

ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOODWAYS:

A PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC LOOK INTO SUNDAY DINNER

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Italian-American foodways is a discipline of study that examines how food habits and eating customs amongst Italian-Americans are connected to their culture. This paper will examine how the foodways of Italian-Americans define them in the context of family and unity, social identity, and changing gender roles. Using the framing of theoretical ideas from the texts of Camp, Noyes, and Hogg, this paper will apply folkloristic, anthropological, psychological, and sociological analysis to *Italian-American Folklore* and *The Milk of Almonds*, two case texts composed of studies, essays, memoirs and artistic work based on Italian-Americans and their culture. Ultimately, these works will all connect to my customary experience as an Italian-American in one focal context—Sunday dinner in my family and how this event identifies us as Italian-Americans who are part of a community.

One of the most enduring customs I have experienced growing up around Italian-American culture is Sunday dinner. In my Italian-American family, weekly Sunday dinner consists of the entire immediate family congregating around a multi-course meal, discussing events, sharing stories, and enjoying the unity of the family. Deborah Mele, an Italian-American food enthusiast and webmaster, explains the courses of an Italian dinner on her website, which showcases several different areas and aspects of Italian cooking. There are generally four courses consisting of *Antipasto* (appetizer), *Primi Piatti* (first course), *Secondi Piatti* (second course), and *Dolci* (dessert) (Mele). Between the first and second course is a time for relaxation, conversing with relatives, and playing with the children. All of my immediate and extended family including aunts, uncles, and cousins flock to my grandparents' house to partake in our customs. Every week when we have dinner together, we continue to engage in a custom that is common amongst Italian-Americans—the appreciation of family and togetherness. In the study of foodways, or the juncture of food and culture, the family is not only gathered to eat, but is engaging in a ritual by which they strengthen and celebrate their familial ties.

The assessment of foodways involves an interdisciplinary approach to food and culture encompassing combinations of views from groups such as anthropologists, folklorists, and nutritionists to name a few. In his article “American

Foodways: What, When, Why and How We Eat in America," Charles Camp, a folklorist, defines foodways as the intersection of food and culture (24). From the perspective of a folklorist, cultures are examined in terms of the way a group interacts with food on all levels from the acquisition of foodstuffs to preparation through consumption. In this manner, food is seen not only for what it offers a group nutritionally but also symbolically in defining customs, norms, or beliefs of a society.

A crucial idea in Camp's examination of foodways is the food event, or the occasion in which food plays a part (28).

To press this point a bit further, we must look not only to those special cultural moments when all can agree that food is saying something about and for us—the cutting of a multi-tiered wedding cake, the giving of Halloween candy to masked trick-or-treaters—but also to the more ordinary customs which mark daily, weekly, and seasonal cycles of food preparation and consumption. (Camp 24)

This quote describes the very nature of food events that verify the social aspects behind food and eating. Camp describes these events as "special cultural moments," whether it be cutting a wedding cake or giving candy to trick-or-treaters, because these moments are significant whether we realize it or not. We often take the role food plays in our social lives for granted. To use Camp's example, the whole connotation surrounding Sunday dinner in my family would not be the same if it were not for food. Metaphorically, it acts as glue that binds us and holds us together—reason for us to come together every week. Sharing food, enjoying each other's company, and keeping our familial ties strong—this is what our weekly custom is about; it's not about eating to simply satisfy hunger.

To reiterate this idea, let us continue to examine what Camp calls "the more ordinary customs which mark daily, weekly, and seasonal cycles of food preparation and consumption" (24). Why are they important to the significance of Italian-American food and culture? In my family, Sunday dinner follows a weekly cycle of routine and preparation that unfolds exactly the same way every week—the same way one would consider the chronological events of mass in a church or the innings in a baseball game. At 1:00 in the afternoon everyone starts piling in for dinner. There are the same people present every week—aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, parents and grandparents. Every person has his own informally assigned seat (it would actually be considered rude to sit anywhere else because then you would be in

