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## Family Dining: Food and Drink in The Sopranos – a Gastrocritical Approach

Lisa Davies

*Technological University Dublin*, [lilydavies@gmail.com](mailto:lilydavies@gmail.com)

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# **Family Dining: Food and Drink in The Sopranos – a Gastrocritical Approach**

A thesis submitted to the Technological University Dublin, School of Culinary Arts and Food  
Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of M.A in Gastronomy  
and Food Studies

By

Lisa Davies

May 2023

Supervisor: Anke Klitzing

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of the M.A. in Gastronomy and Food Studies is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Abstract

This thesis uses gastrocriticism to explore food and drink in the 86 episodes of the long-form narrative HBO television series *The Sopranos*. Gastrocriticism is an emerging branch of literary criticism that draws on scholarship from a range of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. A deeper understanding of the series was gained by using a structured framework of enquiry to explore narrative, setting, characterisation and genre through the lens of food and foodways. *The Sopranos* is a story of an Italian-American crime family and food is abundant in the series and bound up with the identity of the main characters. This study highlighted how the intertextual food tropes in *The Sopranos* are a continuation of the gangster genre, recalling expressions of Italian-American identity, family, *esprit de corps* and power. Food is central to the plot and is used in a variety of ways; as a key narrative device; an embodiment of the personality of the lead character; as a vehicle to access the subconscious; as a symbol of greed; as a symbol of power, as a token of identity, and as a signal of outlier status. Looking at food and foodways offered insight into the nuances of the characterisations and Italian-American identity, and how this identity is evolving as the population is becoming more assimilated in America. A gastrocritical viewing of *The Sopranos* has provided a more in-depth understanding of the series and the cultural landscape of the time. This study shows how foodways are a foundational component of ethnic identity.

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Finally, thank you to my family who have been very supportive, especially my husband, Neal, who as well as sitting through many episodes of *The Sopranos* has been a wonderful sounding board. Also his cooking skills have improved tremendously over the past two years as he has had to cook more dinners than before!

# List of Episodes in the Six Seasons of *The Sopranos*

With abbreviations that will appear hereafter in this thesis.

Series 1 - Release Date: Jan 10, 1999 – April 4, 1999		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S1E1	The Sopranos
2	S1E2	46 Long
3	S1E3	Denial, Anger, Acceptance
4	S1E4	Meadowlands
5	S1E5	College
6	S1E6	Pax Soprana
7	S1E7	Down Neck
8	S1E8	The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti
9	S1E9	Boca
10	S1E10	A Hit is a Hit
11	S1E11	Nobody Knows Anything
12	S1E12	Isabella
13	S1E13	I Dream of Jennie Cusamano

Season 2 - Release Date: Jan 16, 2000 – April 9, 2000		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S2E1	Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist's Office
2	S2E2	Do Not Resuscitate
3	S2E3	Toodle-Fucking-Oo
4	S2E4	Commendatori
5	S2E5	Big Girls Don't Cry
6	S2E6	The Happy Wanderer
7	S2E7	D-Girl
8	S2E8	Full Leather Jacket
9	S2E9	From Where to Eternity
10	S2E10	Bust Out
11	S2E11	House Arrest
12	S2E12	The Knight in White Satin Armor
13	S2E13	Funhouse

Season 3 - Release Date: March 4, 2001 – May 20, 2001		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S3E1	Mr. Ruggiero's Neighborhood
2	S3E2	Proshai Livushka
3	S3E3	Fortunate Son
4	S3E4	Employee of the Month
5	S3E5	Another Toothpick
6	S3E6	University
7	S3E7	Second Opinion
8	S3E8	He is Risen
9	S3E9	The Telltale Moozadell
10	S3E10	...To Save Us All from Satan's Power...
11	S3E11	Pine Barrens
12	S3E12	Amour Fou
13	S3E13	The Army of One

Season 4 - Sept 15, 2002 - Dec 8, 2002		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S4E1	For All Debts Public and Private
2	S4E2	No-Show
3	S4E3	Christopher
4	S4E4	The Weight
5	S4E5	Pie Oh My
6	S4E6	Everybody Hurts
7	S4E7	Watching Too Much Television
8	S4E8	Mergers and Acquisitions
9	S4E9	Whoever Did This
10	S4E10	The Strong, Silent Type
11	S4E11	Calling All Cars
12	S4E12	Eloise
13	S4E13	White Caps

