

“Garlic Eaters”: Reform and Resistance *a Tavola*

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In a scene from *It's a Wonderful Life* (directed in 1946 by Frank Capra, Hollywood's premier Italian-born filmmaker), the villainous Mr. Potter tells George Bailey he is “trapped into frittering his life away playing nursemaid to a lot of garlic eaters.” Some years earlier, in his 1927 commentary on the Sacco and Vanzetti case, John Dos Passos ([1927] 1970) muses on the so-called “native” New Englander's fear of “agitators, bombsters, and garlic-smelling wops” (52–53); later, he refers to the widespread characterization of Sacco and Vanzetti's anarchist philosophy as their “garlic-smelling creed” (56). In settling on a food-related ethnic slur, Americans might have just as appropriately chosen “eggplant eater” or “fig eater” to demean both the Italian-American population and its cuisine, but it is garlic's signature potent aroma that renders it the perfect vehicle to express the class, ethnic, and racial biases directed toward the ethnic Italian. As a result of both the size of the immigrant population and the comparatively rapid introduction of their cooking to the wider American public, Italian Americans were, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, the ethnic group most routinely associated with food, and the Italian-American culinary profile achieved the relatively greatest degree of recognition (Levenstein 2002, 76). Thus, arguably more than for any other group, food became a marker of Italian ethnicity. Any number of ethnic slurs — “spaghetti bender” or “grape stomper,” for example — testifies to the fundamental association of Italian Americans and food. No slur, however, is more notorious — nor more revealing — than “garlic eaters,” which was particularly common in the early twentieth century.¹

This essay explores the roots of Mr. Potter's animosity: why and how his ethnic hatred seized upon the consumption of garlic as a vehicle for its expression. In particular, I focus on the cultural meanings of garlic as a representative “smelly food,” which, like other foods alien to the mainstream American diet, came to function as an olfactory signifier for the alien who consumed it. The rhetorical power and persistence of this signifier is both attested to and maintained by its representation in a range of texts, produced and disseminated at all levels of American culture, from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. A comparative study of these texts affirms that American culture has characteristically demonstrated an analogous opprobrium for the putative rankness of Italian Americans, their

homes and neighborhoods, and their diets. In particular, the odor of garlic permeates representations of the Italian-American body, environment, and cuisine, consequently emerging as a primary signifier of Italian-American ethnicity. These various representations—in conjunction with references to garlic use in a range of culinary literature—must be understood with regard to their cultural work, specifically within constructions of ethnic, national, and class identities in the United States. Attitudes toward garlic, then, compose a complex set of social relations, not only between Italian Americans and mainstream American culture but also between Italian Americans of divergent class identities or aspirations. On one hand, both the smelly food and the smelly body are seen as alien, unclean, unhealthy—garlic’s reputed literal indigestibility thus metaphorically identifying the unassimilated (and, perhaps, unassimilable or even pestilential) ethnic body within the American body politic. On the other hand, the frequently passionate partisans of a garlic-based Italian-American cuisine emerge as figures ultimately more resistant to the processes of assimilation, marking their plates, their homes, and their bodies with a distinctly “Italian” aroma. Overall, then, what might initially be seen as apolitical, personal instances of culinary taste are, as Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) has memorably theorized, produced by and continue to reproduce dominant class and ethnic hierarchies, and they are shaped, in this particular case, in response to an aesthetic that endows cultural capital on food, domestic spaces, and bodies identified as odor free and, thereby, suitably assimilated to American values.

The disrepute heaped on garlic—and those who eat it—has its roots in the Italian peninsula, and it reflects the class and racial biases that undergird Italy’s long-simmering north/south tensions. The fraught social meanings of the bulb are notably represented in the foundational cookbook of Italian national cuisine, Pellegrino Artusi’s *The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well* ([1891] 2003). Here Artusi refers to garlic’s history as a “plebian condiment” that “the ancient Romans left . . . to the lower classes, while Alfonso King of Castile hated it so much he would punish anyone who appeared in his court with even a hint of it on his breath” (107–8). Tentatively aiming to advocate for garlic within the emerging definitions of Italian cuisine, Artusi addresses garlic phobia on several occasions, more than once referring to it as a sort of pathological “horror” or “fixation” the reader ought to overcome (107–8) and endeavoring to alleviate the concerns his reader may bring to the preparation of garlic-based dishes. In the instructions for preparing Spaghetti alla Rustica (two cloves, six or seven chopped tomatoes), for example, he advises on the proper cooking of garlic (don’t overcook or undercook it), thereby ensuring the production

of any number of "healthy and tasty dishes" (107–8). Such reassurances are crucial to Artusi's efforts to raise the culinary cultural capital not simply of garlic but also of the range of regional cooking he is organizing into an official cuisine. Many of his recipes, however, demonstrate that rigorous monitoring of garlic's potent presence, and not mere reassurances to his phobic readers, is essential to his canonizing project. In routine commentary about proper preparation and delicate seasoning, Artusi's sensitivity to the potential offense of the bulb leads to a repeated emphasis on minimizing its use. He calls for studding roasts "lightly" (368, 383); requires only "a little garlic" in his meat *crocchette* (croquettes) (166) and "very little garlic" in his *salsa verde* (green sauce) (117) or grilled squid (344); specifies small cloves for his *bracioline* (cutlets) (235) and tripe (251); and often asks for fractional amounts, including, somewhat absurdly, "less than ¼ of a clove" in his stuffed veal breast (246).

