The Emerging Tradition of Soppressata Weekend: Sustaining an Italian-American Masculine Identity through Food Rituals

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> *Today, the close relationship between Italian food and Italian identity seems an unremarkable fact.*
>
> —Carol Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy*

It was early Saturday morning, February 4, 2012. An important weekend had arrived, and there was much work to be done. Though it was Super Bowl weekend, a time when many Americans planned for parties and anticipated Sunday's confrontation between the New York Giants and the New England Patriots, it was more than that for my father and me. For us, our extended family members, and our close friends, it was also Soppressata Weekend.

As my father and I carried the meat grinder to the car, we prepared for an event that had become a ritual in our household. Since 1998, Super Bowl weekend has doubled as Soppressata Weekend. While I discuss the evolution of this event in detail below, in its 2012 iteration it featured eighteen men, all of whom self-identified as Italian Americans. The men in the group spanned several generations, including first- and second-generation Italian Americans in their fifties and sixties and their third- and fourth-generation Italian-American sons and their friends in their twenties and thirties. From 1998 to 2011, this group gathered at the Tacony-Mayfair Sons of Italy Lodge (#447) in northeast Philadelphia. In 2012, the location changed to the Sons of Italy Lodge (#2311) in Haddon Heights, New Jersey. Prior to the establishment of this practice, a smaller group of typically six to eight men, including my father, his brother, and several friends from the Tacony-Mayfair lodge, would wake early on a Saturday morning (not necessarily on Super Bowl weekend) to drive from the Tacony neighborhood in Philadelphia to New York City's Little Italy. Their primary destination was the Fretta Brothers pork store on the corner of Mott and Hester Streets, where they would buy soppressata. For one of the men in the group, a second-generation Italian American known by family and friends as "Big Dominic," this trip was reminiscent of similar ones he took with his immigrant father as a boy. He felt a particularly strong connection with

Fretta Brothers, having built and maintained a friendship with its proprietors. After stocking up at Fretta Brothers, the men would visit other stores to purchase bread, cheese, and various Italian delicacies before settling in at the bar formerly known as Mare Chiaro (now called the Mulberry Street Bar), where they ate their lunch with wine ordered from Tony, the bartender. This ritual came to an end after Fretta Brothers closed in 1997. Of course, one way for it to have continued would have been for the men to drive to a different location—Arthur Avenue in the Bronx or the Italian Market in South Philadelphia. However, the Mulberry Street location was considered an essential component of their ritual. Specifically, because of Dominic's long history with and personal connection to Fretta Brothers, the men saw it as a site for an "authentic" experience and for "authentic" soppressata. With countless sausages hanging from the ceiling, the store epitomized authenticity and stood for these men as a bastion against mass-produced, prepackaged sausages, which were becoming almost ubiquitous in supermarkets and specialty food stores. Thus, the closing of Fretta Brothers marked the loss not only of a particular food product but also of what the men perceived as a link to an "authentic" Italian heritage. Thus, if a new tradition was to replace the old one, it needed to speak to the men's desire to have access to what they perceived as authentic soppressata, which they used as a bridge to their version of Italian cultural history.

For these men, the solution was not to find a new location for their Saturday tradition; rather, it was to begin a new tradition in which they would make their own soppressata. What at first may seem like a simple solution to a problem—if we can't buy soppressata in New York, then we'll start making our own—offers important insight into how this particular group of Italian-American men uses food rituals to maintain a connection to their sense of Italian heritage. The relationship between food practices, ritual, and ethnic identity is well documented. As Michael Di Giovine explains in his study of the Italian-American tradition of the Christmas Eve meal commonly known as the Feast of the Seven Fishes, "a periodic rite punctuating the calendar" can serve to "continually revitalize the group, which is constantly under pressure of not only acculturation but of schism" (Di Giovine 2010, 183). While the Christmas Eve feast is relatively well known in Italian-American communities in the northeast, Soppressata Weekend is unique.

My ethnographic examination of Soppressata Weekend focuses on food production rather than its consumption. What assumptions are challenged and what boundaries are crossed as this particular group of men shifts from buying soppressata to making it? More specifically, what does this transition reveal about traditional gender roles pertaining to the produc-

tion and consumption of food? Soppressata Weekend can be read in two separate but related ways. First, as these men transition from the traditionally masculine activity of consuming food to the traditionally feminine work of producing it, they open up a space in which normative gender roles can be questioned, complicated, and exposed as performative in nature. At the same time, the transgressive potential of this space is contained as the men attempt to use it as an opportunity to reinforce rather than undermine their conformity to hegemonic notions of masculinity.

