

Food and Humanity:
The Cultural and Historical Significance of
Food for the Ancient Romans to the Italian-American Immigrants

Honors Thesis
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Abstract

The sole view of food only serving humans with nutritional needs underestimates and disregards the symbolic and cultural meanings of food. Looked at in broader context, humans live not just off of food but through it. Food is used to define and unite people in any given culture. In turn, humans use food to transmit and keep alive their heritage. Food thus becomes an archetype to which all humans have a connection because all humans have contact with food and use it for more than just sustenance. There might be diversity between people and the actual foods they eat, but the constant remains the same -- food as an expression of humanity. This paper attempts to illustrate this point by tracing the "food history" of ancient Rome through the immigration of Italians to America at the turn of the 19th century.

According to legend, without the benevolence of a she-wolf who nursed two exposed twins, Romulus and Remus, Rome never would have been founded. Rome's founding, therefore, acknowledged and illustrated the importance food has in shaping the way a culture might develop. Without that gracious wolf, the mere union of several towns and villages might never have amounted to what has become known as the "Eternal City".

Most of us do not give a second thought to what it means to eat. Food obviously exists in order to provide us with life sustaining nourishment -- all that live, must eat. No one disputes the fact that humans must eat in order to survive. Even infants have an instinctual grasp of eating for survival. Generally speaking, when an individual feels the pangs of hunger, they eat. They are biologically driven to the act. Not only are humans biologically driven to eat because of hunger, but even human food selections have a biological or genetic base. For example, most humans have an in-born attraction for sweet foods and an avoidance of bitter tasting foods.¹ What purpose does such a biological drive serve? In nature, sweetness is associated with healthful fruits and bitterness is associated with the presence of toxins. A genetic sense of taste helps to keep humans safe from harm in the natural world. The genetic make-up of humans seems to consistently step in and help out when nutritional guidance is needed.

However, not all of the foods chosen by humans are based on a genetically preprogrammed guidance system. Limits do exist on how much guidance can be given genetics alone. Sometimes "accidents" occur and a new food source is found to be nutritionally adequate (and tasty). After weaning, most humans (except for Northern Europeans) develop the condition of lactose intolerance and cannot ingest milk sugar.² Therefore, a potentially wonderful source of calcium -- milk -- is lost to most of the world's population. At some point in time, however, someone left the milk out in the

warm desert climate and came back to find a fermented concoction (yogurt) which did not cause lactose intolerance. Why exactly anyone chose to initially ingest this fermented milk cannot be said, but a great source of calcium found its way into the diets of millions of individuals in the Middle East and Asia.

Is that it? If food selection is really such a preconditioned and mundane thing then all that can be said is that humans eat it because they have to and accidents have more influence over food selections and development than creativity. Or, are humans much more complex? And does this complexity find expression via food?

Food provides a universal medium through which all humans share a connection. Humans around the globe do the same thing: they eat with one another; they develop symbolic meanings for the food they eat; they develop stories around their food; and they experiment with new ways to prepare food. Food connects every living being on the planet because all humans have contact with food and develop attitudes related to the food they eat.³ All humans, and all human societies, have used food in order to help express one's sense of connection to a greater community of similar humans while also defining the culture in which they live. Therefore, food should not be seen as part of the banal. Food should be viewed as a connecting element that can be used to bring humans together because it is a commonality between all humans.

Individuals in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology have noted for years how humans in every culture use food in symbolic ways to express something about themselves or their group. Therefore, thinking that food only has significance in that it provides nourishment is grossly narrow in scope. Such a view underestimates the symbolic and cultural meanings of food. Yes, humans would die without the consumption of food. Looked at in broader context, however, we live not just off of food but through it because food allows a means in which to articulate any give culture.

Although specific groups and cultures may use different kinds of foods at

different times, the use of food itself remains as a constant form of cultural or group expression. Food sits at the heart of any civilization because members of any given civilization generally share the same types of foods and food practices. Therefore, common links may be drawn between members of a certain culture because of the foods they eat. These "common links" help the individual to feel apart of something special and uniquely theirs. That is, food helps people feel connected to their heritage or to a special group to which they belong.

Therefore, in tracing the "food history" of the Ancient Romans through the turn of the century Italian immigrants, I intend to illustrate how food has been used throughout the ages as a means to define and redefine social and ethnic groups and to maintain a sense of unity within cultures. This one culture can be used to represent how all humans and all cultures have used food since the earliest times to define and express aspects about the civilization in which they live. In the following sections I intend to demonstrate specifically how food was used throughout the ages to influence and shape the culture and people of Italy. In spite of all the changes that occurred in Italian culture, food remained one of the elements that could be used to express how Italians viewed their civilization and their relationship with others. In doing so, the Italian culture can be used to illustrate how humans have always, and still do, use food in order to define themselves, their culture, and to unite with one another.

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As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper, food factored into the mythology and legends of Rome's earliest history. Since the beginning, therefore, the Romans used food to help define their culture -- their civilization. As such, the Romans used food to define who they were, not only in relation to each other, but also in relation to others in the world. Vegetarianism, or at least eating a preponderance of vegetables,

marked the truly civilized nature of a Roman citizen. This definition extended to compare the early Romans to those who lived outside of the Empire -- the barbarians. The barbarians, who lived in Nature and ate meat, did not live as civilized people because of their food practices.⁴ Eventually, later Romans grew to appreciate meat. However, agricultural products, especially grain, remained as the most essential and important food products to the Romans for quite a long time. The use of food in this manner also allowed the Romans to find a way in which they could foster a sense of community and heighten their own sense of what "civilization" entailed. However, the Romans eventually used food to to express personal or social greatness and then, ironically, were criticized by the use of satire and food. Eating, therefore, went far beyond just satisfying the hunger of the Romans. The food these Romans chose to eat illustrated the assumptions and sentiments they had about themselves -- and those around them.

