

Simone Cinotto. *Una famiglia che mangia insieme: Cibo ed etnicità nella comunità italoamericana di New York, 1920-1940.* Torino: Otto Editore, 2001. x + 458 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-88-87503-24-1.



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Inventing Culinary Traditions, Constructing Ethnic Identity: A New Perspective on Italian Immigration in the United States

To most North American diners, spaghetti and meatballs, pizza and lasagna seem just as American as they are Italian. American familiarity with "ethnic" cuisine and, in turn, the Americanization of ethnic culinary traditions is telling of American immigration history. In *Una famiglia che mangia insieme*, Simone Cinotto demonstrates the importance of alimentation and the rituals of eating in the immigrant experience, while uncovering the truly American roots of invented traditions. Using a wide range of sources, Cinotto's research brings a fresh approach to the well-developed field of immigration history and helps food studies take a step forward in the direction of serious academic research. This book looks at how food served as an instrument for the mediation and the negotiation of Italian-American identity in New York during the inter-war years.

From a theoretical perspective, Jack Goody's *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982) serves as a basis for the study of alimentary systems and helps ground Cinotto's study of the symbolism of food within a temporal context. Werner Sollors's and

Eric Hobsbawm's work on ethnicity create the lenses through which the author views Italian-American identity: ethnicity is seen as a cultural construction that is brought about through a process (p. 16).

The introduction not only sets out the author's theoretical tools, it is very forthcoming about primary sources. The Leonard Covello papers and documents collected by the researchers of the Federal Writers' Project are the main primary sources. Other sources vary from oral histories to film. Structurally, *Una famiglia che mangia insieme* is broken up into two parts.

Part 1 is entitled "The Social Origins of an Ethnic Tradition: Food, Family and Community in Italian Harlem." [1] This section explores the way in which food and rituals of eating are essential forces in the construction of identity and the Italian-American ideology of family. The first chapter focuses on the role that food and eating habits played in the changing family structures of Italian Americans from their arrival to their "integration" into American society. Most studies on Italian-American culture conclude that culinary culture had a central role in creating family cohesion and in the maintenance of a distinct identity. On this

point Simone Cinotto agrees, but he goes one step further. The author argues that food was a strong symbol of ethnic identity; however, this symbolism was a result of a complex historical process that finds its roots in urban-industrial America, and not so much in Italian *contadina* culture. According to Cinotto, immigrants created Italian-American culinary tradition by selecting old values and reshaping them in response to contradictions and social pressures found in the host society (pp. 31-32). On one hand, some of these conflicts originated in contradictions between ethnic traditions and American institutions. On the other hand, Sunday dinner and the sharing of food became important symbolic elements in the Italian-American family. The author explains that Sunday dinner was an important part of the ritualization of intergenerational relations (p. 77). The many examples given in this chapter serve to show how a code was developed through food and eating rituals. This code was used to express specific messages regarding roles, identity, and social relations in general with other groups (p. 92).

In the second chapter, entitled "An American Alimentary Panorama: Food, Ethnic Relations and Space in East Harlem in the 1930s," Cinotto looks at the importance of food within the space of the neighborhood.[2] In East Harlem, food was a means of defining identity and space within a multiethnic community. As the ethnic landscape of this neighborhood began to change in the 1930s, food began to play an important part in the mapping of ethnic geography: "In East Harlem, an alimentary geography reproduced cultural and territorial divisions, creating in the perception of the other group an apparent coherence and unity, reinforcing the sense of belonging and difference of the people of the community" (p. 166).[3]

"The Multiple Identities of the Food Business" is the second part of this book, in which the relationship between the food industry and ethnic identity is explored. Chapter 3, "Ethnicity and Modernity: Italian-American Food Products and

Producers," traces the development of an industry and its role in shaping Italian-American identity. In addition to the role of Italian Americans in this industry, Cinotto investigates how Italian foods were introduced to American society and how they became products of mass consumption while still maintaining an ethnic identification (p. 214). This mass consumption of "Italian Style" food was one of the bridges between the Italian Americans and mainstream American society. For example, Cinotto cites a number of successful businesses such as the Atlantic Macaroni Company and Chef Boy-Ar-Dee as case studies.

In the same vein, the following chapter, "'Buy Italiano!': Food Importers, Nationalism and Authentic Food," deals with the marketing of Italian-American and Italian products. Cinotto analyses the rise and fall of Italian food importers in the United States. Before World War I, importers called upon the nationalistic pride of newly arrived immigrants and were able to corner the Italian-American market. Mass media, such as radio, played a central role in the marketing of imported goods and the conquest of ethnic markets. However, scarcity in Italy during World War I and American protectionism led to the decline of Italian imports and the development of the Italian-American food industry. The once regionally diverse products of Italian cuisine became increasingly homogenized as a result of their mass production in America. Italian-American food and "Italian-Style" products were marketed to a wide range of American consumers and became increasingly popular. This culinary transformation was continued by the second generation of immigrants. For this reason, Cinotto suggests that Italian-American products were not hybrids but new inventions created out of nostalgia for an unknown homeland (p. 349).

