-American culture — of family, extended family and circles of friends from their home villages in Italy, which were gradually reshaped along the same lines in the new immigrant communities (cf. Cinotto 2013). In this way, the grammatical deep structure of southern Italian cuisine(s) was passed on essentially intact to the first and very often also to the second generation of the immigrants' American-born offspring. Prejudicial attitudes of the mainstream only reinforced the cultural importance of the family and gave in-group foodways a greater importance, fostering an intense pride in and covert prestige of southern Italian culinary traditions — from my personal experience among family and friends, whatever cultural insecurities we felt in the face of mainstream prejudice, we had no doubt that we ate better than the *Merican*'.

This fidelity to traditional foodways demanded that from the start, Italian Americans play an active rôle in the production and procurement of the foodstuffs required for their cookery. This they did in two ways: Italian-Americans, even those living in densely urban settings, stood out for their cultivation of kitchen and herb gardens even on impossibly small bits of space, so much so that productive fig trees in the hostile climate of the Northeast came to be a symbol of *Italianità*, alongside home production of preserved vegetables and wine;⁵ 2) from their arrival in the US, Italian Americans constructed their own commercial networks for the production and shipping of traditional foodstuffs within the US and for imports from Italy, one of the only entrepreneurial fields open to them in the face of mainstream prejudice. And it is a direct result of this activity that Italian Americans soon gained a foothold in the commercial world of food production and distribution.

In a somewhat more complicated way, they also managed from early on to enter the hospitality industry. Originally, up to World War I, Italian-American public cooking was primarily aimed at the many single-male Italian immigrants then present in US cities, but after the war Italian-American restaurants began to flourish, aiming not at an Italian-American audience but at a mainstream American audience, giving rise to the Americanised cookery of 'red sauce' restaurants that so many people have confused with the actual domestic cuisine of the group. Indeed, Italian Americans were known for their disinclination to dine outside the home and in strongly ethnic neighbourhoods, the Little Italies, the many restaurants that now give them their pseudo-ethnic feel were by and large absent until the resident Italian populations moved out and the neighbourhoods were transformed into urban ethnic theme-parks (Kosta 2014).

It is this urban flight and the suburban diaspora that really took off in the 1960s and '70s that has opened the doors to culinary assimilation. The community support, crucially involving Italian bakeries, pork stores, cheese stores, butcher shops, green grocers and fishmongers, is steadily disappearing, with — by necessity or choice —

increasing reliance on the chain-operated grocery store. The intensity of family bonds have weakened and, for an ethnic group that tended to be strongly endogamous, exogamy is now surely the norm. In this way, the old culinary grammar is less frequently passed on and, even though many individual dishes are commonly retained, they have been divorced from their grammatical underpinnings and necessarily take on completely different meanings and eventually different forms in their new American setting. Indeed, virtually all of the grammatical rules of mainstream American cuisine mentioned above are diametrically opposed to those that underlie Italian-American and southern Italian cuisine, and all of them can be seen at work in the Americanised adaptations of Italian dishes that are pawned off as ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ by television chefs and the American mainstream media and food industries.

Contemporaneous with these changes to the social structure of the Italian-American community came another destabilising force: the ‘discovery’ by Americans of ‘northern Italian’ cuisine, one of the first upscale foodie trends of the late 20th century. Again, irony is an important element here, in that the popularity of northern Italian restaurants and foods in America built crucially on the success of the older Italian-American restaurants and foods among mainstream Americans but the northern Italian trend established its place in the upscale market in part through a conscious separation from and scorn for Italian-American and southern Italian cookery. Coinciding suspiciously with the immigration era disdain for southern Italians and acceptance of northern Italians, northern Italian cuisine was taken to be a ‘refined’ and ‘elegant’ antidote to the southerners’ heavy peasant fare as imagined through mainstream American experience in Italian-American restaurants that had designed a version of southern Italian food that appealed precisely to mainstream American tastes. With the breakdown of the old communities and traditions, culturally assimilated Italian-Americans themselves have increasingly taken on this pro-northern perspective, from which the southern Italian-American traditional dishes and their names have come to be widely regarded as corruptions of (pseudo-)northern Italian analogues, when in fact the Italian-American dishes and names are actually quite faithful reflections of their equally valid and ‘authentic’ southern Italian sources.⁶