The garlic horror that shapes both Artusi's rhetoric and his recipes is most lately and most volubly made manifest in Italy's contemporary "garlic war," which first exploded on the national scene in the spring of 2007 and is being waged in kitchens ranging from the humblest homes to the finest restaurants and the highest levels of government. Chief of the garlic foes is none other than former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose widely acknowledged aversion to garlic and obsession with controlling body odor perpetuate the aristocratic disdain formerly exemplified by Alfonso of Castile. Palazzo Chigi, the prime minister's official residence, was maintained as a rigorously garlic-free zone; Berlusconi also famously banned garlic from menus in 2001, when Italy hosted the G-8 summit, an occasion generally looked upon by the host nation as an opportunity to showcase its cuisine. Berlusconi's TV network, Canale 5, broadcast an editorial in June 2007, issuing a plea for Italian restaurants to refrain from garlic use. Carlo Rossella, the news director at the time, claimed to be allergic to garlic, bemoaning that "garlic for me is a sort of persecution. They put garlic in almost any dish: with meat, with fish, everywhere. It's not politically correct to impose garlic on everybody" ("In Italy" 2007). He and other celebrity garlic critics, which include noted restaurant owners and show business figures such as Raoul Bova and Monica Bellucci, initiated a vocal campaign for garlic-free dining; at one point, top Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* featured lists of combatants on both sides, under the headline "The Crusade of Garlic Enemies" ("In Italy" 2007).

With Berlusconi at its center, the antigarlic crusade identifies the odor of garlic as the bulb's primary violation of polite society. Speaking of his boss, Rossella notes that Berlusconi "considers garlic very dangerous for the environment, his personal environment. . . . Berlusconi doesn't like bad smells.

Garlic is considered by Berlusconi a bad smell" ("In Italy" 2007). Rossella himself avers that "garlic stinks. . . I avoid it like a vampire" ("Ban Garlic?" 2007). These stinks and smells are inextricably bound up with class associations. Rossella, for example, has been compiling a list of garlic-free restaurants and hopes to persuade "distinguished" chefs to come up with separate garlic-free menus. In response, a top Roman restaurateur, Filippo La Mantia of La Trattoria, bans garlic from his kitchen, claiming that garlic is a remnant from a time when masses of impoverished Italians had few other flavoring options and that today's higher standard of living should spell the end of garlic use (Poggioli 2007). The critical response to the antigarlic crusaders further underscores the class issues at play. Claudio Zampa, proprietor of a produce stand in Rome's Campo dei Fiori and supplier to some of the most well-known Roman restaurants, claims that the antigarlic movement is evidence of "culinary snobbery": "What are we supposed to eat, shallots?" Zampa retorts, "Will that make us more elegant? More French?" (Poggioli 2007). Anna Maria Tozzi, owner of Rome's Montevercchio restaurant, notes that "there are lots of prejudices that people who eat and smell of garlic are second class, backward, unsophisticated. It's a class thing for many people" (Poggioli 2007).

Rossella's observation that it is far easier to find garlic-free food in the Italian north as opposed to the south illuminates the regional dynamic that accompanies the class issues identified in Zampa's and Tozzi's comments (Owen 2007). In this context, the reek of garlic particularly adheres to poor southerners, who made up the substantive majority of emigrants to the United States. The transference of regionally based class tensions from the Italian peninsula to the United States during the era of mass European migration, confirmed by contemporaneous documents in the field of "race science" from both sides of the Atlantic, thus provided the grounds for a similar association of garlic with the lower orders to emerge in the United States. As John Dickie points out, Alfredo Niceforo, for example, argues for the racial superiority of the northerner in his 1898 study titled *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* (*Contemporary Barbarian Italy*), concluding that the people of the south "are still primitive, not completely evolved, less civilized and refined than the populations of the North and Centre of Italy" (Dickie 1997, 115). A similarly racialized construct carried over to the United States, where immigrant Italians faced all manner of hostile prejudice and were quite commonly seen as a less evolved or even "darker" race separate from northern European immigrants. In a culture itself experiencing a rise in racist consciousness, the implicitly racist characterization of southern Italian immigrants reached official levels. In 1899, the U.S. Bureau of Immigration began tracking northern or southern Italian origin

for quota purposes; in 1911, an Immigration Commission report concluded that northern and southern Italians

differ from each other materially in language, physique, and character. [The northerner is] cool, deliberate, patient, and practical, as well as capable of great progress in the political and social organization of modern civilization, [while the southerner is] excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, and impractical, [with] little adaptability to a highly organized society. (Guglielmo 2003, 34)

In their incisive discussion of anti-Italian prejudice in Louisiana, Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale (1992) cite an oft-quoted newspaper account of the Italian Americans lynched in New Orleans in 1891, which characterizes the prisoners as "Sicilians, whose low, receding foreheads, dark skin, repulsive countenances and slovenly attire proclaimed their brutal nature" (205). Not surprisingly, there were a number of efforts to disenfranchise or segregate Italians in accordance with legislation restricting African Americans.