As Rome grew in power and territory, her development was significantly influenced by the Greeks. Not only did Greek politics, art, and philosophy influence Rome, but so did Greek food and cooking. This cultural borrowing was bound to happen thanks to the fact the Romans liked to have Greek slaves in their kitchens.⁵ The Greek love of certain foods can be found in Plutarch's Life of Alcibiades in which he gave the account of young Greeks going to the sanctuary of Agraulos and taking the "oath that they will regard wheat, barley, the vine, and the olive as the natural boundaries of Attica".⁶ Plutarch put these foods at the cornerstone of Greek culture because they meant so much to how the Greeks saw themselves. And even while enslaved under the Romans, the Greeks did not relinquish these "fundamentals" of their culture. From the Greeks, therefore, the Romans grew to love the use of olives for their precious olive oil and grapes for wine. Grain, particularly wheat, came to hold a very

special place in the Roman diet (and hearts) as well. The Romans also copied the Greek habit of a light breakfast, reclining while eating, and building separate rooms in the household for cooking and dining.⁷ These specifics regarding what and how to eat, all helped influence the way Romans defined themselves as “civilized”.

Food and civilization were keenly linked in Roman culture because of the fact the Greeks placed such an importance on certain kinds of food as markers of “civilization”. As noted above, these foods were not meats, but vegetables. The growing of enough vegetables to meet the daily survival needs of an individual or family marked one’s ability to control and manipulate nature. Like the Greeks, the Romans did not show a great appreciation for the wild state of nature.⁸ The Romans had more appreciation for the civitas -- the city -- because it expressed humankind's ability to put order into the naturally unruly state of nature. The ability to farm the land and produce food clearly marked one way in which nature could be controlled and then used for the benefit of the civitas. The fact the early Romans were essentially vegetarians is one way in which the Romans used food as a means to illustrate how the “civilized” person dominated and manipulated the land in order to survive. A mark of distinction was given to the well-to-do Roman who, of course not with his own hands, worked the land and reaped the benefits of the land he manipulated and controlled.

If any single food influenced the way Romans saw themselves, and how they should connect to their world, it is grain. The Romans created a special goddess -- Fornax -- to preside over the bread ovens because grain was so important. In fact, Fornax was honored every year by placing flowers in all the bread ovens of Rome.⁹ As an expression of Rome’s greatness, legends developed around bread. One story related how when the Gauls once tried to take Rome, Jupiter intervened. Jupiter instructed General Manilus to take all of Rome’s flour supply and bake loaves of bread.

Then the bread was to be thrown out to the Gauls as a gesture that the Romans had no fear of being reduced by siege. The Gauls supposedly fled at this sign of confidence.¹⁰

The Romans took baking so seriously they would not let a baker change professions, and a baker's son had to take up the profession as well.¹¹ In case of emergencies such as the city being under siege or the professional miller's quern breaking down, most Romans kept their own saddle quern (a device used to grind grain) or small rotary quern handy at home -- Romans had no desire to ever be without their bread.¹² The very use and invention of a portable rotary quern is a testament to how the importance of grain in Roman life inspired ingenuity and technical development.

Roman leaders understood the importance of bread to the citizens of Rome. In 123 B.C., due to occasional food shortages, the cost of living skyrocketed and many families could not afford to purchase bread. The Roman government instituted *annona* -- the free distribution of bread.¹³ The numbers continually fluctuated, but at Rome's imperial height, one in three of the population received free bread.¹⁴ Roman politicians realized the importance bread had in the daily lives of thousands of people. Bread was an essential part of life because it provided sustenance to the masses. Food also provided a sense of community because it gave the people of Rome a common connection. The upper class leaders of Rome knew this fact and also knew that by providing bread, they could attempt to keep the populace happy -- and in no mood to revolt.

As illustrated, the Romans definitely took their bread seriously. The seriousness came not only from the sense of "Romaness" derived from the civilized pursuit of manipulating a natural product into food, but because bread was also used as a primary way of making class distinction. For example, the lower classes could usually not afford

to buy fresh bread. Therefore, the purchasing of fresh bread marked one as being a member of the upper class. The more leavening properties added to bread, and whether prepared in a bread oven or in ashes, also marked the class level of the person buying the bread.¹⁵ Also, only those in the upper-class could afford to buy lighter-colored wheat bread. Wheat has an labor-intensive and low-yield grain. Therefore, to be able to afford wheat or even grow it in large amounts, a Roman citizen had to possess a substantial amount of money.¹⁶

Those in the lower classes often ate bread made of barley, oats, millet, or rye. These breads were “black” and considered nutritionally and socially inferior to the “white” bread made from wheat.¹⁷ The belief of the inferiority of black breads can be found in Pliny’s Natural History. Pliny noted how rye was a “very poor food and only serves to avert starvation”.¹⁸ However, Pliny also noted how rye “grows in any sort of soil with a hundredfold yield, and serves to enrich the land”.¹⁹ Despite the fact rye obviously grew better than wheat, wealthy Romans continued to use wheat as a way of setting themselves apart from other Romans. As important as it was for all Romans to be united as *Romans*, class differences still prevailed and bread was a primary indicator of these divisions.