Inside the Ritual of Soppressata Weekend

When it began in the late 1990s, Soppressata Weekend was anchored in a very close-knit group of about ten family members and friends, all of whom were second- or third-generation Italian Americans. The group included my father and his brother, their cousins, their sons and sons-in-law, and very close friends of our families. Participants spanned several generations, with approximately half of the men in their fifties or sixties and the other half in their twenties or thirties. This core group was associated primarily through their connection to Tacony, a small neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia with a long Italian-American history. (See Iatarola and Gephart [2000] for a discussion of the Tacony neighborhood.) Tacony's Italian roots can be traced to immigrants mostly from southern Italy who settled in this neighborhood, established the Italian "national parish," Our Lady of Consolation Roman Catholic Church, and adopted a range of cultural practices that they identified with their Italian culture and identity. In doing so, they created a particular form of "Italian-ness" by reenacting certain traditions with the aim of linking their past, present, and future. They—like the men who would come to participate in Soppressata Weekend decades later—demonstrated through these practices that tradition must be recognized as "a facet of all social life, which is not natural but symbolically constituted" (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 276). In other words, it was through the process of adopting and repeating certain activities that they constructed the "traditions" through which their individual and collective Italian-American identities would be created and sustained.

Today, Tacony faces difficult economic challenges and other setbacks. Most recently, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia announced that it would close Our Lady of Consolation's elementary school, along with Saint Hubert Catholic High School for Girls, which is also in the neighborhood (the decision to close the high school was subsequently reversed). Many current and former Tacony residents across multiple generations are

alumni of one or both of these schools. For many residents of Tacony, this announcement signaled more difficult change for a community struggling to survive.

The specific details of Soppressata Weekend have changed since it began in 1998, but the general characteristics have remained relatively stable. Early on Saturday morning, the men gather at the Tacony-Mayfair Sons of Italy Lodge for the first step in the process, which involves cutting and trimming pork shoulders that one of the men purchases the day before at Hatfield Quality Meats, a processing and packaging facility that also sells wholesale meat. These large pieces of pork are trimmed of excess fat and chopped into approximately two-inch cubes in preparation for grinding. Once ground, the meat is divided into two batches and is mixed with a combination of salt, spices, and wine. The specific amounts vary for each batch in order to produce two different types of soppressata: mild or sweet, with less pepper; and hot, made by increasing the amount of whole peppercorns and adding crushed red pepper flakes and cayenne pepper. The mixed ground meat is refrigerated overnight. The following day, the men make soppressata by stuffing the prepared meat into casings that are purchased by Mark, one of the men who lives in South Philadelphia and who gets them from a meat store in the Italian Market. Soppressata are made by cutting them into individual links, using specific ties to distinguish between mild and hot soppressata, attaching a string that will be used for hanging them, and then distributing the soppressata among the men. The process also involves calculating all of the costs associated with the weekend and using this number as the basis for determining the price per soppressata. The goal is to break even, not to make a profit. The price is usually around $3.00–$3.50 per sausage. Each man indicates how many pieces he would like to buy, and it becomes his responsibility to complete the curing process, which typically involves pressing the soppressata (to remove air and liquid so they don't burst) for a few days, hanging them to cure (for four to six weeks, depending on the weather), and then storing them in oil or vacuum sealing them. Inevitably, there is much discussion about how each man follows or alters this standard process, from not pressing the soppressata to forgoing the more traditional storage in oil in favor of vacuum sealing or freezing, which some men prefer because they find it less messy or because they feel the soppressata lasts longer when stored this way.

While this general outline for the work of Soppressata Weekend has remained consistent, there have been some significant changes over the years. When the tradition began in 1998, the first hurdle the men confronted was finding what they considered an "authentic" recipe for soppressata.

As mentioned above, an important part of their allegiance to Fretta Brothers was their faith in the authenticity of their process and product. Therefore, if these men were to re-create this sense of authenticity, they needed to have the "correct" recipe. While the first- and second-generation Italians in the group recounted memories of soppressata and other cured meats being made in their households, they did not have direct experience doing this work. Therefore, my father initially reached out to his cousin Filomena, who in the 1950s emigrated at the age of twenty from Calabria to Canada. She was one of our only remaining family members who had actually lived in Italy and who still made her own soppressata. For my father, who was born in Philadelphia, the fact that she was born in Italy gave Filomena, and thus the recipe she provided, that ever-important quality of authenticity. Her legitimacy was also enhanced by the fact that, as a woman, she was part of a culinary legacy, which included her mother and my grandmother, that traced itself back to the town of Mangone, Cosenza province, in Calabria, where all three of these women were born. In addition to the recipe, Filomena also offered advice on the crucial steps of pressing and hanging the meat as it cured and storing it once it was ready. At the same time, Nick, one of my father's closest friends, who also emigrated to the United States from Italy in the 1950s at the age of five, researched recipes on the Internet. In those early years, he also brought several older Italian immigrant men to consult on the process. In more recent years, Nick has become the "keeper of the recipe," responsible for the delicate work of measuring out the salt and other spices and directing the overall process. At the same time, his son Domenic has assumed responsibility for overseeing the distribution of the finished product (a process that in recent years has included careful measuring, weighing, calculating, and data collection). In short, while Nick serves as the link to the past, preserving and protecting a recipe that was initially cobbled together from a number of different sources but is now deemed authentic, Domenic has focused on bringing precision and standardization to the process, using scales and computers to guide production and distribution.