What is striking is the frequent extent to which this discourse of class and race centrally situates foul-smelling food within the broader representation of the filth and odor attributed to the Italian-American body and environment. In "Offensive Bodies," Alan Hyde (2006) writes that "hated ethnic groups" and "foreigners" are frequently perceived as having "distinct odors" (56) and that "the mobilization of norms of cleanliness and good odor" is an essential part of the "larger policing project of ethnic and economic elites against poor and minority populations" (55).² The depiction of Italian Americans as dirty and smelly, then, identifies them as an alien population warranting social control, and the situation of the Italian-American diet within this nexus of dirt and odor thus similarly identifies their diet as a primary marker of that otherness and a legitimate focus of opprobrium, reform, and/or containment. Indeed, even before mass immigration, American observations of Italians often noted dirt, bad odors, and disorder as aspects of the Italian character. In *The Innocents Abroad*, for example, Mark Twain (1869) regularly bemoans the off-putting aromas of Italy, especially those emerging from the natives' "garlic-extermimating mouths" (184). And in the United States, prominent studies of New York's tenements—even those of theoretically progressive observers—routinely characterize the Italian immigrant as especially foul in appearance and smell. In *The Dangerous Classes of New York*, for example, Charles Loring Brace ([1872] 1984) claims that the Italian immigrants "were, without a doubt, the dirtiest population I had met with" (194), while Jacob Riis ([1890] 1996) suggests that the "Italians were content to live in a pig sty" (92).

Representations of domestic filth such as these functioned within a nationalistic moral rhetoric as signifiers of the Italian's ill health, low morality, and consequent distance from American values. That both Brace and Riis urge the Italian immigrant to adopt the so-called "Protestant" virtues of cleanliness and order testifies to their perception that, at some level, the filth and smell they witnessed was the result of the Italian character, rather than the immigrant's material deprivation; Riis, in fact, suggests that the "natural bent" of the Italian is to befoul his living environment (92).

Brace's ([1872] 1973) description of the squalor he encountered is notable: The Italian tenements, he writes, are "a bedlam of sounds, and a combination of odors from garlic, monkeys, and the most dirty human persons" (194). Such imagery, which fixes the Italian immigrant's food as an essential component of his or her rank body and environment and, thus, as evidence of his or her rotten person and character, typifies the critical response to the Italian-American diet early in the immigrant era. In *97 Orchard*, her portrait of family eating habits among Lower East Side immigrants, Jane Ziegelman (2010) notes that "non-Italians found proof of the . . . immigrants' lowly character in the food they ate" (189). At their most benign, the criticisms of the Italian-American diet and domestic economy – levied by settlement house workers, public health officials, and educators – were seen as evidence of the recalcitrant immigrant's resistance to assimilation. Ziegelman, Hasia Diner, and Harvey Levenstein, among others, note observations regarding the Italians' "indulgence" in olive oil and other imported "luxuries" like cheese, their de-emphasis on the consumption of milk, their reliance on pasta and legumes as a protein source, and, overall, the relatively high percentage of their household income spent on food as common criticisms (see, for example, Ziegelman 2010, 183–227; Diner 2001, 48–83; Levenstein 2002, 78–83; and Cinotto 2011, 15–17). At its sensationalistic worst, the revilement heaped on Italian-American food intended to illustrate the disease and barbarism of the Italian American who ate it. Ziegelman (2010) notes, for example, how the diet of the rag-picker – the "decayed remains" of "odorous vegetable[s]" fetched home in a "filthy bit of sacking" – came to typify the worst popular conceptions of Italian-American food (190). In addition, the long public campaigns against New York's pushcarts, which provided many Italian Americans with employment and their daily food shopping, routinely characterized them as evil-smelling, unsanitary nuisances to public health. Even the "Report of the Mayor's Pushcart Commission" (1906), which investigated the "pushcart evil" and which, in fact, somewhat exposed the sensationalistic rhetoric typical to the popular press, nonetheless claimed that the "existing evils" of pushcart districts were a "danger from improper

food supplies because of dirt and germs” and “a material addition to the discomfort of living through additional odors and noise in neighborhoods where conditions are now almost unbearable” (16). Through such representations, the Italian immigrant’s body, home, and food consequently became linked in a stinking olfactory image that served to identify the perceived physical, moral, and intellectual incapacities compromising his or her potential Americanization. In particular, the putatively malodorous Italian-American diet, with garlic as its notorious signal scent, emerged as a metaphor for the immigrant’s indigestible, even toxic presence, as unassimilable to American culture as a clove of garlic to the refined pretensions of mainstream cuisine.

Thus it is that the anarchist ideology of Sacco and Vanzetti—the anarchism that was routinely vilified as an amoral, foreign presence in American society—became known as “the garlic-smelling creed.” And thus it is that the elimination or minimization of garlic within the Italian-American diet became an essential focus within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts at “culinary reform,” which were designed to assimilate the European immigrant through diet. In this context, recipes and cookbooks are more than mere practical guides to feeding the family; they instead share in the agenda of Americanization that dominated the settlement houses, public health services, and public schools that served the immigrant population, disseminating information about “un-American” tastes and smells and enabling the immigrant to acquire the culinary cultural capital inherent in a delicate cuisine. Typical of the culinary reformer’s zeal for mild flavors and smells is the work of dietitian Bertha M. Wood, who identifies the immigrants’ habit of “highly seasoned” foods as inconsistent with a healthy American diet. Wood’s 1922 study, *Foods of the Foreign Born in Relation to Health*, addresses health and social workers serving immigrant communities. Affirming that “food [is] in the first rank of importance in our plans for Americanization” (1), her perception of culinary reform as a means for facilitating assimilation parallels the sensibility undergirding *The Settlement Cookbook*, the first of whose 34 editions was compiled by Lizzie Black Kander in 1901. As historian Angela Fritz (2004) writes, “Kander understood that food was a powerful means of religious and cultural expression, and she used culinary reform to gain control over the effects of massive immigration and industrialization, to aid in the assimilation of immigrant girls, and to introduce immigrants to American consumer culture” (38). As a compendium of primarily mainstream American dishes and menu concepts, along with a small selection of distinctly ethnic foods drawn from America’s immigrant groups, *The Settlement Cookbook* intends to embody a diverse national cuisine that