The final chapter of this book looks at the development of Italian restaurants in New York and how they served as links between ethnic groups and social classes. Cinotto explains how many

Italian restaurants began as boarding houses. As the middle class began to look for entertainment and sociability outside of the private sphere, these venues found a new clientele (p. 365). During Prohibition, Italian restaurants gained increased popularity, because they were notoriously places where alcohol was served. Cinotto notes that this notoriety led to the establishment of Italian restaurants in areas such as Greenwich Village and Times Square which were frequented by tourists and the middle class (pp. 379-380). Contrary to this expansion, Italian restaurants were closing in Italian areas of the city. Italian Americans preferred to cook and eat at home, doubting the authenticity of restaurant fare. Italian restaurants played perhaps the biggest role in the process of gastronomic homogenization: "a distinct and singular model of 'Italian cuisine' was, more than anything, a response to demand and the taste of the mainly non-Italian clientele" (p. 401).[4] Cinotto also shows how the institutionalization of the Italian restaurant also helped form and solidify stereotypes about Italian Americans and Italy. The author concludes that an Italian-American ethnic tradition was something created by the American experience of Italian immigrants—a hybrid creation.

In the Italian-American community, food was a language that articulated close relationships, relationships of power, exclusion and inclusion, respectability and prestige (p. 431). Cinotto underlines that the history of food serves as "an interesting interpretive key for understanding forms of socialization in the family, the street, commercial and public spaces—during holidays, in markets, stores, cafés and restaurants. It is an interesting view of the multifaceted aspects of daily life in a community and in the city and their historical transformation" (pp. 431-432).[5]

The literature concerning immigration history often focuses on the political, economic, and demographic aspects of immigration, while leaving the human element aside. *Una famiglia che*

mangia insieme can be seen as part of a movement to explore the social and cultural experiences of immigration. This book complements earlier works such as Herbert Gans's *Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (1962) and Richard Alba's *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (1985), and can be placed within the recent literature that focuses on the ethnic experience of immigration.

In this book the author addresses a wide variety of topics from the role of food and eating in the creation of group identity to the rise of the Italian-American food industry. Amidst the richness of the various chapters, there is a lack of cohesion at times. The reader has the impression that this is a collection of five independent essays. This is not entirely problematic, although arguments are sometimes repeated. I appreciated the many citations of primary sources and the detailed examples that the author gives, but in order to make the book less bulky, citations could have been selected more sparingly. The streamlining of this text would make it an even more enjoyable read.

Una famiglia che mangia insieme is an excellent example of the innovative work that can be done in the field of food studies. Simone Cinotto's use of a wide range of historical sources and interdisciplinary theoretical tools is both academically fruitful and intellectually engaging. The author leaves room for his sources to speak which brings a human aspect that is often missing in many social histories. Cinotto moves beyond statistical and theoretical approaches to immigration history and gives a real sense of cultural change and the creation of immigrant identity. In addition, this book is very accessible and could potentially appeal to a wide audience in North America if a translation were produced. By using Italian-American cuisine as an ethnic "narration," Simone Cinotto successfully brings together the cul-

tural, social, and economic aspects of the immigration experience of Italians to America.

Notes

[1]. "Le origini sociali di una tradizione etnica: cibo, famiglia e comunit= ad Italian Harlem."

[2]. "Un panorama alimentare americano: cibo, relazioni etniche, spazio ad East Harlem negli anni trenta."

[3]. "Ad East Harlem, una geografia alimentare riproduceva le divisioni culturali e territoriali, creava nella percezione di altri gruppi un'apparente coerenza ed unit=, rinforzava il senso di appartenenza e di differenza delle persone nelle comunit=" (p. 166).

[4]. "un modello unico e distintivo di <<cucina italiana>> fu soprattutto una risposta alla domanda e ai gusti della maggioritaria clientela di origine non italiana" (p. 401).

[5]. "un'interessante chiave interpretativa sulle forme di socializzazione nella famiglia, nella strada, negli spazi commerciali pubblici--nelle feste, nei mercati, nei negozi, nei caff= e nei ristoranti; un interessante sguardo su molteplici aspetti della vita quotidiana nella comunit= e nella citt= e sulla loro thrtrasformazione storica" (p. 432).

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