Location has also been an important yet shifting factor in Soppressata Weekend. For many years, the entire two-day process was undertaken at the Tacony-Mayfair Sons of Italy Lodge. While most participants either no longer lived in or never lived in Tacony, it served as the literal and symbolic center for this ritual. The neighborhood was deeply associated with not only a general Italian-American identity with which all participants felt a connection but also with the specific history and lineage of the Naccarato family, as well as several other neighborhood families

that were represented by other men in the group. Thus, this location underscored one of the primary objectives of Soppressata Weekend—namely, emphasizing how it served as a means for these men to connect to their familial and ethnic heritage. With a mission that includes "preserving Italian-American traditions, culture, history, and heritage" ("About OSIA" 2011), the Order Sons of Italy in America provided a context in keeping with the men's soppressata production. At the same time, it sustained the particular connection that many participants felt to this neighborhood in general, and to this specific Sons of Italy Lodge in particular. For participants who still lived in this neighborhood or who had grown up there and since moved away, this space served as a bridge between past and present insofar as it had been for generations a site of countless family celebrations and community festivities.

A minor change in location occurred in 2009, when the work of day 2 was relocated to a local deli so we could switch from using the stuffing attachment on the meat grinder to using the deli's professional-grade equipment. A more substantial change occurred in 2012, when the entire event moved from the lodge in Tacony to the Sons of Italy Lodge in Haddon Heights, New Jersey. This happened primarily because the composition of the group had changed. Over the previous several years, Nick began bringing more of his family and friends to the event. At the same time, he and his son Domenic assumed additional responsibility for organizing and planning. When Nick decided that it was time to invest in a sausage-stuffing machine for the event so that we no longer needed to go to the local deli on day 2, it became feasible to relocate to his Sons of Italy Lodge in Haddon Heights, approximately forty minutes from Tacony. While it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the impact of this change, given that it occurred only in 2012, the composition of the group was significantly different, with the majority of participants connected to Nick and only a handful of us coming from Tacony. While the event still entailed a group of men coming together to make soppressata and, in doing so, enacting an Italian-American identity, it was much less associated with my father's family, friends, and neighborhood. This change in venue, in other words, marked an evolution in the tradition, the impact of which cannot yet be fully determined.

Finally, there are a few aspects of the event that are important to know insofar as they provide context for my analysis. First, Soppressata Weekend is for men only. Some women, including my cousin and some of the participants' wives, have inquired about participating but have been told that it is a "men's only" event. While women have stopped by from time to time, their visits are typically brief, and there is a palpable

change in the men's demeanor. To the extent that Soppressata Weekend is a bonding experience, it is clearly and unequivocally one among men (which I discuss in detail further on). Second, the timing of Soppressata Weekend has remained consistent such that it falls on Super Bowl weekend. While I discuss the gendered implication of this timing below, here I note that it has sometimes caused tension. Typically, both days end with a meal, with roast pork the highlight of the second day. For many participants, however, there is potential conflict between their desire to join the group for this meal and their need to head out in time for Super Bowl–related activities. In fact, in 2011 the men decided not to include this final meal, a decision that some others found disappointing, given that for them it was the culmination of the event. The pork dinner returned in 2012, though most men headed out quickly thereafter, forgoing the cigars and wine that were enjoyed at the end of day 1.

As this summary suggests, Soppressata Weekend is both based on the repetition of certain elements, which reveals how its own identification as a tradition is "a wholly symbolic construction" (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 273), and is also subject to evolution and change. It is an opportunity to build community and reinforce bonds between family and friends while at the same time it is fraught with its own complexities and tensions. In short, it is an occasion that offers insight into not only how a specific group of men uses food to sustain Italian-American identity but also into how heteronormative codes of behavior can be complicated and challenged as men who do not typically take responsibility for feeding their families participate in such food rituals.