incorporates a range of ethnic traditions, but that also strictly contains them within dominant American culinary rules. Wood (1922) similarly makes a gesture toward diversity within a nonetheless clearly stated goal of Americanization. Professing some appreciation for the integrity of the ethnic cuisines she studies, she suggests, at one point, that “there is a need for enlightenment among Americans regarding the practical utility and enjoyability of many foreign foods” (97). This progressive observation notwithstanding, Wood asserts that “in the melting pot of America,” the immigrant’s “food habits often conflict rather than fuse or evaporate” (ix), and her work, thus, comparatively analyzes various immigrant cuisines so that health and social work professionals could successfully intervene in the immigrant’s diet. Her primary goal is to identify perceived weaknesses in immigrant cuisines and to adapt those particular ethnic recipes that “already resemble our dishes so closely” in order to produce a “welcome diet” for the new American (4) and allow the native to (very cautiously) “broaden” his or her own (2). A consistent target for criticism, in virtually all of the groups she studies, is highly seasoned, aromatic food. Writing of the Mexican-American diet, Wood asserts that “hot flavorings” (9) or “irritating spices” (15) make it comparatively less healthy than the American one. On the subject of Jewish-American food, Wood bemoans the variety of pickled meats, fish, and vegetables; the “high seasoning” of fish dishes, which makes them, apparently, good only as appetizers but not as a main meal (88); and, overall, the strong flavors of a diet that ultimately “destroys the taste for milder foods, causes irritation, and makes assimilation more difficult” (90). One assumes that Wood here uses “assimilation” in reference to digestibility, but her unwitting double meaning perfectly expresses her underlying perception of highly flavored, strong-smelling foods—and, ultimately, of the immigrants who consumed them—as unassimilable to American culture.

In her analysis, Wood echoes the common perception of Italian immigrants as a particularly hard case when it comes to adopting an American diet, emphasizing that, seemingly more than for any other group, “an understanding of their dietary background is absolutely essential to successful results” (Wood 1992, 30; see also, for example, Diner 2001, 77–78, and Levenstein 2002, 79–81). Her exposition of this background illuminates some conventional north/south divergences in the food practices of the Italian peninsula, with her clear preferences falling in favor of the more gently seasoned, more dairy-based cuisine of the north. Thus the millions of emigrants from the south who made up an overwhelming majority of the Italian-American population are found to be “fond of more highly seasoned food” than their northern counterparts and are primarily reliant, Wood

notes on more than one occasion, on dried peppers and garlic for flavoring in their foods. Consequently, the “Italian” recipes that Wood provides minimize garlic use (two out of over thirty recipes), wholly eschew *peperoncini* (hot red peppers), and emphasize instead dairy products (including butter instead of olive oil), eggs, and a light hand with onion, parsley, and nutmeg as the seasoning in most dishes. It is true that some of what Wood presents is intended as pabulum for the ailing and for children (indeed, she is deeply concerned that Italian immigrants feed their children a strongly flavored, “adult” diet), but virtually *all* of what she presents has been stripped of vigorous flavoring and rendered inoffensive to the American stomach and palate.³ There is no garlic in the meatballs (no onion, either), the Codfish with Green Peppers, or any of the soups; it makes its only appearance in two tomato sauce recipes—one of which, Spaghetti alla Napolitana, incorporates one measly clove in a dish distinctly marked—and ghettoized—by its southern provenance. Otherwise, “Italian” cuisine emerges as one step above nursery food, with the range of dishes—pastas, soups, custards, polenta, meat, fish, and vegetables—nearly all bound by or sauced in eggs and dairy, a style of preparation far removed from the conventional diet of immigrants whom Wood sought to Americanize. Such food, as Levenstein (2002) affirms, intended to “domesticat[e]” Italian fare in a manner that “did not disturb essentially British palates” (75), yet the routine situation of aromatic Italian food within broader representations of filthy, malodorous immigrant bodies and spaces suggests that Wood’s typical wariness about highly seasoned food arises not simply from gustatory and digestive concerns but from fear of its smell, a smell signifying an alien, potentially diseased presence at large in the nation.