Since the upper class Romans had the money, they sought to define themselves separately from others by means of eating what others could not. Having more time, and money, to devote to new styles of bread, the upper-class Romans employed cooks to prepare dazzling new bread recipes. Honey-and-oil breads, suet breads, wine wafers, and mushroom-shaped breads with poppy seeds were all invented. Expensive ingredients, such as aniseed, various cheeses and oils, found their way into breads in order to create the most delectable and sought-after creation.²⁰

Therefore, spices used in breads and other foods also reinforced the cultural divisions between the upper and lower class Romans. Spices and flavorings for food seemed to be in an almost insatiable demand for many upper-class Romans by the first century A.D.. The Romans imported the now unknown herb silphium from Cyrene in North Africa, a brown resinous juice from the giant fennels of Persia called asafoetida, and ginger from far away and exotic China.²¹ These are just a few examples of the myriad of spices brought into Rome because of expanding trade routes. The upper-classes could not get enough of these spices to flavor their food. In fact, the stronger the spice, the better. If the theory of the use of lead pipes leading to the fall of the Roman Empire is true, the demand for these spices makes excellent sense -- the stronger the spice, the less lead that can be tasted.²²

The growing spice trade in Rome demonstrated the growing obsession with extravagance and luxury in the upper echelons of Roman society. Besides new spices, other elements of the upper-class imperial Roman diet began to change. The Romans still considered outsiders as "barbarians", but conquering so many different people led to an expansion in traditional Roman eating practices. Meat became more of a status symbol and the formally modest vegetarian meals of the Roman family began to disappear.²³ Food habits reflect part of a society's ideology.²⁴ Therefore, the fact that the Romans ceased to exist as modest eaters illustrates the shifting of social priorities. Romans had always used food as a means to distinguish between social classes, but now food was being used as a means to compete with those in one's social class. The bonding and uniting attributes of food were slowly disappearing.

Most members of any society use food to set their group apart from other groups. Food used in this manner helps keep a family, a tribe, or a "race" of people united and bonded together. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with using food in such a manner.

In fact, since this practice occurs all over the world, it appears to be a natural human thing to do. However, in the latter years of the Roman Empire things began to go too far. In order to set themselves apart from everyone else, rich Romans began to compete with one another on who could be more vulgar. Vanity took precedence over community. Since food already held a central position in Roman culture, food easily came to be used as means to compete with and even critique other members of society.

In the first century A.D. Petronius Arbiter wrote The Satyricon. In this book, Petronius told the story of a rich man, Trimalchio, who desired to throw the most lavish dinner party ever. Arbiter wrote this story during the reign of the emperor Nero. Nero, a man not known for his intellect or compassion, frequently indulged himself and his court by throwing grandiose dinners. Arbiter wrote this story at a time when he had fallen out of favor with Nero and some think this book might be an indictment against the excessiveness of Nero's court. Whether or not this is true, the satire of "Trimalchio's Dinner" gives a glimpse at what kind of extravagance existed in Rome at this time -- and how this extravagance was sometimes seen as wasteful and ridiculous. The story also illustrates how food can be used to critique a given society instead of binding it together. Considering the upper class Romans appeared to have little concern at this time with the unifying potential of food to society, the use of satire and food seems particularly appropriate.

An arrogant man, Trimalchio spent half of the time at his dinner either insulting his guests or making them listen to his own philosophical meanderings. Trimalchio's only redeeming quality was that he knew how to throw a good dinner party. His guests first received sausage hors d'oeuvres on a silver tray with "dark Syrian plums to represent black coals, and scarlet pomegranate seeds to represent redhot ones" underneath it.²⁵ More appetizers and wine followed and eventually a gigantic tray with each of the twelve symbols of the Zodiac was brought into the dining room. Each

astrological symbol on the tray had an appropriate food to go along with it -- beef with the Taurus symbol, a pair of lamb's kidneys with the Gemini symbol, etc²⁶ As it turned out, the Zodiac tray with the food on it was only the top of another tray. Inside the Zodiac tray was a hare with feathers stuck in its back to make it look like Pegasus.²⁷ One of the highlights of the evening came when live thrushes flew out of a boar that had been slashed open in front of the guests.²⁸ The entire novel is filled with scene after excessive scene of amazing food dishes and bad poetry by Trimalchio. The Satyricon, therefore, illustrated how pomposity and wealth stood for more in Rome at this time than actual grace and intelligence. The simple and modest elements of Roman life that had once made Rome a mighty and intellectual culture were disappearing under a cloud of shallow vanity and conspicuous consumption.

The ludicrous nature of the Roman feasts can best be illustrated by the real life Roman named Apicius. A true connoisseur of fine food, Apicius collected recipes for one of the most extensive cookbooks left from ancient Rome. Apicius loved to eat. He loved it so much that when he realized he had spent all but his last one million dollars on feasts, he killed himself for fear of starving to death.²⁹ Priorities had definitely shifted away from the time when early elite members of Rome lived off their own simple gardens. The final Emperors of Rome, and the aristocracy around them, consumed everything in their path and helped caused the downfall of Roman civilization. By looking at how food practices and meanings changed in Roman culture, one can see how focus shifted from what it meant to be a Roman to what it meant to be an extravagant and superficial elite. Food stopped being a source of unity between Romans against the "barbarians" and instead became an element of arrogance and internal division.

I am in no way implying that the food itself caused Rome to fall. I am only trying

to illustrate that by looking at the foodways of the Ancient Romans, one can see how the Romans changed in their definition of themselves. One can see the changes going on in Roman civilization by looking at Roman food practices because food was so central to the Roman conception of civilization. While most Romans, even the extremely wealthy ones, did not engage in such outlandish extravagance, the fact that such a show of excess was going on can be used to illustrate the changing attitudes going on in Rome. The days of modest eating and living no longer existed. Although food had always been used to mark class distinctions, at the very least the general attitude towards food reflected the common consensus in society about what it meant to be defined as Roman -- responsible, a member of the *civitas*, living in one's class, yet showing concern for the well-being of those who needed it.