Season 5 - Release Date: Mar 7, 2004 - June 6, 2004		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S5E1	Two Tonys
2	S5E2	Rat Pack
3	S5E3	Where's Johnny?
4	S5E4	All Happy Families
5	S5E5	Irregular Around the Margins
6	S5E6	Sentimental Education
7	S5E7	In Camelot
8	S5E8	Marco Polo
9	S5E9	Unidentified Black Man
10	S5E10	Cold Cuts
11	S5E11	The Test Dream
12	S5E12	Long Term Parking
12	S5E13	All Our Respect

Season 6 - Release Date: March 12, 2006 - 12 June, 2006		
Episode	Abbreviation	Episode Title
1	S6E1	Members Only
2	S6E2	Join the Club
3	S6E3	Mayham
4	S6E4	The Fleshy Part of the Thigh
5	S6E5	Mr. and Mrs. John Sacrimoni Request...
6	S6E6	Live Free or Die
7	S6E7	Luxury Lounge
8	S6E8	Johnny Cakes
9	S6E9	The Ride
10	S6E10	Moe 'n Joe
11	S6E11	Cold Stones
12	S6E12	Kaisha

Season 6 - Final Series - Release Date: April 8, 2007 - June 10, 2007		
Episode	Code	Episode Title
1	S6E13	Soprano Home Movies
2	S6E14	Stage 5
3	S6E15	Remember When
4	S6E16	Chasing It
5	S6E17	Walk Like a Man
6	S6E18	Kennedy and Heidi
7	S6E19	The Second Coming
8	S6E20	The Blue Comet
9	S6E21	Made in America

# Glossary of Characters Mentioned in This Thesis

## The Soprano Family

Tony Soprano	Defacto boss of the DiMeo crime family
Carmela Soprano	Tony's wife and mother of their children
Meadow Soprano	Tony and Carmela's daughter
AJ Soprano	Tony and Carmela's son
Janice Soprano	Tony's younger sister
Livia Soprano	Tony's mother
Corrado Junior Soprano	Tony's uncle and his mother's brother-in-law. Former boss of the DiMeo gang until he develops dementia.

## DiMeo Crime Family

Silvio Dante	Tony's loyal consiglieri
Paulie Gaultieri, nickname Paulie Walnut	A soldier, promoted to underboss in 2006
Christopher Molitsanti	One of Tony's soliders, until he is promoted to caporegime. He is Tony's cousin once removed but is close to him and refers to him as Uncle.
Richie Aprile	A caporegime in the DiMeo crime family and leader of the Aprile gang. He is Jackie Jr's older brother.
Vito Spatafore	One of Tony's soldiers who is the only member of the crime family to be bisexual
Ralphie Cifaretto	A captain in the DiMeo crime family
Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero	One of Tony's soldiers who later becomes a FBI informant
Bobby Baccalieri	A high-ranking soldier who runs Junior's business interests
Eugene Pontecorvo	A soldier who later become a FBI informant
Tony Blundetto	Cousin of Tony Soprano and Christopher Moltisanti.
Furio Giunta	Furio is brought over from the Zucca Camorra family in Naples to work for Tony
Patsy Parisi	Former soldier in Junior's crew, 2000 transferred to Soprano's crew
Burt Gervasi	Soldier in the Soprano crew
Big Pussy Malanga	DiMeo associate. Was assassinated after a dispute with Junior.

## Lupertazzi Crime Family

Phil Leotardo	Acting boss of the rival Lupertazzi gang
Johnny Sacrimoni	De-facto boss of the Lupertazzi gang until imprisoned

## Other Characters

Dr. Melfi	Tony's pyschotherapist
Father Phil Intintola	Local Catholic priest who becomes emotionally involved with
Dr. Cusamano	Tony and Carmela's neighbour
Jeanie Cusamano	Dr Cusamano's wife
Joan Cusamano	Twin sister of Jeanie, alumni of Georgetown University
Artie Bucco	Chef and owner of Vesuvio and then Nuovo Vesuvio
Charmaine Bucco	Artie's wife
Mr. Wegler	AJ's college counsellor at High School
Rosalie Aprile	Widow of DiMeo crime family acting boss, Jackie Aprile Sr and mother of Jackie Jr
Jackie Aprile Jr.	Son of Rosalie and Jackie Sr.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis applies a gastrocritical approach—a lens through which to view food and foodways in literature and film—to the HBO (Home Box Office) television series, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). The term gastrocriticism was coined by Ronald Tobin over 20 years ago and is defined as a “multidisciplinary approach that links gastronomy and literature.”<sup>1</sup> Because *The Sopranos* is long-form narrative television, it will be treated as a film for this thesis. This chapter will cover definition, justification and aims and objectives of this thesis.