As shrewd entrepreneurs in this post-modern, late capitalist market for well-packaged culinary ‘authenticity’, Italian Americans have become major players. And as such, they know well how to sell their wares to a maximally large audience that wants the otherness of Italian cuisine moderated by the filters of mainstream American culinary grammar, all served up with lots of garlic, jalapeño chillies, extra cheese and a final drizzle of EVOO. For the American mainstream, this kind of Italianoid cookery is merely one of many seemingly ‘authentic’, appropriated and adapted foreign cuisines, while for culinarily assimilated Americans of Italian descent, it represents a well-spring of faux tradition. For culturally conservative Italian Americans, it represents just a new means for the American mainstream to express its contempt for Italian-American and southern Italian culture and likely the final nail in the coffin of their ethnic cuisine in America.

In terms of the typology of cuisines proposed above, Italian-American cuisine was (and, to the increasingly limited degree to which it survives, is) an endo-cuisine, a cuisine that

continued to a remarkable degree not just its deeper ‘grammatical’ structure but the full array of traditional dishes from southern Italy, with culinary adaptation to the new American setting involving a degree of ‘koinisation’ between the closely related foodways of southern Italy’s different regions and sub-regions and limited adoption of previously unfamiliar American foodstuffs. As much as possible, wherever Italian Americans found themselves able to (re-)construct communities and networks of food production and food procurement, they devoted strikingly high levels of time (gardens and home food preservation) and money (expensive imported olive oil and hard cheeses, fresh produce from elsewhere in the US) on producing a culinary culture that corresponded not to an American dream but to the southern Italian ideal, with all the traditional structure of sober days featuring familiar vegetables, pulses and preserved fish and offal and more festive meals with fresh fish and meat, all elevated by traditionally made bread and pasta in relative abundance. What renders such fidelity to traditional foodways in an alien environment not just possible but necessary and natural is culinary discourse and activity that is strongly focussed inwardly, within the nuclear family, the extended family, and the local ethnic community — as is the case with language acquisition, such discourse, observation and shared experience is the only means by which traditional knowledge can be transferred across generations. But crucial too is an attitude of younger generations, that find greater value in tradition than in assimilation to the surrounding, alien culture.

What is at issue here are not individual recipes and, most typically, holiday dishes, which easily survive as isolated relicts into new culinary settings, but rather a full array of gustatory aesthetics and culturally complex patterns of preferences and taboos regarding meal structures, food calendar, cooking methods and techniques, etc. In the context of an American mainstream society, in which exogamy and work constraints antithetical to close habitual family interactions reign, it was inevitable that Italian-American cuisine would in effect disappear. That the process has taken so long is especially surprising, given that mainstream American cuisine had already started down the path to becoming the quintessential exo-cuisine in the period when Italian immigrants first arrived in the US in the late 19th century, a cuisine in which the focus of discourse, observation and shared experience has gradually but steadily been shifting away from the family and immediate community to public spheres of corporate marketing, cookbooks, journalistic food writing and television cooking shows.

If we look at cuisine in a more sophisticated manner than is generally used, distinguishing between its superficial level and its deeper structural level, that is, its grammar, and further take into consideration the discourse-based typology suggested here, we can understand why in the increasingly few homes in the United States in which Italian-American families’ cookery conforms to the traditional grammar of their endo-cuisine, the salad bowl arrives at the end of the meal, with its typically sober contents dressed simply in olive oil and red wine vinegar or lemon, and why in the homes and restaurants where the American mainstream’s exo-cuisine reigns, including most ‘Italian’ restaurants and the homes of Americans of Italian ancestry, the salad bowl — with sometimes bewildering arrays of far-flung ingredients — normally arrives at the start of

the meal, with its contents dressed with creamy, sweet and very often commercially-produced concoctions.

In the end, Italian-American cuisine gradually meets its death as the result of broader socio-cultural factors — exogamy and, more importantly, the fragmentation of the extended and even nuclear family have rendered the generational transfer of structured culinary knowledge impossible, while the dissolution of focussed ethnic communities and their supporting culinary infrastructure has further weakened opportunities to remain faithful to traditional ways. From the other side, even in a context of only partial familial and communal dissolution, the seductive power of mainstream America's commercial food industry and its relentless advertising and skillfully targeted appeals to simple tastes with the trappings of youth culture make it inevitable that the traditional bowl of artfully prepared tripe loses out to the double bacon cheeseburger, or for that matter, that the homemade pizza with anchovies loses out to the commercially produced and delivered pizza with extra cheese and pepperoni.