The magnificence of Roman feasting began approximately a century before the birth of Christ and ended around 300 A.D.. During this time, and after, Romans faced serious threats from the "barbarians". The barbarian threat and conquest of Rome naturally affected the traditional foodways of Rome. Survival came to hold far more meaning than who could throw the most extravagant dinner party. The barbarian threat and eventual conquering of Rome brought with it a large amount of uncertainty and instability. Those who had lived in the once glorious Roman Empire needed something to give them hope and solace in this now chaotic world. The fledgling religion of Christianity did just that. And not too surprisingly, one of the ways Christianity attempted to create a sense of commonality and community between Christians was by the use of food. Christianity fully exploited the potential of food as a binding and defining force in society.

Humans have connected food with religion since the earliest of times. In quests for bountiful crops and harvests, early myths from many cultures often associated an Earth Goddess figure, or some other fertility figure, to agriculture.³⁰ Spiritually, then,

food has always played an integral part in the lives of humans. Not surprisingly, the Christian Bible contains several references to food. Probably the most infamous story in the Bible, the "Fall of Man", contains the food imagery of an apple and, ironically, a woman. One of Jesus' miracles most remembered from the Bible is the episode in which he fed 5,000 people with a small basket filled with fish and bread. Stories such as these, and certain rituals that developed around food in Christianity, all helped provide people with a sense of continuity and focus during a chaotic time period.

By and large, the early Middle Ages marked a time in which most people desired some kind of unity and stability. As for Italy specifically, a central government no longer existed. Small city-states or kingdoms existed throughout the peninsula and a sense of "national unity", as might be thought of today, simply did not exist. For that matter, a strong sense of loyalty or community did not necessarily exist between the individual and the kingdom in which they lived. Most people simply obeyed their lord and lived life as best they could in order to survive. The new Christian (Catholic) Church became the one focal point in which all Italians could attempt to relate to other Italians and even Europeans. Although there were differences in how Christianity was sometimes practiced, essentially, a Christian was a Christian no matter where on the continent they might live.

In attempts to create a unifying basis between Christians, the Church used food as a sacramental and ritualistic element of the faith. In this way, Christians throughout Europe could feel connected to one another and, therefore, experience a sense of belonging to a cohesive group. The communion meal provided the individual with a sense of security as well -- no matter how bad this life might be, by participating in the sacraments, a heavenly reward awaited the humblest of souls after their death. In the mean time, the rigors of fasting enabled the human spirit to be tested in its endurance, creativity and imagination. For the people living in the once center of the Roman

Empire, food was not used to define them as Romans or even Italians per say, but as Christians first and foremost because Christianity was the single most important aspect of any person's life. Therefore, the use of food in Christianity helped provide a sense of unity and stability between Christians and helped Christians define who they were as a group.

The most significant outcome of food imagery and symbolism in Christianity is that food came to be used as a means to link Christians with a sense of commonality. During the instable and chaotic times of the early Middle Ages, the bonding elements of Christianity became more important than the territory in which one lived. So the use of food to bond all Christians together became extremely important and a fundamental aspect of early Christianity.

The fact that food practices helped define the practice of early Christianity for many people should not be a surprising outcome. Early Christianity first emerged as really nothing more than an separate sect of Judaism.³¹ Within Judaism food had traditionally played an important role in defining one "Jewishness". Those in Judaism used food as the embodiment of God's word because God blessed His "chosen people" with nourishment for survival. Also, since no graven images were allowed in Judaism, food served as a legitimate form of expression regarding common dietary practices followed by the Jewish people.³² The dietary rules of the Jewish tradition, therefore, had a direct impact on the development of how Christianity came to use food to enhance group solidarity as well.

An interesting question emerging from this context, however, is why did bread and wine emerge as the dominant foods related to Christianity? As stated above, the Bible is filled with food imagery. The Jews certainly used bread and wine in some of their rituals, but they did not necessarily use these foods as their own predominant

ritualistic symbols.³³ Also, the Bible relates other stories in which Christ utilizes foods other than the combination of bread and wine. Why then did not some other food gain predominance instead of bread and wine?

Part of the answer to this question lies in the fact that early Christianity was centered in the Mediterranean. In other words, the fact Christianity fully blossomed in and around Rome significantly influenced what foods became of key use in Christianity. Many an ancient Roman regarded the basic food items of wheat, grapes, and olives as a defining element of "Romanness". These items maintained their significance in Christianity as well. In fact, these three food items, all symbols of Roman culture, left an outstanding imprint on the development of Christianity.³⁴ Bread, wine, and the oil used in the liturgy, each played an indispensable role in shaping the way the Church developed the common rituals to be shared by all Christians. Although Roman food traditions, such as the honoring of Fornax, disappeared with Christianity, the basic foods of Rome maintained their dominance in Italy. In fact, the traditional Roman foods of bread, wine, and oil even grew in more importance since they were now connected to religion and gave the Christians of the Italian area, and the rest of Christendom, a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves.

