

Food in Fact and Fiction: The Italian American Odyssey

Fred Gardaphé, Queens College/CUNY

When Italians began immigrating to America in numbers that drew the attention of government agencies, their diets were seen as Anti-American. It wouldn't be until after World War II that Italian food would become popularized outside Americas Italian homes. As Italian Americans began representing themselves in films, the respect for food and the dignity involved in its preparation and consumption begin to appear. Images of food abound in the literature created by Italian Americans and this talk explores the way food is used by Italian American writers and filmmakers to translate Italian culture into American culture.

Through the writings of Helen Barolini, Don DeLillo, Rose Romano and Tony Romano, I show how this translation takes place and the effect it has on creating and maintaining Italian American identities. It is not surprising that Helen Barolini, a prominent figure in Italian American literature chose to tell more about her life through *Festa*, a memoir of sorts, through the months of the year; a menu and recipes for each major holiday. Barolini's uses food used to verify, dignify, and unify her cultural identity. "Italy," she writes, "is as close to me as appetite" (1).

In America, the perception of Italians as wildly emotional, food crazed lovers, is still problematic, and most likely will remain so until alternative perspectives of Italian American life reach larger American audiences. This talk through analyses of literature, film and autobiographies offers an interpretation of some of those alternative perspectives that challenge stereotypical ideas of America's Italians. It concludes with an account of a traditional Sunday dinner that illustrates the process of cultural translation of Italian food into American life.