Such fears as they are brought to bear upon food are particularly well illustrated when considering Lizzie Black Kander’s culinary reform efforts in the context of her broader life and work to sanitize immigrant homes and neighborhoods. *The Settlement Cookbook* is notable both for its perception of conventional Italian-American food as a distinctly smelly, garlic-based cuisine and for her attempts to contain—and, thereby, assimilate—that cuisine within a benignly smelling, putatively American one. The function of garlic as a signifier of things Italian is illuminated by its rare appearance in the book outside of its Italian recipes. Of note are two recipes for tomato sauce, one of which, identified as Italian Tomato Sauce, differs from the previous one primarily by the addition of garlic to the recipe. Furthermore, Kander’s efforts to repress simultaneously not simply the presence of garlic in the American diet but also the presence of Italian ethnicity within American culture leads to some unusual recipes, techniques, and nomenclature. Garlic is left out of some signature Italian

dishes, and it is greatly minimized in others. Italian Tomato Sauce, in fact, contains one clove of garlic for a quart of tomatoes; a ravioli recipe incorporates garlic by instructing that a clove be rubbed over the cut of beef that is to be used for the filling and then discarded. Even the Italian language appears too strong for American tastes, as a number of the so-called “Italian” recipes are designated with French names; thus, we get pasta dishes called Spaghetti Italiennne and Noodles a la Neapolitan.⁴ This purification of diet and culinary language is but one component of the hygienic domestic practice central to Kander’s vision of the American home: a spotless kitchen, sanitary cooking practices, and a cuisine mild in taste and smell. Kander, whose zeal for cleanliness led her to open a bathhouse in one of Milwaukee’s immigrant neighborhoods, shared a common perception of its dirty, smelly character; as reported in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, native Milwaukeeans complained routinely of the “filth” and “horrible stench emanating from the ghetto” (Fritz 2004, 40). Bathing was, in fact, on the rise throughout nineteenth-century America; Kander’s bathhouse, then, is one amid a series of institutional efforts to increase public hygiene. While we may disagree with the breadth of his generalization, Alan Hyde (2006) reminds us of the cultural and political work at issue in such efforts: “Every step in the history of public health measures for the encouragement of personal hygiene, the spread of bathing, and the eradication of filth is always and necessarily a form of political hegemony” (56). Given the widespread association of garlic—and the Italian-American diet overall—with filth and foul odors, Kander’s culinary reform efforts should be seen as a component of her broader public health efforts, thereby underscoring the cultural and political work of her cookbook and others like it. Her banishment of garlic from the American table thus is inextricable from her quest not simply for a sanitized kitchen but also for a sanitized America, where the recently arrived European would be assimilated into the odor-free American mainstream, his threat to the public’s noses and its physical, moral, and social health vanquished.⁵

It is worth noting that Kander’s garlic phobia reflects not simply the dominant values of American culture but also her own ethnic anxiety as the middle-class child of Jewish immigrants. Kander’s lifelong work to clean up the foreign-born population, their neighborhoods, and their food thus intends to confirm her own acquisition of a properly refined, hygienic American character and, thereby, to distinguish her from the as-yet unasimilated, unwashed ethnic masses. Such tensions between immigrant groups and between generations of immigrants are, of course, woven into the fabric of the immigrant experience in America. A contemporary example—and one that further illustrates the significance of strange,

smelly food in the narrative of assimilation—appears in Sandra Mortola Gilbert’s poem “No Thank You, I Don’t Care for Artichokes” (2002). Here, the function of a pungent cuisine as a marker of ethnic identity and a correspondingly low status in the Americanization process is illustrated in the tense standoff between Mortola Gilbert’s Jewish-American mother-in-law and her son, who happily devours his Italian-American wife’s artichokes:

“No thank you, I don’t care for artichokes,”

decreed my mother-in-law as my husband
passed the platter of inward-turning
soft-skulled Martian baby
heads around the table,

and they were O so shyly slyly
jostling with each other with their boiled-
green sardonic gossip
(what was the news they told?)

when he sharply answered, “Mother,
have you ever
eaten an artichoke?”

“No,”

she said, majestic, “but I just know
I don’t care for them, don’t
care for them at all” —
for truly, if they weren’t Martian,

they were at least Italian,
from that land of “smelly cheese”
she wouldn’t eat, that land of oily
curves and stalks, unnerving pots

of churning who knows what,
and she, nice, Jewish, from the Bronx,
had fattened on her Russian-Jewish mother’s kugel, kosher
chicken, good rye bread. . . . (2002, 150–51)

American-born and hailing from the Bronx, but only one step removed from the Russian homeland her immigrant mother left behind, Mortola Gilbert’s mother-in-law clings precariously to her American identity, fully cognizant of the signifying power of food—especially strong-smelling food—within the narrative of assimilation. Her almost inexpressible horror of the artichoke confirms the depths of her fear of being associated with smelly immigrant

food—and, by extension, identified as a smelly immigrant herself. Italian food (and, analogously, the Italian-American daughter-in-law) is associated here with a “smelly” foreign land and cuisine, their alien nature typified not simply by “unnerving pots” roiling with mysterious vegetables but also by the artichokes’ perceived resemblance to “Martian baby heads.” The threat inherent in this strange grotesquerie is further emphasized by the “inward-turning” and “sly” way in which the vegetables seem to carry on their “sardonic gossip.” Faced with this undesirable alien—whose refusal to assimilate to American culture is metaphorically represented by its refusal to speak intelligible English—Mortola Gilbert’s mother-in-law summons an aristocratic demeanor, signifying her class ascendance above the unregenerate, odiferous ethnicity she has encountered, “majestic” in her refusal to eat the artichoke and ending the conversation by “decree.” And thus she clings to a somewhat sanitized, bland version of her own ethnic cuisine—kosher chicken, rye bread, and kugel, but no pickles or gefilte fish—as a marker of her purified, Americanized status. Such anxiety is not surprising in a Jewish American, given the largely contemporaneous occurrence of mass Italian and Jewish immigration and the often similar characterization of Jewish immigrants—and their food—as “smelly.”