Food had this effect partially because food sharing can be seen as a bonding ritual within groups.³⁵ Usually, only those who are relatively close to one another share food, thereby creating a bond between those sharing that food. A respect for the sameness and traditions of a group often grow stronger when people share food in a common manner. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, those living in Italy and other European areas were at a loss. The "old ways" had been swept away and new "barbarian" rulers controlled everything. Very little stability or continuity existed in this new social order. Whether in Italy or elsewhere, rulers constantly battled one another

for control over territory. Helpless peasants often found themselves caught in the middle of wars they had no real concern in. The people of these times, including those in Italy, desperately sought some kind of stability in life and Christianity, with its high ethics, universal appeal, and promise of a hereafter, provided some of that stability.³⁶ The food practices within Christianity then allowed each individual Christian to feel a sense of connectedness to other Christians.

As Christians, the people of the Middle Ages shared certain beliefs in common: the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection of Christ after his crucifixion, and the belief that certain foods, when blessed, became the body and blood of Christ himself. Before his crucifixion, Christ took bread and wine and told his followers in Matthew 26: 26-27 to "Take and eat, this is my body" and "Drink from it, all of you. This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins". Jesus used food as a metaphor to explain his (God's) purpose on Earth. The bread and wine also became common means for followers of Christ to remember his sacrifice.

The Eucharist, therefore, became the overriding element that all Christians tangibly held in common. No matter where a Christian might be in the world, they knew they were not alone in celebrating the communion -- all Christians participated in this act. In a time of tremendous instability, such a fact must have been quite reassuring and comforting by providing a counter to the otherwise unstable nature of medieval life. The common act of eating a communion wafer and drinking the sacramental wine united Christians throughout Europe. Of course, Christianity did not manage to stop the numerous wars fought for territory and power. At the very least, however, Christianity served as a single structure in society in which people could consistently turn to for a little peace and stability. Such a goal was important throughout all of Christendom and Italy certainly served as no exception.

Other elements defining the Church for early Christians also included the fast

and feast.³⁷ The Eucharist maintained a primary function of uniting all Christians, but the Lenten season and other holy days of indulgence and denial solidified that bond even more at certain times of the year. By fasting at the same time, Christians united symbolically in sharing the sacrifice Christ made when he died for all of humankind's sins.³⁸ When they feasted, Christians -- ideally -- praised God for all of His blessings and rejoiced in the life to come.

During the times of fasting, the sharing of Christ's sacrifice was not the only thing these Christians held in common. During the Lenten season, only one meal could be eaten a day. Lent commemorated Christ's forty day fast in the wilderness before first going out to preach his gospel. By fasting, Christians were to share in the suffering that Christ went through and, therefore, gain a closer connection to him and God. Also during Lent, Christians were not allowed to eat meat because when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, He cursed all animals living on earth. Christians could, therefore, eat fish since fish do not live on land. In coastal areas, fresh fish was plentiful and cheap, while in inland areas, salted or dried fish was inexpensive to purchase. Therefore, throughout most of Europe, most people adequately survived the Lenten season.³⁹

In some case not only meat, but meat products, were also forbidden. This meant butter and eggs could not be used in baking. Cooks needed to be inventive if they wanted to try to create any diversity in their meals or make any kind of baked goods. In Southern Italy, almonds were blanched, ground, and steeped in water until they yielded a milky liquid -- latte di mandorla -- which could then be used in place of milk.⁴⁰ The restrictive food practices of Christianity forced many to explore the various ways limited foods could be used. Regardless of how they felt about the situation, numerous Christians were forced to stretch their minds and become, if only in a limited sense,

quite creative with what they had available. Of course, those in the poorest classes of society did not have this opportunity and could not afford to be "creative" with food. They simply lived as best as they could and ate dreary and monotonous meals not only during Lent, but also throughout the rest of the year.

Although the Lenten season connected Christians together in common religious practices, the monotony of the same foods for six weeks did not thrill very many people. (Even St. Augustine dropped hints about fasting being hard.)⁴¹ By and large, the medieval diet did not have a lot of diversity to it already. So, Lent only exacerbated the situation. Thankfully, times of fasting usually ended with times of great feasting. Feast days became times of great celebration, entertainment, and self-indulgence.⁴² These days were a time of release for people and, generally, helped keep society happy. Like the Romans who instituted *annona*, the early Church fathers understood how sometimes people need the security of feeling there is plenty to eat and starvation is not a threat. Times of want were plentiful enough in the Middle Ages. After a Church imposed time of limited eating, the masses of people desperately needed a release and the Church allowed for such a release by permitting holy feasting days. The Church also allowed feasts because it did not want to send the message that anything God had created for human consumption, such as meat, was inherently bad.⁴³ By allowing the people to indulge in such products, if only for a limited time, the Church sent the message that what God had placed on earth for humans to use was a beautiful gift in which Christians needed to be thankful.

No matter how many connections might be drawn between Christians, not every trouble in life could be solved by Christianity. War, disease, and famine continued to bring instability and heartbreak into the lives of those who only wanted a little peace. Famine struck Italy especially hard during certain periods of the Middle Ages. In the

late 1200's, agricultural expansion slowed and cultivated areas shrank.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the population growth of the time did not move in a similar direction. By the early 1300's Italy was in the midst of a major famine. An Italian chronicler noted in 1329 that many had to eat ". . . cabbages, plums, lettuce, roots, melons, and watercress, both cooked and raw, and different sorts of meats -- horse, donkey, buffalo -- but all without bread."⁴⁵ Obviously for the poor, fruits, such as melon, were expensive to come by, but the main plea for all classes seems to be for bread. In fact, in 1338 shouts of "Bread, bread!" could be heard almost everywhere.⁴⁶

Just as in ancient times, the Italian populace demanded that they have bread to eat. In these instances the communion wafer they might receive on a Sunday morning did not satisfy their desires for their beloved bread or their hunger pangs. The bonding links of Christianity could only hold society together so well before more "worldly" concerns that dominated the lives of everyday individuals exerted themselves. The fear of starvation, and the process of starving to death, created such an unstabilizing factor that only, in fact, could the presence of bread -- that tradition staple of the ancient past - hold society together. However, unlike the Roman times in which an excess of bread existed to feed the masses, there simply was no food to feed people.