someone else's seat). For as long back as I can remember and even to this day, my Uncle Bobby gets the end piece of a loaf of Italian bread (which is considered to be the best part for its crunchiness) reserved for him every week. As for the other ends, it's every man for himself. Minute details like these are just small aspects of the feast described earlier. Yet, they are important in understanding what makes our custom unique. In creating specific rituals and traditions, the most inconspicuous details of time, smells, and practices like the ones aforementioned are truly important when studying Camp's customs that mark cycles of food preparation and consumption. These are what he calls "special cultural moments" because they make our experience unique and are symbolic of our very own customs. Great festive Sunday dinners like mine may be commonplace amongst Italian-Americans in general, but the special details inherent in my family's account, like the ones just described, are what makes it our own family event. Whether it is now or several years in the future, when I think back on Sunday dinner at this time, it will not be some vague or hazy memory of a bunch of relatives coming over for dinner. On the contrary, it will be the familiar faces I am used to seeing every week, the same traditional sequence of dishes (*antipasto, primi, secondi, and dolci*), and the silly little details about which chair was mine and who got the end of the bread that will illuminate my memories within the broader picture of celebration of unity and maintaining familial bonds.

Further, my experiences are fortified when compared to the case studies in the book *Italian-American Folklore*. In this piece, which is a work that comprises interviews and studies in conversation, traditions, stories, music, and food of the Italian culture, authors Frances Malpezzi, a researcher, and William Clements, a folklorist, also describe Sunday dinner as a significant traditional custom in the lives of Italian-Americans.

Earlier in the century when Italian laborers worked long hours six days a week, Sunday provided their only opportunity for socializing: it was a time for gorging, a time for catching up on the week's gossip, a time for continuation of old arguments and the invention of new ones, a time for venting frustrations. It would be a total day, a day filled with eating, drinking, women preparing meals, talking, political arguing, and storytelling. The meals seemed never to stop: First the appetizer, later the pastry and coffee, an hour after that sandwiches, then you start the supper—one meal leading to another, without end. (82)

Why are these elaborate weekly rituals so important? These are the “food events” that Camp describes—an occasion in which food plays a role. It is a day of gorging and relaxation and part of a custom that dates back to the early twentieth century. After a grueling work week, Italian laborers could look forward to Sundays as a day of relaxation and indulgence. Great feasts like the one described in my account and in *Italian-American Folklore* acted as a buffer to the arduous task of going back to work on Monday, both in the past and currently, and allotted a set amount of time for familial gathering. Above all, as Malpezzi and Clements point out, “this custom often involved a reaffirmation of group identity—the family, as has usually been the case with Italian-American Sunday observances” (83).

Family and celebration of togetherness are foremost contributing factors to Italian-American identity. It is how we, as an ethnic nationality, identify ourselves in both individual and group terms. But exactly what is identity in the context of family and nationality? This could be further explored by examining the idea of social identity theory in the article “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory.” Identity theory will not be examined in regards to this context because it concentrates solely on role behavior and role identities without examining attributes such as ethnicity, sex, race, and nationality as they are involved in the dynamics of self-identity. The authors of this article are researchers in sociology and psychology at the University of Queensland, Australia. Through their research, they provide interdisciplinary arguments and expertise on how these theories are related. They define social identity theory in the following terms:

The basic idea is that a social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self definition that is a part of the self-concept. People have a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self-concept. Each of these memberships is represented in the individual member’s mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group—that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave. (Hogg, *et al.*, 259)

Broadly interpreted, this means that individuals and their sense of self and how they act and behave is directly attributed to the group or social category in which they

belong. But what is a social category? What are the demands and boundaries these groups set and limit their members to?

A social category can pretty much include any group or genre one could possibly be affiliated with—nationality, politics, sports, or academics to name a few. What makes these categories unique is the common theme under which its members are united and practice similar interests. These categories end up defining their members based on the ideas affiliated with each group. For example, in American politics, a voter defines himself as being either in the left, right, or center of the political spectrum. The views and ideas expressed in each sub-category are the ideas with which the voter represents himself. For instance, a voter who tends to be on the left side of the spectrum will be more liberal in his views and support ideas such as women's right to abortion and affirmative action. In this way, the group or category an individual belongs to limits and molds his viewpoints to conform to the socially accepted views of the group.