Soppressata Weekend as Food Ritual

Soppressata Weekend can be understood as a *ritual*, which Lucy Long (2000) defines as "recurring activities with a symbolic reference" (152). Long argues that a common activity like food consumption is transformed into a ritual "when it occurs with the intentional referencing to meaning larger than the immediate meeting of physical and nutritional needs" (152). Similarly, Jack Santino (1994) defines rituals as "repeated and recurrent symbolic enactments, customs, and ceremonies" and acknowledges that while historically they have been connected to some element of the sacred, in contemporary cultures, they may "include events that are not specifically religious in nature" (10).

Within ethnic communities, in particular, food rituals play an especially important role as they "help to establish a cultural boundary which serves both inclusive and exclusive purposes, uniting those within

its bounds and distinguishing that particular group from all others" (Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore 1998, 130). In fact, Sabina Magliocco (1998) argues that food is "the most common form of symbolic ethnicity" (145–146). In her study of an Italian-American community in Clinton, Indiana, she concludes that "in preparing traditional foods for family reunions and special occasions, the Italian Americans of Clinton are essentially discoursing among themselves about the nature of their ethnicity" (153). Similarly, in his study of "exotic" foods within Italian-American communities and families in Utah, Richard Raspa (1984) finds that "the preparation and consumption of exotic foods among these Italian-Americans is a nostalgic enactment of ethnic identity and familial solidarity" (185–186). Furthermore, he concludes that "personal narratives surround these folk foods and illuminate them as objects of Old World craftsmanship and sources of ethnic pride and familial history" (188).

However, rather than situating ritual activities as separate from those that make up our everyday lives, Roger Abrahams (1987) emphasizes the important link between them: "These framed and prepared-for activities borrow from the everyday but are transformed by stylization and sometimes by the spirit of license which encourages the inversion of everyday values and practices, even to the point of acts of transgression" (176). When applied specifically to food rituals, such transgressive potential may be realized as communal cooking activities focus attention on the typically invisible and devalued work of food preparation. In such instances, meals are transformed from a necessary yet mundane aspect of everyday life into ritualized activities that warrant special attention. As a result, the work of food preparation is reframed in a way that can challenge traditionally gendered assumptions about it.

For example, consider what changes when the domestic kitchen becomes the site for communal cooking by groups of women in preparation for a more ritualized "special occasion." From my experiences growing up in an Italian-American family and community, such ritualized eating included Sunday dinners (Cinotto 2010) and holiday meals that brought together extended family and friends and also included a number of communal festivities, from annual Italian festivals and spaghetti dinners organized through the local parish to smaller ethnic-based fairs and festivals. When these special occasions remained within the private sphere of the home, they typically included generations of women gathered together in the kitchen to prepare ritual foods.[1] When I was a child, the same neighborhood women who regularly prepared meals in their homes for their families shifted into a more public space as they took to the streets or to the church hall to prepare the food that played a central role in our communal

religious feasts and ethnic festivals. From bringing their prized recipes for Sunday gravy and meatballs to the church hall for spaghetti dinners to baking cakes and cookies for sale at one of the food stands, from preparing large quantities of roast pork or roast beef to staffing the stands where sandwiches were made and sold, these women brought the knowledge and skills that were typically reserved for their home kitchens to a more communal space. While in recent years the food offerings at these types of festivals have become increasingly commercialized through reliance on professional food vendors, the annual Feast of the Saints/Italian Festival at Our Lady of Consolation parish still features individuals and families who play a large part in preparing the food. In these instances, food preparation is embedded in a set of ritual practices that function to "help give meaning to our world in part by linking the past to the present and the present to the future" (Kertzer 1988, 10). Moreover, it plays an important role in the process of "self-authentication" (Abrahams 1987, 177) as it allows individuals seeking to maintain a connection to their ethnic and cultural past to do so by embracing what they believe to be "traditional" practices around the production and consumption of food, even as these practices shift from the private kitchen to the public arena.[2]

This is an important context for understanding the symbolic value of Soppressata Weekend. From the perspective of its participants, the event is about making a food product that their ancestors made and consumed and, in doing so, using food to connect across generations to a perceived culinary and cultural past. Of course, their perceptions do not necessarily reflect historical fact. As these men cobble together a recipe from several different sources and develop their own methods for preparing, processing, and storing their soppressata, they are not duplicating the past but rather constructing their own imagined version of it. In this context, the act of preparing food transitions from what they perceive to be a routine obligation that is typically fulfilled by the women in their families into a ritualized activity through which these men create an ethnic heritage as they perform what they understand to be an important facet of their individual and collective identities. This process of ritualizing the production of food provides a context for valuing this work in that it extends beyond the routine responsibility of feeding the family and becomes a means of constituting one's "Italian heritage." This distinction is also important because it provides these men with a necessary framework for distinguishing between the domestic duties and responsibilities that they understand as traditionally assigned to women and their decision to produce the food product that they had formerly purchased and consumed.