Since the Roman times, bread marked class distinctions within Italian society. The "wheat bread eaters" still thought themselves superior to the "non-wheat bread eaters".⁴⁷ Famine, however, initiated something of an armistice between these two groups as the wealthier "wheat eaters" had to rely on the peasants to find alternative ways to make bread. The peasants knew how to find alternative products, such as acorns, to grind into flour. However, sometimes flour was made with just about anything that could be found. Often, peasants foraged the woods and found various grasses,

seeds, herbs, and wild grains to make bread.⁴⁸

Substances such as the grass called darnel and ergot were, therefore, often added to bread. While these sources did allow for the production of a type of flour for bread, the consequences were quite high.⁴⁹ Soon, darnel came to be noted for its ability to cause a feeling of drunkenness, weariness, and nausea in those who ate the bread in which darnel was an ingredient.⁵⁰ Ergot brought to these dishes lysergic acid, a chemical compound related to mescaline, the narcotic derived from peyote.⁵¹

Malnutrition seeps energy and thinking capabilities away from people enough without the use of drugging herbs. Such herbs only exacerbated some of the problems of the Middle Ages. The lack of creativity, original thought, and the occasional indifference towards work expressed by the masses might very well be connected to the fact many people wandered around in a starvation induced daze exacerbated by tainted food.⁵² The famines in Italy, and throughout all of Europe, might have very well have affected why the Middle Ages are often called the "Dark Ages". While this claim is quite controversial, it does at least make one consider the kinds of effects food has in shaping a culture.

From time to time, the rich and poor alike suffered from contaminated bread consumption. However, since the rich controlled most of the forest and cultivatable land, their times of want often did not last as long as the peasants times of want. As such, when times were good, the wealthy of the late Middle Ages -- sometimes even the Popes in Rome -- enjoyed throwing extravagant dinner parties just as the Romans had done. By the time of the Renaissance, certain hallmark examples of extravagance, such as the ones Trimalchio had at his feast, began to reemerge in the dining rooms of the rich.⁵³

The growing desire during the Renaissance for more and different food stuffs inspired quite a change in the food patterns of Europeans -- especially Italians. Change was inspired, in part, by the vast amounts of exploration being carried out in the hopes of finding new and more effective trade routes. The increased trade during this time revived the growth and productivity of many cities and towns. Christianity still remained important during the Renaissance, especially in Italy, but notions of regionality began to influence the way in which people viewed themselves and their societies. People, therefore, found that they could be connected to one another by more than just Christianity. Individuals could feel a sense of belonging with others of their region. Therefore, the region one was from once again began to shape how one defined themselves and the culture in which they lived. Food played an integral part in defining people of this time because the new foods introduced to the continent, via Columbus, eventually evolved into regional cuisines. Eventually, Italians would come to see this food as a quintessential element of who they were and would want to take this food with them wherever they went.

But how did Italy first reassert herself as a distinctive culture with her own special foodways? To begin with, Italy has miles and miles of sea coasts. During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Italian port cities began to reassert their advantage of being "middle men" on the long trade routes to the east. Venice survived the Middle Ages as a trading center, but began to really flourish again during the Renaissance. Pepper, cinnamon, saffron, cloves, ginger, cardamom, and sugar all flowed from the East to the West via Venice.⁵⁴ Trading ports in other Italian cities began to emerge all along the coasts and the food and spice trade soon became the economic focus of the times. Due to expanding trade and communications between different countries, specific foods began to become associated with different groups. Nothing had a greater impact on this fact than when Columbus "discovered" America and brought back many

new and unique foods to Europe.

Prior to 1492, the primary spices of European cooking were Indian spices, such as cardamom, pepper, and ginger.⁵⁵ Peasants did not generally use spices and lived primarily on bread, native fruits and vegetables. Gastronomically speaking, and for other well-known reasons, Europe was rocked by Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World". Not only did Columbus bring fantastic stories, maps, and trade routes back to Europe, but he also brought back four of the five most economically important New World foods: maize, sweet potatoes, manioc, and chili peppers.⁵⁶ Columbus also kept a log of the foods he ate while in the Caribbean. He was one of the first Europeans to ever try guava, papaya, pineapple, and iguana.⁵⁷ (Interestingly, Columbus wrote in his journal that iguana "meat is white and tastes like chicken".)⁵⁸

The new foods brought back to Europe had enormous consequences for the people of Italy. As noted earlier, Italy had suffered many famines throughout the Middle Ages and even later times. One of items brought to Italy after trade was established with the "New World" was maize. Maize thrived in Southern Europe and probably was one of the greatest contributors to the reverse of the population decline Italy suffered in the late 1600's.⁵⁹ In fact, following the Colombian exchange, many European countries experienced a growth in their population.⁶⁰ Fewer wars, better medicine and hygiene definitely played a part in this population increase, but an increase in overall food supply probably had the greatest influence.⁶¹

During this time of new food use, the the people of Italy began to grow in their creativity with food. One can argue they were partially forced to do so. After all, so many new and wonderful foods flourished in the Italian climate and they had to be prepared in some kind of fashion. One food item that dominated the food scene in Italy

was the tomato. The first mention of the use of the tomato in Italy comes from the Venetian publisher Petrus Matthioles. Matthioles wrote in 1544 that the tomato appeared to be a species of mandrake and should be prepared in the same way as eggplant -- "fried with salt and pepper".⁶² Later in the 16th century, the tomato faced some resistance from those who thought it to be injurious to their health.⁶³ However, by the end of the 16th century and early 17th century, the tomato, if not yet in great abundance or use, had been established in the Italian culture. (One might wonder if this had anything to do with the common notion that the tomato, or "love apple", had aphrodisiac qualities.)⁶⁴