As for the Italian American in this scene, the daughter-in-law emerges, by contrast, as embracing the fullness—and full flavor and aroma—of her ethnic identity. In counterpoint, Italian-American memoirist Maria Laurino (2000) changes her diet to accord with a theoretically refined American one, vividly demonstrating that anxieties over smelling bad are rooted in the matter of national identity, so that Italian Americans often worried that to *be* American they needed to *smell* American. In her essay titled “Scents,” Laurino writes of the shame she experienced as a teenager in the early 1970s after being identified—to her face—as “the smelly Italian girl” (98). After hearing the insult, she begins dousing herself with cologne to cover an odor that she fears may suggest “a pungent clove of garlic in a pan of warm oil” (98). Examining the words of her critical classmate, Laurino notes that “she never talked about that smelly girl, or that smelly girl who is Italian, but rather that smelly Italian girl. The structure of that phrase . . . implied that being Italian was essential to her particular definition of what it meant to be ‘smelly’: in other words, I was smelly *because* I was Italian” (98). Laurino’s memoir often touches on ethnic self-consciousness and even shame as basic components of the Italian-American experience:

Shame seems to me to play an important part in the way many Italian-Americans see themselves in relationship to the larger world. The Italian-American searches for social status and intellectual respectability,

hoping to escape a role cast long ago for the dark white ethnic. When I was a child, we tried to mask our susceptibility to shame by keeping “ethnic” details, the keys to our identity, under lock and key. (100–101)

In “Scents,” Laurino’s shame fixes on her body—not simply body odor but also body and facial hair and a propensity to sweat. All of this she perceives is associated with “dirt” (20), and she fears that such an association indelibly marks her class and ethnic status: She is, in the words of Flaubert, exuding “the basement odor of the masses” (20). And as the previous image of garlic in a pan of oil makes clear, this odor is inextricable from her ethnic cuisine. Consequently, as Laurino grows older, and gains control over her own diet, her continuing anxiety about bodily smell causes her to forgo the Italian foods of her youth, “the sweet scent of tomato sauce” and “oil-laden frying peppers” (24) abandoned in an effort to mask her ethnicity and assimilate: “I was determined to change who I was, stripping away layers of my ethnicity in order to disassociate myself from the Smelly Italians” (25). Later in life, Laurino notes, while in the “precarious work” of re-engaging with her ethnic identity, she returns to some of the foods of her youth, though the response of her college roommate to the provolone Laurino has eaten in their shared room (she suspects Laurino of having vomited) confirms the lingering resistance of mainstream America to the ethnic Italian (25). And Laurino’s lifetime habit of wearing French cologne, which she recognizes as rooted in her desire to erase her Italian “smell,” indicates her continuing ambivalence about fully embodying her Italian ethnicity, even though she worries that, as a more fully assimilated American, she has rid herself “of the perceived stench of [her] ethnic group” but left herself “without a defining odor” (26).

Thus, a task faced by millions of Italian Americans every week—how many cloves of garlic to toss into the sauce—is rooted in this dynamic of attraction to and repulsion from bodily and environmental smells, and it has powerful consequences with regard to the achievement and maintenance of an American identity. No wonder, then, that even among Italian Americans the innocent white bulb engenders such a welter of strong emotions. On one hand, Italian Americans have often celebrated garlic and other “smelly” foods as a sign of their unregenerate Italian character, of their distance from a wholly Americanized identity indicated by the absence of odor—food odor and even, finally, body odor. The reader may recall the *Sopranos* episode “Marco Polo” (Episode 8, Season 5, 2004), when, during a family barbecue, Tony parades around with a string of uncooked sausages about his neck; later, his antics are cited with dismay by Carmela’s upwardly mobile mother, who worries that her “classy” Italian-American

friends, who have left the Italian New Jersey enclave, will think the whole family a bunch of wops. Tony has a comrade in my mother, who is a true garlic champion. Her *linguine alle vongole* might properly be called clams and pasta on garlic. If she is required, say on vacation, to eat someone else's cooking for more than a few days, she will pronounce herself in "garlic withdrawal." On the other hand, my great uncle, my father's best man, and his wife—to name only three—cannot abide garlic. My uncle—a fruit and vegetable salesman, of all things—would not allow garlic in the house and once threw a plate of pasta with cheese he determined to be "smelly" out the window. (As my uncle was a Roman who married a Sicilian, and spent the rest of his life claiming to have married down, his garlic phobia seems to have had class arrogance written all over it.) My father's best man and his wife—the children of immigrants—are two of those for whom the slight whisper of garlic flavor is acceptable but who can never EVER see it or, worse, bite into it in a dish. Viewers of TV food personality Rachael Ray, herself of Italian-American descent, cannot fail to hear that her Italian-American in-laws, the Cusimanos, share a similar aversion.