The Gendering of Food Production and Consumption

While post–World War II America has experienced significant changes in how food is procured, prepared, and consumed, gendered assumptions about this work remain deeply embedded in our culture. According to Johanna Mäkalä, "the division of labor has changed over the past few decades . . . however, a study by Susan Grieshaber (1997) shows that girls are still socialized in preparing, serving, and clearing up after meals at an early age, whereas such skills are not required from boys" (Mäkalä 2000, 13). These dynamics have a broader role in establishing and maintaining an array of cultural values and ideologies. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes, a society's eating habits and practices help to shape its broader economic and social landscape. Specifically, how a society eats is "associated with a whole conception of the domestic economy and of the division of labour between the sexes" (185).

Carole Counihan and Steven Kaplan (1998) make a similar point, explaining that "the power relations around food mirror the power of the sexes in general" (4). Specifically, they argue that "gender is constructed through men's and women's roles in the production, distribution and symbolism of food" (3). While they acknowledge that for women to have primary responsibility for feeding the family can be read as "a potential source of influence on husbands and children through the ability to give them a valued substance—food," at the same time, it is more typically linked with "female subordination through women's need to serve, satisfy, and defer to others, particularly husbands and boyfriends" (4).

One important way in which food practices reinforce normative gender roles is by emphasizing the connections between gendered identities, gendered spaces, and the "proper" places for men and women in society. Specifically, women's responsibility for feeding the family is situated firmly within the private realm of the domestic kitchen. As such, it stands in contrast to the professional work undertaken traditionally by men in their roles as husbands and fathers who provide the economic resources necessary to support their families. Of course, such assumptions about this rigid separation between men's and women's roles fail to take into account the range of lived experiences that reveal a much more complex negotiation of these gender boundaries. Nonetheless, there is a normative framework against which individual men and women have been—and to a large extent continue to be—judged. While Joan Newlon Radner (1993) acknowledges that "a man can, of course, do certain kinds of 'domestic' work, like cooking or weaving," she emphasizes that it is most culturally acceptable when "he does it outside the home" (39). This separation between domestic work performed in private and professional work done

in public is important in establishing the relative social and economic value of each type of work. Specifically, the presumed invisibility of domestic work contributes to its devaluation (DeVault 1991).

However, the private, domestic, feminized space of the kitchen is not completely off limits to men. But even as Jessamyn Neuhaus (2003) acknowledges significant changes in rigid gender-based assumptions and stereotypes around the production and consumption of food, she concludes that cooking continues to be perceived as women's work, quoting a columnist who makes this point in blatantly sexist and homophobic terms:

> Columnist Steven Bauer asserts that even though more American men cook, we still "think of the kitchen as a woman's space, one that's too risky for people of the male persuasion, even those who don't flinch at bungee jumping, hang gliding or facing a frothy set of class VI rapids." As Bauer explains, the risk, of course, is perceived feminization: "What can be worse for a boy than to be 'tied to mommy's apron strings'? The message is clear: overexposure to pots and pans can seriously affect a man's ability to make his way in the world." (265)

While such sentiments are deeply problematic, they nonetheless reflect familiar attitudes about normative gender and sexuality. Consequently, men's participation in the production of food must be negotiated in ways that protect their gender identity. In his essay "Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition," Thomas Adler (1981) explores how such negotiations are made to accommodate the would-be male cook. While the professionalization of cooking within the public sphere allows for the celebration of the male chef as opposed to the female home cook, in the private sphere, men's cooking must be characterized as special in other ways. As Adler explains, "Dad's cooking exists in evident contradistinction to Mom's on every level: his is festal, hers ferial; his is socially and gastronomically experimental, hers mundane; his is dish-specific and temporally marked, hers diversified and quotidian; his is play, hers is work" (51).

Several of these strategies for accommodating men's participation in food production are evident in Soppressata Weekend. First, using Adler's language, it is temporally marked; it is an annual occasion that stands in stark contrast to the everyday lives of the men who participate in it. Second, it is also dish specific as it focuses on one food product that has significant symbolic value. In fact, the distinctiveness and value of their work are very much framed by the product they make, a cured sausage made from pig. As Gillian Riley (2007) explains in *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food*, pigs have a long and complex place in Italian culinary history.