Today, it is hard for many to imagine a classic Italian meal without thinking of some kind of use for the tomato. However, the tomato -- a "traditional" component of Italian cuisine -- is only 500 years old, while the heritage of Italy stretches back almost 800 years before the birth of Christ. Considering how long the Italian culture has existed in the Mediterranean area, therefore, the tomato is quite new. However, the use of the tomato became a central part of Italian cooking used widely by all classes. The tomato, along with other new foods, became an important component of not only how others perceived Italian cuisine, but of how Italians related to their own culture.

For a long time, Christianity, and the use of food within Christianity, helped create a sense of connectedness among the many peoples of the world. Because of the voyage by Columbus, nations began to assert themselves even more fervently than they had during the earlier part of the Renaissance. As such, the development of strong national identities found fertile ground to take shape and grow. Because of the nature of this development of national identity, food became intimately linked to how individuals defined themselves within their culture.

To illustrate, trading routes and ports were desired, and subsequently built, all

around the world. This meant more and varied food stuffs entered into the lives of those living in other parts of the world. Some foods naturally grew better in the various climates of Europe. Therefore, foods such as the tomato in Italy, came to be associated with that country. In Italy, therefore, a distinctive national cuisine developed because some of the food items used became particularly suited to the Italian climate and because the Italian people simply liked these foods.

Food practices in Christianity linked people from all over Christendom in one common group. Christianity remained, and still remains, important to Italians. However, the sense of their uniqueness as *Italians* began to grow in importance even more when they began to appreciate and focus on other aspects of their heritage beside their religion. The sense of the specific national group one belonged to helped provide a central component of the sense of Self. Just as the early Romans had used the mainly vegetarian diets they ate to mark themselves as different from barbarians -- the Other -- Italians began to use the new foods introduced to them by Columbus as a means to express their uniqueness as a flourishing culture. The tomato, maize, and even time-honored natives foods such as pasta, were all prepared in ways that became distinctly *Italian*. The type of foods prepared in Italy were like foods prepared no where else in the world and, therefore, carried with them a sense of Italian culture and heritage.

Within Italy the use of food to state "Italianness" was important. However, the ability to use food as an expression of culture and ethnicity became even more important to those who decided to leave Italy: the immigrants. These individuals took with them to America many hopes and dreams. But they also took many fears and anxieties along. By maintaining the use of traditional foods they had grown up with in Italy, the immigrants could forge a link with their cultural identity and remain connected to their heritage. The eating and preparation of traditional foods not only helped Italian

immigrants define who they were in relation to their heritage, but also allowed for family bonding to occur. Families who ate traditional meals together shared and passed down their heritage and united together as similar people in a foreign land.

Between 1876 to 1914, approximately fourteen million Italian immigrants came to the United States.⁶⁵ Many of these individuals did not speak the English language and were greeted not by the open arms of freedom, but by job discrimination and disappointment. Although many Italian immigrants came to America searching for a new life, they still wanted to maintain a sense of their own unique ethnicity, especially when America turned out to not be the "promised land" they had hoped it to be. Traditional foods helped the immigrant forge links with the past and with their Italian culture. Food helped ease the shock of entering the new culture they found themselves in and helped create a sense of reassurance in the lives of many Italian immigrants.⁶⁶

Of course, the foods desired by many Italians, such as pasta, olive oil, garlic and eggplant, could not be easily found in America. Therefore, Italian immigrants often used what space of land they might be able to find (not an easy task in the city!) and grew their own eggplants, tomatoes, herbs, and spices.⁶⁷ Some immigrants even tried to keep chickens and goats for slaughter in their already cramped yards, which forced New York authorities to make such actions illegal in 1901.⁶⁸ Whatever foods could not be grown or prepared at home were often sent away for back in Italy.⁶⁹ And if these items could not be obtained, then the Italian immigrant improvised. Mexican chili took the place of peperoncini, mozzarella was made from cow instead of buffalo milk, and American grapes were used to make new kinds of strong red wines.⁷⁰

In order to make the obtaining of such foods easier, ethnic food clusters also emerged.⁷¹ Enclaves of ethnic groceries, bakeries, and butcher shops not only allowed

immigrants to buy the foods they desired, but also allowed for a common meeting place -- especially for the women. These stores became a place for women to meet, talk, share in neighborhood gossip, and even share new recipes.⁷² Fostering a communal identity in this way aided the Italian wife and mother in keeping Italian heritage alive and a part of the everyday lives of their family.

The Italian immigrant mother became the preserver of Italian culture because she usually remained within the traditional limits of her home, church, and neighborhood where she shopped.⁷³ Thus, she became instrumental in preserving Italian heritage because she was the least "Americanized" of her family and controlled the food they ate.⁷⁴ Italian mothers accomplished this feat by preparing traditional Italian dishes for their families. The preparation of food was essentially the mother's domain.⁷⁵ Her ability to use and adapt traditional recipes marked her status as the guardian of tradition and heritage.⁷⁶ She used recipes from Italy to help connect members of the family with their heritage. By doing so, a special bond was created among family members. They were taught that they were the same -- they ate the same foods and shared the same history. Therefore, family members had to stand by one another and help each other out in this new land. However, to do so, they could not become too "American".