The same is true for family and nationality. In the case of Italian-Americans in *The Milk of Almonds*, a compilation of accounts of Italian-American women writers on food and culture, much insight is given into family and nationality as forms of social identity. In one short story titled "The Exegesis of Eating," author Alane Salierno Mason cleverly accounts the rules of her Italian-American grandparents' dinner table by comparing them to religious commandments:

And thou shalt treat the food that touchest thy lips with reverence, in recognition of the labors and traditions of thine ancestors, and in communion and fellowship with those to whom thou art tied with ties of blood and love. Thou shalt not neglect to share the fruits of the earth with thy neighbor. Thou shalt not neglect to feed the old and the sick. Thou shalt serve first the pasta, then the meat, fish, or fowl, then the salad, and thou shalt sprinkle no grated cheese on the fish. Thou shalt give thanks before the meal and kiss the hand that feeds thee. Except in condition of necessity, thou shalt not eat in haste, in distraction, or alone. (261)

This quote is incredibly insightful in understanding the role family and nationality play in social identity. In this instance, the author is a member of an Italian-American family that adheres to rules or a code surrounding their eating habits. Being part of this family means that she practices this code in order to conform to the beliefs and

rituals of her family. The author is identifying herself as an Italian-American by describing these common ethnic eating habits which she takes part in – appreciating the food, serving pasta first, then meat, fish, or fowl, then the salad... and not eating alone. In terms of social identity theory, Mason is ultimately exemplifying how social identity “describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group – that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave” by partaking in her family’s rules for eating and classifying herself as an Italian-American in doing so (Hogg, Terry, & White 259).

It is revealing to examine why Mason decided to compare the methods of eating to religious commandments. From this, one can gather just how sacred family and food are to Italians. By putting dinner in the context of religion, an institution by which many people govern their lives, Mason depicts how much value we Italians hold in our customary eating habits. To further strengthen this point, Malpezzi and Clements tell us from an Italian-American perspective that “food stands for wealth in the material and familial sense. To share food has been the consummate act of hospitality, and to refuse to accept offered food has often been regarded as an insult” (224). Gathering of family for dinner, as in my case, is a show of appreciation and generosity—the comprised work of men and women to prepare a meal for their family. Our family is being shown the hospitality of my grandparents—on the surface level it is my grandfather’s labor and money which afford the food and my grandmother’s preparation and cooking for hours every week. But it is also their devotion to a custom that helps keep our family together and closely knit. For this reason, it would be insulting not to accept food because in this sense, it is regarded as the wealth of our family—a manifestation of the combined efforts of labor, preparation, affection, and love. This is again exactly what Charles Camp is referring to when he speaks of “those special cultural moments when all can agree that food is saying something about and for us” during “the more ordinary customs which mark daily, weekly, and seasonal cycles of food preparation and consumption” (24). From the acquisition of groceries (a result of my grandfather’s labor) to preparation of food (a result of my grandmother’s hard work) to consumption (which is the final reward of my grandparents’ affection), Sunday dinner is saying something about our culture as Italian Americans which in turn defines us as a community: we appreciate our family, enjoy our togetherness, and embrace our traditions.

Further, in examining Mason's comparison, one must ask what it means that this food event is being compared to religious code and not a legal or academic code or some other force that disciplines peoples' lives. To answer this question, one must look at the consequences of secular and non-secular codes in this day and age. In particular, failure to obey a municipal, state, or federal law, for example, will result in a tangible penalty, whether it is community service, monetary fine, or jail time. On the other hand, the punishment for disobedience of religious code is usually associated with feelings of guilt. For example, in Catholicism, the notion that God is judging your every thought and action can weigh heavily on a person's mind and lead to feelings of guilt on an abundance of matters not condoned by the church: homosexuality, divorce, and ironically, gluttony, to name a few.

In Mason's example, the assertive language used—"thou shalt" and "thou shalt not"—connotes the feeling that a strict adherence to these codes is necessary. The passage does not say "Well, you really should try to give thanks before a meal" or "It's a good idea to share your food with others." Instead, it declares "Thou shalt not neglect to share the fruits of the earth with thy neighbor" and "Thou shalt give thanks before the meal and kiss the hand that feeds thee" (De Salvo & Giunta 261). This structure instills obedience in the reader or the one who is practicing these customs because he fears the ramifications of guilt that will follow with noncompliance. In my family experience, though Sunday dinner is not as formally codified as Mason's account, I experience the same repercussions of guilt that Mason herself probably experienced whenever she broke her family's sacred covenant. If for some reason I am either not hungry, dieting, or unable to make it home for Sunday dinner, I feel an enormous amount of guilt for not eating. In a sense, it is as though I am not appreciating all the effort and preparation that goes into this event. This examination, though more abstract than the first point of view on Mason, adds a new level of insight to understanding why Mason compares her family eating habits to religious code instead of legal or academic laws. It can be inferred that the punishment of guilt for disobedience, as is evident in my customs, was a contributing factor in the creation of Mason's comparison. I connect my family experience to Mason's because in this instance, we share an Italian-American social identity in which I could relate to her feelings towards holding her family's customary food habits in a religious light.