Of particular importance in this context is its place in rural, southern Italian communities, where "the pig's value in the domestic economy of the poor is . . . clear" (397). She continues: "In peasant society, being unable to afford to rear a pig was the ultimate stigma of poverty, and the distribution of cuts of meat at pig-killing time was a ritual of obligation, not only to helpers but to those less fortunate" (397).[3] Read in this context, Soppressata Weekend takes on added meaning as it contrasts the economic conditions that led many of these men's families to leave Italy with a visible sign of their subsequent success in the United States. As these men transform large quantities of pork into hundreds of soppressata, they not only create what they believe to be a bridge to their familial and cultural past, they also juxtapose that past with evidence of a more prosperous present and future.

Thus, when men produce food, whether Sunday morning breakfasts and weekend barbecues or ritualized activities like Soppressata Weekend, it is a "special occasion" that stands in stark opposition to the day-to-day work performed by women. Because "ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference" (Smith quoted in Bell 1992, 102), it functions to identify legitimate occasions when men can embrace activities that are otherwise devalued as women's work. As is the case with special occasions that make women's work in the kitchen more communal and thus more visible (holidays, festivals, etc.), this same logic provides a safe way for men to enter this space as well. Rather than being identified with women's work when they shift from consuming to preparing food, men are invited to differentiate their culinary forays from the day-to-day work performed by their female counterparts by characterizing it as special.

Within Italian-American families, the gendered assumptions that inform the work of feeding the family are rooted deeply within Italian culture. In their study of food practices among several individuals and families in Bologna, Douglas Harper and Patrizia Faccioli (2009) underscore the symbolic and emotional value of food within Italian communities. Speculating that "making special foods and eating them together as a family is the cultural ideal" (64), they focus on the work both of producing foods—which often involves narratives of grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters working together in the kitchen—and of consuming foods—which often occurs around a large table of extended family and friends. Much of their study does little to challenge the traditional gendering of food that feminizes its production and masculinizes is consumption. For example, after considering the impact of the contemporary feminist movement on Italian households, Harper and Faccioli conclude that "the extraordinary changes in

modern Italy have not fundamentally altered the emotional structure of the family and the role of food in family dynamics" (110). Instead, they endorse what sociologist Laura Balbo calls *la doppia presenza* (the double presence): "The 'double presence' is a recognition that women retained domestic duties when they entered the labor force" (126). Similarly, in her study of family and food in twentieth-century Florence, Carole Counihan (2004) identifies shifts in how much time younger women actually spend cooking, while acknowledging that "they still felt that cooking was essential to their identity as women" (175).

Despite significant changes in the latter half of the twentieth century, traditional gendered assumptions about women's roles in the family remain deeply ingrained in American culture. As Suzanne Bianchi (2011) explains, "being a good mother, devoted to one's children, is a core identity that does not change when women take on more hours of paid work" (20). Instead, many scholars argue that women's increased presence in the workforce conflicts with an "ideology of intensive mothering," which "is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (Hays 1998, x). Such an ideology is linked to what Mary Blair-Loy (2005) identifies as "the *family devotion schema*, a cultural model that defines marriage and motherhood as a woman's primary vocation" (2). Such assumptions reinforce the message that women, regardless of their work status outside of the home, maintain primary responsibility for caring for their families, including the work of producing food. Given this fact, how is it that a group of men who otherwise seem to embrace these gendered assumptions in their everyday lives can come together once a year to do the kind of work that they typically expect of their wives and mothers?

To answer this question, and to understand how Soppressata Weekend both exposes and reinforces the performative nature of normative gender roles, I turn to the work of Judith Butler (1990), who argues that "gender is performatively produced" (24) through "the *stylized repetition of acts*" (140; emphasis in original). To the extent that one's biological sex and gendered identity align according to cultural norms and expectations, this performance—"gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds [that] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (140)—is assumed to be a natural and stable part of one's identity. However, Butler argues that the performative nature of gender is exposed through parody, most visibly "within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (137). These and other practices that imitate or exaggerate normative gendered attributes and behaviors reveal not only that they are moments in which gender is performed but also that

all gender identifications are created through performance. Thus, normative gender identities are created and sustained as men and women perform their expected roles in society, including in relation to the production and consumption of food. By extension, these performances are disrupted and revealed to be performances when men and women step outside of their prescribed roles and act in ways that contradict them. Even as these moments are framed as exceptional or special, as in the case of Soppressata Weekend, they are nonetheless significant, as they disrupt performances of normative gender identities and therefore require framing and contextualization that contain their disruptive potential.