From this perspective we see that the shift from the one food culture to the other can seem at the broader social or familial level gradual but is in fact at the individual level generally rather abrupt: In a given family, one or both of the parents may well retain a broad knowledge of Italian-American cuisine but their children may be with regard to their culinary grammar essentially American, with culinary continuity being essentially superficial and limited to a set of traditional Italian-American dishes that are the ones that are most accessible to the American palate; in such cases, once those children leave home they will typically have little or no interest in the many traditional dishes that do not conform to the American culinary grammar, though they may eventually have some nostalgic attachment to the idea of those dishes or else develop a fondness for them in the context of 'foodie' or gourmet interests in later life and then often with a preference for pseudo-authentic (and especially 'northern Italian') versions thereof that they have encountered through celebrity chefs.

In this paper I have characterised a number of developments in the history of Italian-American cuisine as ironic and must needs do so again. The relatively strong fidelity of Italian Americans to their traditional southern Italian culinary grammar was, as we have noted, in part a product of a social and economic inversion in the face of mainstream prejudice, but it was also in good measure enabled by the rapidly growing industrialisation and de-location through long-distance shipping of food in America: without the ability to import olive oil, cheeses and other foodstuffs from Italy and fruits and vegetables from elsewhere in North America, Italian-American communities would have had to redesign their cuisine fundamentally or else simply adapt to the foodways of the local mainstream. But then, in holding so stubbornly onto their old world cuisine for the better part of a century, they also played a crucial rôle, along with a few other key immigrant groups, in the transformation of the American culinary landscape from one in which there were old regional cuisines into one in which there was a national cuisine, in most or all basic respects still firmly northern European in its grammatical structure, but ever more open to accept and adapt to its own tastes a wide array of ethnic ingredients and dishes.

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¹ This section is a condensed version of material in Buccini (to appear) in the context of a more detailed discussion of the structure of culinary 'grammar' and the typology of cuisines.

² See Buccini 2015 for a more extensive discussion of Italian immigration to the US and more generally on the history and nature of Italian-American cuisine.

³ It is worth noting that before the 'unification' of Italy, continental southern Italy (from Abruzzo and what is now the southern part of Lazio southward) all belonged to one and the same nation for well more than half a millennium, called in its last period the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies; during most of this time, Sicily was also part of the great southern kingdom. It is therefore not surprising that despite considerable variety across this large area, there also developed a great many unifying traits in all cultural domains, from language, architecture, music, etc., on to cuisine. A crucial step in Italian unification was the conquest and subjugation of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, a

process whose negative impact on the south contributed to the mass emigration of southern Italians to the United States and elsewhere.

⁴ The importance and stability across time of the weekly template of meals in Italian cuisine is generally underappreciated by outsiders and has been a central element of foodways throughout Italy and among Italian emigrant communities (see, for example, Camporesi's (1995: 164ff.) discussion in a northern Italian context). Of course, the basic frame of the template is related to Catholic traditions — the old rules regarding abstinence and the tradition of celebrating each Sunday — but it is interesting to note that in the United States, many families that have lost any strong attachment to the Church nonetheless continue to follow to varying degrees the originally religiously-based template.

⁵ While the home production of wine and preserved foodstuffs surely had in part an economic motivation, the aesthetic and also symbolic value of the homemade products has always been of great or greater importance. For many Italian Americans (as well as Italian immigrants elsewhere, e.g. Australia), the arduous work of processing vast quantities of fresh tomatoes in late summer for use throughout the year became a sort institution for the entire extended family.

⁶ For example, 'pasta e fasul' (pasta with beans) is felt by many to be an Italian-American corruption of the 'real' Italian 'pasta e fagioli', when in fact the former is the proper southern Italian dialect name for the version(s) of the dish made by so many Italian-American families of southern Italian descent. One also regularly hears the Italian-American usage of 'lasagna' as the name of the stuffed and baked noodle dish being said to be 'incorrect', presumably the product of Italian-American ignorance, when in fact it is a faithful continuation of the name of the composed dish throughout southern Italy with a collective singular. Standard and northern Italian usage of the plural 'lasagne' for the composed dish is correct in its own context but for the southern Italian and Italian-American contexts it is inappropriate. On this, see Buccini 2013: 95.