Next, this discussion makes way for a sub-category of examination in the topic of my Italian-American Sunday dinner—gender roles. Dorothy Noyes is another folklorist who engages her readers with complex ideas and definitions pertaining to group, community, and identity. Her article, “Group,” contains a section titled “Community, Imagined and Performed” in which she discusses gender roles in the following terms:

The recent synthesis of Judith Butler argues that such apparently natural categories as gender are reproduced through repeated individual performances. The heavy social sanctions on deviant gender performance imply a deep seated recognition of gender’s constructed status: it must be constantly policed and reinforced to maintain itself. “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.” (Noyes 467)

Noyes’s main idea is that gender roles and their certain limitations and boundaries are defined by the way they are practiced (i.e. how often, when, where). When Noyes says “the heavy social sanctions on deviant gender performance imply a deep seated recognition of gender’s constructed status: it must be constantly policed and reinforced to maintain itself,” she is implying that any divergence from collective approbation of recognized gender roles will result in the deterioration of those roles if they are not constantly practiced.

For example, in my case of Sunday dinner, gender roles are quite evident. Much like social identity theory, gender roles define how individuals act and behave according to the social category or role to which they belong. My grandfather, and the men of his generation, would never think of helping clean the table between courses or after dinner by bringing his dish to the sink or wiping off the table. He also never serves himself any food because my grandmother will do it for him. These are tell tale signs of a classic patriarchal society in which women play a subordinate role to men by staying home, tending to the house, and waiting on their husbands. However, because these ways were not taught to their children (my aunts and uncles) or to me, these classic gender roles have not been practiced and have thus virtually disappeared in my generation. I have no qualms with helping clean up or serving female relatives dinner. As Noyes points out, these roles must be “constantly policed and reinforced” to maintain their potency. In this case, they were not reinforced and have diminished as a result. This demonstrates a way in which my family is adhering

to a non-patriarchal facet of mainstream American culture—one in which the tasks of gender roles are divided more equally amongst both sexes. Ultimately, this all ties in to Camp's ideas concerning the intersection of food and culture: in a case like Italian-American Sunday dinner, it is seen how the changes in roles over time relate to foodways because food has a crucial connection to the way people act and behave. Whereas my grandfather associates food and its preparation with female identity, I see it as something that shares an equal part amongst both sexes. This, in turn, has had an effect on the way food has been handled through the generations. In my grandparents' generation, food was usually the primary concern of the wife, mother, or female. However, in the generations that have followed—that of my parents and my own—it has changed into a combined effort between men and women to share responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and serving food. From this observance, I can extrapolate that social identity in the form of patriarchal gender roles like the ones described will continue to disappear in future generations of my family if they are no longer practiced. This ultimately means that these criteria that “describe and prescribe one's attributes as a member of a group—that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave” will change what it means to be an Italian-American male or female in the future (Hogg, Terry, & White 259). Based on my experience, future Italian-American Sunday dinners will see cooking, cleaning, and serving being shared more equally by both men and women.

There is a final question about what keeps the Italian-American community unique. How does it resist cohesion with mainstream American culture? Again, I will use my own experience growing up in both a predominantly Italian-American town and ethnic family to illustrate this point. As we know, my grandmother still cooks dinner every Sunday for our family. We generally eat traditional Italian dinners of pasta, meatballs, and fish. In this way, we resist homogeneity into aspects of mainstream American culture, which are comprised of eating fast food in a non-household setting without family present. I remember from my childhood the first time I ate at a friend's house who was not of Italian descent. I was very surprised to see how differently the customs between our families were practiced. There was no formal table setting or time in which his family engaged in dinner—in fact, we ate dinner from Burger King on the couch in the living room while watching television. This was absolutely unheard of in my home. First, any food from a fast food venue like Burger King, Mc Donald's, or any restaurant for that matter, was considered to be