Soppressata Weekend is framed in several ways that make it "safe" for this group of men to step outside of their typical routines and partake in a kind of work that they would traditionally identify with women. For example, it shifts the location of this work from the domestic kitchen into quasi-public spaces. As mentioned above, until 2012 Soppressata Weekend took place at the Tacony-Mayfair Sons of Italy hall. This is significant not only because it provides a space for men to take responsibility for producing food in a venue other than the private domestic kitchen but also because it immediately connects their decision to perform this task with their desire to use it as a means of creating a sense of ethnic heritage. Focused less on feeding families, the activities of Soppressata Weekend are more closely tied to the broader mission of celebrating what is perceived as Italian-American culture and traditions. Thus, the local Sons of Italy hall, whether in Pennsylvania or New Jersey, as was the case in 2012, provides an important backdrop for distinguishing the work undertaken by these men from that performed by women on a daily basis.

This distinction was also enhanced when day 2 of the weekend was relocated for several years to a local deli in order to use its high-capacity stuffing machine. Like the Sons of Italy hall, this location contrasts with the domestic kitchen in important ways. Not only does it cross the public/private divide, it also brings the men's work into a professional setting. Like the restaurant kitchen, it is a professionalized space in which men's participation in food preparation not only is authorized but can be celebrated. Consequently, it stood in contrast to the routine work performed in isolation by women in their domestic kitchens. While in 2012 the event moved to a different Sons of Italy hall, one of the factors that made this possible was that the men had purchased their own professional-grade sausage-stuffing machine. Still working in the legitimizing space of the hall and now utilizing their own professional-grade meat grinder and sausage-stuffing machine, the men could comfortably distinguish their work from that undertaken by their mothers and wives in the domestic kitchen.

Such a distinction is enhanced by other facets of the work, including an assembly-line approach. As explained previously, the first task to be performed is preparing the meat for grinding. This involves setting up multiple tables down the length of the hall where men work with approximately 350 pounds of pork (the quantity of meat alone separates this work from that performed daily in a domestic kitchen). Most of the men assume their positions on either side of these tables and get to work trimming the meat and chopping it into approximately two-inch squares. At the far end of the tables, several other men take charge of setting up the meat grinder to begin processing the meat that has been collected in large aluminum trays. Meanwhile, Nick, the "keeper of the recipe," sets up his "lab," complete with spices and scales. He begins measuring out the spices and consults with his son about the weight of the ground meat and how it should be divided into trays of equal weight and separated into two batches (one for sweet and one for hot soppressata). The younger men who track data, led by Nick's son Domenic, also like to calculate the "meat-to-fat" ratio by comparing the weight of the meat with which the group began with the total weight of the ground pork (in 2012, approximately 360 pounds of pork yielded 300 pounds of ground meat).

This assembly-line approach carries into day 2 as the work transitions to stuffing the spiced ground pork into casings. Once again, long tables are set up across the length of the hall with the stuffing machine at one end and a scale at the other end. While there is always some discussion (sometimes heated debates) about the best way of doing this work, eventually several men work the sausage stuffer while the other men cut the soppressata into lengths and tie them securely at each end. At the other end of the table sits the man responsible for weighing each soppressata and tracking this information. Jokingly referred to as "quality control," he will often report when the team has produced a "perfect" sausage that weighs in at exactly one pound. Such consistency is important when it comes time to calculate the cost per soppressata and divvy up the weekend's yield.

Another framing device that distinguishes Soppressata Weekend from the type of daily, domestic food preparation traditionally assigned to women is its emphasis on specialized knowledge. In their study, Harper and Faccioli (2009) found that men often had one specific role in the meal preparation process, namely, choosing and buying the wine: "Several women said that choosing wine requires a special kind of knowledge that men uniquely possess" (145). Specialized knowledge is also highlighted in another section of their book, *The Italian Way: Food and Social Life*, when Harper and Faccioli focus on various methods for preparing specific foods. In discussing curing meats they explain:

> Before the recent invention of refrigeration, meat was preserved by curing. . . . While . . . dry curing is simple on the surface, it depends on skill and knowledge. Too much salt and drying produces tough, salty meat that one would eat in desperation; too little salt and the meat will spoil. To make a food as exquisite as Italian *prosciutto* . . . takes artfulness in technique and production. (174–175)

The importance of such knowledge to the process of preparing and curing meats is also evident at Soppressata Weekend, from Filomena, our Canadian cousin with whom my father consulted initially on the recipe and curing process, to the Italian immigrant men who were brought to the event by Nick in those early years. It is also evidenced as men share their techniques for curing and storing the soppressata. Too little time for pressing and curing and the soppressata will be inedible; too much heat or improper storage and they will spoil.

Like selecting the best wine for a meal, making soppressata requires specialized knowledge. This is not to suggest that the work that women perform in the kitchen does not require knowledge and skill but, rather, that such work is often viewed as natural or innate for women, not requiring special training or education beyond what is provided to young girls by their mothers and grandmothers. Whereas at Soppressata Weekend the salt and spices used to cure the meat are precisely measured using a scale, I remember my grandmother telling people who asked her for detailed recipes or exact quantities that she just knew how much of each ingredient was required. No measuring cups and spoons; no exact recipes or precise measurements; it seemed as though *nonna* always knew by instinct the right amount of each ingredient.