Today's pre-eminent Italian-American cookbooks feature recipes that more fully endorse garlic use, though they, too, often give voice to these long-standing anxieties and aversions, echoing Artusi's fraught representations of garlic use amid his efforts to define and elevate "Italian" cuisine. In so doing, these contemporary cookbooks move to positively affirm the ethnic and class identities conventionally signified by garlic's odor, while at the same time testifying to the continued power of long-standing negative stereotypes adhering to these identities. On one hand, leading chef and cookbook author Lidia Bastianich, in *Lidia's Italian-American Kitchen* (2001), tosses garlic cloves into her pots in amounts that would make Bertha Wood and Lizzie Black Kander shudder. The multiple cloves in her Italian American Meat Sauce and her meatless Marinara Sauce recipes far exceed those in Wood and Kander's analogous recipes; Bastianich also routinely uses garlic in the kinds of soup, fish, and meat recipes where Wood and Kander leave it out entirely. A similar approach typifies John and Galina Mariani's *The Italian American Cookbook* (2000), whose Spaghetti with Potatoes and Garlic (twelve cloves) uses more garlic than the entirety of Wood's Italian recipes collectively. This recuperation of garlic use is particularly significant here given the canonizing agenda of these cookbooks, which explicitly aim to treat Italian-American cooking as both a distinct and a worthy cuisine; the subtitle to the Marianis' work is, in fact, *A Feast of Food from a Great American Cooking Tradition*. It will come as no surprise that such works as *The Sopranos Family Cookbook* (Rucker and Scicolone 2002) or *Rao's Cookbook* (Pellegrino 1998) feature one garlic-laden

recipe after another; such works are primarily designed for readers with a distinct affection for old-time, red sauce dishes not far removed from the working-class kitchen and for the outlaw, “our thing” allure provided by the *Sopranos* connection or the storied denizens of Rao’s restaurant. Concerns about the damage done to the Italian-American reputation by gangsters real and fictional aside, these works intend to function as unapologetic, in-your-face celebrations of ethnic identity, where the unmistakable aroma of garlic announces itself with no apology or deference to the values of mainstream culture, much less the elite culture of high cuisine. They are not, like Maria Laurino, afraid to smell “Italian.” But aligned with an outlaw subculture – and re-enforced by the aura of Rao’s legendary near impenetrability – such works undermine their garlic advocacy by identifying the bulb as the property of the ethnic in-group, hardly presenting it as a foundational flavor in a cuisine of wide cultural resonance or appeal. More striking, then, is the garlic use in Bastianich and Mariani and Mariani, who move boldly and definitively to establish the bona-fides of Italian-American cuisine in the midst of America’s “food renaissance,” to a nation of eaters increasingly interested in “authentic” ingredients and preparations and also a diverse range of American and global cuisines. Developing as a chef, Bastianich (2001), for example, increasingly recognized that the “Italian” food she encountered in America was distinct from that of her youth in Italy: “Clearly, it had been developed by a people with a rich collection of memories of intense flavors and aromas and a patrimony of recipes and cooking techniques that in this new land had to be executed with different ingredients from those with which the immigrants were familiar” (xiv). The unfulfilled aspirations of Kander and Wood to showcase the authentic food of Italian America within the diverse traditions of American cooking are, thus, fulfilled by Bastianich and the Marianis. Their cookbooks illuminate the basic foods, cooking techniques, flavor principles, and ways of eating that compose Italian-American cuisine, identifying both its traditional roots and its adaptations to American culture and material conditions, and ultimately giving garlic, its most prominent ingredient, a place at the national table.⁶

On the other hand, just as Pellegrino Artusi, in the midst of his canonizing representation of “Italian cuisine,” sought to advocate for garlic while simultaneously treating it like a controlled, volatile substance, so do Bastianich and the Marianis, amid similar canonizing agendas, advise caution. Bastianich (2001), in fact, recognizes the centrality of garlic to Italian-American cooking, noting its abundant use as a departure from traditional Italian foodways. Delineating the historical circumstances that gave rise to this centrality (the general inaccessibility of the fresh herbs, vibrant tomatoes, and rich olive oils that were essential in southern Italian

cooking), Bastianich affirms that the immigrant turned to the more easily procurable garlic, using it with “abandon” to provide “the intensity that the newcomers missed” in their initial attempts to re-create the dishes of home (219). Her lengthy sidebar on garlic is largely devoted to somewhat countering that abandon, with tips on mediating the pungency of garlic through various means of cooking or preparation, which include leaving it whole—sometimes even unpeeled—and thereby enabling its removal from the finished dish. So aware is Bastianich, in fact, of the potential offense of the clove, that she emphasizes the desirability of the individual diner’s ability to remove it at will: “Most of the garlic I use is either crushed whole cloves or sliced (because it is easy for people to spot and remove, if they choose)” (219). This trepidation is somewhat more heightened in the Marianis’ work. “Garlic,” they write,

has long been associated with the worst aspects of Italian-American food, and it is true that too many Italian-American cooks seem to add an abundance of garlic to their sauces and other preparations just to comply with Americans’ unwitting characterization of Italians as “garlic eaters.” (34)

One imagines they are thinking precisely of the highly seasoned fare found in the *Sopranos* and Rao’s cookbooks, and indeed, in *How Italian Food Conquered the World*, John Mariani (2011) reserves his most withering scorn for mob-related cookbooks: “Perhaps worst of all are those Italian Americans trying to capitalize on the Mafia image in cookbooks, as if in some way suggesting that the criminals have any particular taste in food aside from the ability to gorge on enormous quantities” (95). I have no wish to argue the culinary value of these works (though they by no means seem wholly worthless), much less to defend the characters of *mafiosi* everywhere against Mariani’s invective, but it is nonetheless hard to ignore the class and ethnic anxieties operating here. Indeed, by equating overuse of garlic with complicity in the negative stereotype of the smelly immigrant, the Marianis conversely imply that the good immigrant obediently and rigorously controls both the garlic in his food and the smell of his body. That smells are at issue today, as they were in the early immigrant era, seems clear from the following comment: “Southern Italians’ love of garlic is akin to their love of perfume: A little goes a long way and too much is in bad taste” (Mariani and Mariani 34). Such a sentiment recalls Maria Laurino’s experiences, betraying again Italian-American anxiety about conforming to mainstream American notions of appropriate body odor. Indeed, Mariani’s assumption that one cannot be a “made man” and have “taste” in food makes clear just how much his notions of said taste are assumed to have transcended the southern Italian and working-class roots of Italian America and its cooking. So, while *How*