junk food by my grandmother. It was not fit to make up a proper dinner. Second, we always ate dinner at the table together in a group in the dining room or kitchen—never on the couch or in front of the television. In this instance, it is quite evident that social identity theory in the form of self-concept had a major bearing on my perception of who I was. This phenomenon is what Hogg, Terry, and White's theory of social identity refers to in their article "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory." Looking back, I was part of a social category that held family interaction and gathering for dinner in high esteem. Being a member of that community made the customs I was exposed to at my friend's house (eating fast food and watching TV during dinner) very foreign to me. Those beliefs and feelings were directly attributable to the circumstances under which I was raised and the community I was a part of. In my community, as was exemplified in the event of Sunday dinner, those circumstances included things like eating home-cooked meals and conversing with other family members during dinner. Though it was done unconsciously at the time, I classified myself as an Italian-American at a young age by recognizing the differences between my friend's customs and my own and realizing the methods my family practiced were not the same as everyone else's.

Up to that point in my young and naïve life, I thought everyone lived like me and practiced the same customs. But as I've learned from then on, many people do not. In fact, very few of my non-Italian friends practice the same eating habits my family does. This bears a major significance by portraying the examples in which Italian-American foodways have resisted cohesion into mainstream American culture—a culture which does not contemporarily hold family values and food events (like Sunday family dinners) in the same regard as the Italian-American culture in which I was raised.

We see that an analysis of my family's weekly Sunday dinner shows that the foodways of Italian-Americans define them as a community and keep them both resistant and adherent to change. From the examination of a pertinent ethnic food event, the interdisciplinary application of several fields of study (folklore, anthropology, psychology, and sociology) has provided a finely tuned analysis of a broad and generally overlooked subject—the intersection of food and culture. By illuminating this topic it is easily seen that food plays an integral role in our lives by

not only satisfying our physical human needs, but by acting as a cultural medium that communicates the importance of family and community.

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#### COMMENTARY: ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOODWAYS

Neha Bagchi

DiPiazza paints a warm and engaging picture of his Italian-American family's ritualized Sunday dinners, showing how cultural practices (in this case, Sunday dinner) serve to hold the members of their family together and reinforce the sense of identity, community and belonging. By the very same token, however, one's culture also serves to delineate one from other cultures. It is true that this delineation is what allows for identity and that without it, the world would be one homogenous mass with no diversity. But sometimes this delineation walls other communities off to large extents. Some communities are more closed than others, and tend not to want to mingle too much with members of other communities, or, they are willing to interact with certain communities (who are a little different but not too much) but not with others (who are too dramatically different to be accepted).

There was once a time when cultures were relatively insulated from each other simply because of geographical separation; cultural exchanges happened over the course of trade and military interactions, but for the most part, people retained their

sense of cultural identity without too much difficulty. Today, though, people travel extensively and can move from one part of the world to settle down in another. It is becoming increasingly harder to draw boundaries between cultures. People of different cultures meet in such settings as workplaces and universities, where there is a good deal of interaction. It is becoming increasingly difficult to hold on to one's "own" culture—indeed, the very definition of what one's "own" culture has begun to come into question.

What happens when two people from entirely different cultures meet and consider spending the rest of their lives together? They face a very unique set of issues. They come from families that each have specific ways of doing things, and now the couple in question must compromise; each must make space for the culture of the other if their relationship is to last. People who are or have been in this situation will know just how difficult this can be; sometimes we do not even realize how deeply ingrained certain parts of our cultures are and when these are challenged, we have a difficult time compromising. This situation—the meeting of two cultures through a marriage—has been arising more and more frequently now in a world where cultures become geographically adjacent and where people of different cultures interact with each other on a daily basis.

Sometimes a cultural practice is threatened not by a single person entering a community but rather by a family entering a larger community with a different culture. For example, DiPiazza's Italian-American family can be traced back to an Italian family that came to America. What happens when a family from one nation settles in another for generations? What are the aspects of their culture that they are willing to compromise on? Is it necessary to compromise or can they have fulfilling lives without letting go of the culture they call their own?

I would like to know DiPiazza's thoughts on how cultures change as the proximity of cultures and the resultant intermingling of cultures increases. What happens when an outsider must be brought into a community? Do the rituals of that community get compromised? When—if ever—is it possible for an outsider to blend in seamlessly? Is it "good" or "bad" when cultural demarcations begin to blur? How have cultural practices changed over time, creating a family that is now no longer Italian, but Italian-American?