Finally, the masculine ambiance of Soppressata Weekend is reinforced by some additional subtle and not-so-subtle conditions. As mentioned above, there is an unwritten though widely acknowledged and enforced rule that this is a male-only event. On the surface, this environment allows for the exercise of unconstrained masculinity, as evidenced by the freedom with which bawdy jokes are told and off-color language is used. This year, when two younger men whose wives had recently had babies veered into talk about breastfeeding, sleeping patterns, and sharing domestic duties, several men taunted them and complained that such topics were not appropriate. This was a space for "men to be men," and tips and tactics for childrearing were clearly out of bounds. Whenever these young men returned to these topics, they were teased and chided for being "whipped" by their wives.

Another way in which masculinity seems to be reinforced is through the playful sexualization of the work at hand. Particularly on day 2, it appears

impossible to avoid sexual jokes, particularly when it comes to the shape, size, and girth of the phallic soppressata. Not surprisingly, the stuffing process invites any number of crude references and sexual innuendos, most of which are aimed at affirming the sexual prowess of the joke-teller or questioning the virility of its intended target. While most of these jokes are framed through familiar codes of normative heterosexuality, in some instances, they adopt homosexual or homophobic undertones. There is typically a fine line between masturbatory jokes that emerge as men "stroke" or "massage" the soppressata and jokes that suggest homosexual subtexts to such actions, particularly when a man is jokingly accused of getting too much pleasure from his work.[4] This year, Domenic, who was responsible for creating the right amount of space between soppressata as they came out of the stuffing machine, found himself the target of jokes when he explained that he would "use a whole fist" between individual links. While all such joking is light-hearted and takes place in a convivial atmosphere (of course, one that presumes that this is a space not only reserved for men, but more specifically for heterosexual men), it nonetheless reveals the complex sexual undertone that exists just beneath the surface of the event.

In this way, Soppressata Weekend can be read in relation to theories of homosociality. Jean Lipman-Blumen (1976) defines homosociality as "the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex," distinguishing it from "homosexual" by explaining that "it does not necessarily involve . . . an explicitly erotic sexual interaction between members of the same sex" (16). Like the football players who compete in the Super Bowl, the men who participate in Soppressata Weekend do so, at least in part, out of a desire to bond with other men. According to Sharon Bird (1996), such homosocial interactions "are critical to both the conceptualization of masculine identity and the maintenance of gender norms" (122). While this is accomplished in spaces that segregate men from women, such segregation requires that normative codes of gender and sexuality be reinforced within them. In other words, as men choose to segregate themselves from women, they must reinforce their masculinity and heterosexuality because it is in such spaces that they can be called into question.

Ultimately, a close analysis of Soppressata Weekend reveals its complex and conflicting connection to normative gender identity. On the one hand, it is readily apparent that the work of making soppressata can be differentiated in concrete and tangible ways from the daily task of feeding the family. In fact, situating it in stark contrast to this work may prove valuable to those participants who want to maintain a gendered division between the special occasions on which they participate in the preparation of food

and the daily routine that assigns this work to women. On the other hand, even as this particular event is coded and framed in ways that allow participants to reinforce their masculinity and presumed heterosexuality, the very fact that such coding happens reveals the fragility of such identities. By stepping outside of hegemonic masculinity, these men reveal the performative nature of gender identity even as they work to contain this reality.

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Notes

1. My own presence in the kitchen as a boy who identified very much with my grandmother and often worked by her side on such occasions suggests how any generalizations about gender roles should be read as normative but must also be complicated by taking into account divergences from such norms. This also provides an important framework for my analysis of Soppressata Weekend through the lens of normative codes of gender and sexuality, which I do later in the essay.
2. To place my personal experiences with Italian-American foodways within a broader context, see Malpezzi and Clements (1992, 221–246).
3. To underscore this point, Riley (2007) cites two sayings from Calabria: "'*Cu' ammazza lu porcu sta cuntentu'nu annu, cu'si marita sta cuntentu 'nu jornu'* (He who kills a pig is happy for a year, he who marries is happy for a day)" and "'*Allu riccu le mora la mugliere, Allu poveru le mora lu puorcu'* (The rich man mourns his wife, the poor man his pig; a loose translation)" (397).
4. For a similar image, see the beginning of Nancy Savoca's film *Household Saints* (1993), which follows three generations of Italian-American women in post–World War II New York's Little Italy.

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