Italian Food Conquered the World opens by asserting that “in the not-so-distant past, the mere presence of garlic in a dish was considered emblematic of the unsophisticated taste of Italian cooks” (1), the work of the Marianis, once again conjoining anxieties about food, body odor, class, and ethnic identity, suggests that, even today, garlic remains troublingly “unsophisticated,” a potent threat to the cultural capital their work seeks to bestow upon Italian-American cuisine and, by extension, Italian Americans themselves.

While the evolution of basic recipes in Italian-American cuisine demonstrates that the rise in Italian-American ethnic pride, the wide-scale embrace of multiculturalism in the United States, and, perhaps more than anything else, the procession of generations of Italian Americans away from their immigrant forebears have facilitated an increased comfort level with garlic – and all that it signifies – we are not yet, as David Kamp optimistically asserts, “all garlic eaters” (Harmanci 2006). Anxieties remain, and sources as seemingly disparate as a contemporary pasta recipe, a nineteenth-century travel narrative, and America’s best-loved Christmas movie remind us not simply of the persistent, negative stereotypes of the Italian American but also of the potency of garlic’s signifying power, never separable from its unmistakable aroma and certainly even more lingering. If garlic is, as many claim, the essence of Italian-American cuisine, its presence should remind us of the essentially fraught history of that cuisine as it achieved its hybrid identity, just as for those Italian Americans who cooked it, ate it, and brought it into being.

Notes

1. The Urban Dictionary (2011) identifies “garlic eater” as an ethnic slur primarily directed against Italian Americans, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1918 comic war song “When Tony Goes over the Top,” for example, Italian-American soldier Tony the barber is characterized as potentially able to kill the Kaiser with his garlic breath (Frisch, Fletcher, and Marr 1918). Food writer David Kamp recently suggested that America’s cultural evolution has made Mr. Potter’s slur antiquated, claiming “well, we’re all garlic eaters now,” but the persistence of garlic-related slurs suggests otherwise (Harmanci 2006). The phrase still pops up frequently in online discussion forums, relating to, among others, Rudolph Giuliani, Samuel Alito, and *American Idol* contestant Stefano Langone. The Urban Dictionary notes the phrase is also currently used in Japan as a slur directed toward Koreans. Overall, its extensive list of garlic-related slurs reveals both that the odor of garlic remains an olfactory signifier for the unassimilated immigrant body, and also the extent to which attitudes toward garlic use still correlate to ethnic and class identity. “Garlic glider,” for example, refers to an urban public bus, presumably dominated by the potent aroma of lower-class ethnics and immigrants.
2. Hyde’s essay, from Drobnick’s *The Smell Culture Reader* (2006), appears in a section of essays titled “Odorophobia,” an excellent introduction to the cultural significances of perceived filth and smell.

3. One might note here, by contrast, Pellegrino Artusi ([1891] 2003), whose conviction in the positive digestive effects of garlic lead him to recommend garlic bread as ideal food for babies (182).
4. Such labeling of Italian foods with French terms follows conventional practice at the time, given the prominence of French cookbooks as the industry standard and the French culinary imprimatur as the most desirable. Levenstein (2002) concisely summarizes the “mediatory role” of French culinary professionals and nomenclature in assuring wary Americans that “the original Italian dish had been civilized and purified in French hands” (77–78). Kander’s doing so, however, is at odds with her theoretical intention to represent the cooking of the American melting pot, and thus it suggests not only the inauthenticity of her recipe with regard to actual immigrant practice but also her perception that things Italian—whether food or language—were unsuitable to the refined pretensions that shaped not only her cookbook but also her vision of the nation at large.
5. Anxiety about “the stinking rose” within the regions of high cuisine (and its aspirants) was still notably in evidence in 1982, which saw the publication of *The Silver Palate Cookbook*. One of the best-selling cookbooks of all time (over 2.5 million copies), it is generally credited with being instrumental to the introduction of “gourmet” cooking techniques and ingredients into the American home at the dawn of the current “American food renaissance.” In a lengthy sidebar to a recipe for Duck with Forty Cloves of Garlic, authors Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins (1982) seek to reassure their middle-class readers about garlic’s legendary reek. After several paragraphs of encomia, they conclude: “If after all this you are curious but still hesitant, we pass along one final tip: chewing a bit of fresh parsley or mint will sweeten the breath and help to eliminate traces of garlic just eaten” (186). Lukins and Rosso were often criticized for their highly seasoned recipes; in Lukins’ *New York Times* obituary, Julia Moskin (2009) notes that “editors admonished the authors for their exuberant seasoning style. ‘No, girls, no,’ a copy editor wrote on one recipe. ‘No one puts 25 cloves of garlic in ratatouille!’”
6. My framework for identifying the basic elements of a “cuisine” is drawn from Belasco (2002).

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