The bond created between family members extended beyond the immediate family, however. Extended family gatherings on "special occasions" (religious or life-cycle events) were a fundamental aspect of keeping Italian heritage alive.⁷⁷ Some of the major events in which extended families gathered to celebrate included: baptisms, First or Holy Communions, confirmations, weddings, and funerals.⁷⁸ After each of these events, the entire family would gather for a large traditional Italian meal. Therefore, in Italian-American culture, the use of catered meals for important events

came to be seen as the "American" way of doing things.⁷⁹ Italian-Americans were grateful to America, but wanted to maintain their own sense of cultural identity. So, the eating of homemade meals, especially on special occasions, illustrated that family support remained strong because cultural identity was not being lost -- the "group" was staying together as a stable and consistent part of life.

Social workers in many American cities saw the connection between maintaining of the strength of cultural identity with food. Many of these social workers sponsored neighborhood meetings in which they attempted to "Americanize" the immigrant family by instructing Italian mothers on the proper and most nutritional ways to prepare food for their children.⁸⁰ The social workers were not overly successful mainly for the reason that in the lives of immigrants, the food itself was not so much as important as the fact that social relationships were built around the food that was eaten. Therefore, the foods prepared for certain meals came to be associated with "food events" that marked what it meant to have an Italian heritage. The symbolic meanings of the foods that were prepared and eaten by the immigrant family intimately linked concepts of self with cultural identity.⁸¹

When so many aspects of life were changing for Italians in America, the use of food became more and more important. The clothing styles, music, and games of the Old World might disappear or be considered too unacceptable in the new land of America, but food could remain as a lasting marker of what it meant to be Italian.⁸² What the Italian family literally did in the privacy of their own home was their own business and could not be scrutinized by those who thought them "different". The dinner table then became the focal point of social and political discussions and, importantly, the place where children could learn about their heritage.⁸³

As young children from Italian backgrounds grew up in America, their parents feared they might not grow to fully appreciate the culture and heritage of their past. Food, therefore, became a way to keep Italian culture alive for younger generations. When an Italian family sat down to a dinner of antipasto, prosciutto, melonzoni, and spaghetti, they sat down to their heritage and to special memories. The older generations could then share these experiences with their children and grandchildren. Memories of one's native land found celebration in traditional foods and personal histories could be shared over a family dinner.

So, the immigrants brought with them the desire for a better life, anxiety about what this new life would be like, and their homeland recipes. Food helped the immigrant define who they were as a member of a distinctive ethnic group. Ethnic food was then able to be used as a means to bind families closer together and, thereby, help maintain a sense of pride and knowledge about their Italian heritage. By keeping the recipes from the "Other Side" alive, a sense of comfort was maintained within the immigrant community.

By illustrating what the use of food has meant throughout the centuries to those in the Italian culture, I have attempted to illustrate how food has been used as a constant means to define and unite people within a given culture. The early Romans used food in myths and stories, just as in the Christian religion, in order to create a sense of solidarity in regards to the group one belonged. The Romans also used food to mark their special status in the world as compared to "outsiders". Although the Italian immigrants were the "outsiders" in America, they continued this use of food to mark themselves as a special group within a foreign land. The immigrants also used food in this way for the same reasons the early Christians did: they desired to maintain a sense of belonging and cohesion with those who shared similarities to themselves. These sorts of connections can be made between those living in Italy, or coming from Italian

descent, no matter what the age. What should not be forgotten, however, is that the Roman/Italian culture's use of food to demonstrate these points can easily be substituted for any culture.

Throughout the world, the sharing of food is significant because who one eats with defines the social group to which one belongs.⁸⁴ As humans from different cultures, we all share different ideas, pasts, and cultural backgrounds. However, certain elements of our existence are similar and, in fact, do not change over time. All humans have the desire to feel connected to others and to have a sense of "place" in the world. Feelings of belonging (and love) are intimate needs in which humans must have fulfilled in order to fully develop their humanity. As stated earlier, humans feel connected to each other when they share meals together. For this reason, special meals are usually reserved for family and close friends.⁸⁵ So, not only are cultural or group values and insights transmitted at these times, but this connection can make the individual feel loved and intimately a part of their group who's meals they share.⁸⁶

Of course, food has not, and is not, always used in such a positive manner. As illustrated in regards to the ancient Romans, food eventually came to be used as a means to divide rather than unite society. Food can have this kind of use in society because it is so central to everyday life. Anything so "common" can easily be manipulated to fit whatever needs or purposes desired. Yet this "commonness" of food also gives food its specialness. Food's specialness comes from the fact it is a universal medium that transcends any "common" meaning or use because every human on the planet shares in this connection.

Therefore, because of the centrality and universality of food, food has the ability to take on special meanings which aid humans in defining what their culture is about and who they are as members of that culture. Food also provides individuals with an

opportunity to share their cultural commonalities with one another and, thereby, bond with one another. Food uniquely has the capability to bind, define, and maintain the structure and integrity of one's group no matter what the context might be.⁸⁷

Essentially, I think that is what food is all about. Food connects humans to each other and also to their collective pasts. By sitting down to one of Grandma's famous Sunday dinners, or sharing in any kind of "food-related" ritual, people remember their families and their own personal histories. But then these meals in which people sit down to also foster communication. In this way, not only are memories shared, but new ones are also created. The power and symbolism of food ultimately resides in this fact. Food can be used by all humans to create new elements to their culture while still helping to maintain a sense of where they came from and where they fit into their present culture. Furthermore, and most importantly, all humans share a connection with food and, therefore, a connection with each other.

ENDNOTES

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