## 1.1 Definition

Food is far more than sustenance. Jean Anthelme Brillat Savarin’s aphorism, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are”<sup>2</sup> infers that food is more than nourishment; it is a “web of relationships and many-layered meanings.”<sup>3</sup> *The Sopranos* is a HBO television series that follows the everyday lives of a mob family. As a crime drama it fits into the gangster genre,<sup>4</sup> and should be considered in relation to the gangster movies to which it draws many allusions, such as *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974 and 1990) and *GoodFellas* (1990). Food and drink is plentiful in *The Sopranos* but to date there has been little academic research on this area. This thesis proposes using gastrocriticism—an emerging branch of literary criticism<sup>5</sup>—to view the 86 episodes of the series. Gastrocriticism draws on a range of interdisciplinary studies and this thesis will use research from food and film studies, anthropology, sociology, social and cultural studies. It provides a structured framework of enquiry, using gastrocritical questions<sup>6</sup> to offer a systematic approach; for example, exploring narrative, setting, characterisation, genre through food and foodways can provide a deeper understanding of the series. This research will

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<sup>1</sup> Tobin cited in Anke Klitzing, “‘My Palate Hung with Starlight’: A Gastrocritical Reading of Seamus Heaney’s Poetry.” *East-West Cultural Passage* 19, no. 2 (2019): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*. (1825; transl. Anne Drayton, 1970; repr., London: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Anke Klitzing, “New Beginnings in Reading (Irish) Literature: A Gastrocritical Look at George Moore’s ‘Home Sickness’ and Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*,” in *New Beginnings: Perspectives from France and Ireland*, ed. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023), 39.

<sup>4</sup> “American Film Institute Brings the Best of Hollywood Together to Celebrate “AFI’s 10 Top 10.” American Film Institute press release, June 17, 2008. On AFI website, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140328082541/http://www.afi.com/Docs/about/press/2008/AFI10\\_top\\_10\\_release\\_June08.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20140328082541/http://www.afi.com/Docs/about/press/2008/AFI10_top_10_release_June08.pdf), accessed March 30, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Anke Klitzing, “New Beginnings”.

<sup>6</sup> Anke Klitzing, “Gastrocritical Reading Questions” (unpublished manuscript, last modified 09 February 2022), Microsoft Word File.

provide greater insight into *The Sopranos* by viewing it through a “culinary lens”<sup>7</sup> as food and foodways drive the plot, sustain tension and define the characters.

## 1.2 Justification

Gastrocriticism is a form of literary criticism; however, this study will apply it to *The Sopranos* which is long-form narrative television. It is a relatively new artform that has the “texture of epic-fiction”<sup>8</sup> and warrants academic attention. Food film studies is an emerging area of study led by Parasecoli,<sup>9</sup> Bower<sup>10</sup> and Poole.<sup>11</sup> Since the earliest days of filmmaking, food has been used to enhance stories: whether that be to depict a character, his or her ethnicity or class, a state of mind or to serve as a metaphor.<sup>12</sup> Food is a “highly condensed social fact”<sup>13</sup> and the intersection between food and film offers insights into identity and culture. Applying a gastrocritical lens will provide deeper insight and understanding into characters, the narrative, values and identity. In this case it should also provide greater understanding about Italian-American food culture and foodways particularly, as food is an expression of Italian-American identity.<sup>14</sup>

As scant research has been undertaken on the role of food in *The Sopranos*, there was only a partial body of work on which to build. There has been significant research on *The Sopranos* in varied areas from a psychotherapy point of view,<sup>15</sup> Italian-American stereotypes<sup>16</sup> and gender.<sup>17</sup> Food and the gangster genre has been studied by Santos.<sup>18</sup> To this author’s knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Amy Tigner and Allison Carruth, *Literature and Food Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony N. Smith, “TV or not TV? The Sopranos and Contemporary Episode Architecture in US Network and Premium Cable Drama,” *Critical Studies in Television* 6, no. 1 (2011): 37.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Lindenfeld and Fabio Parasecoli, “Food and Cinema: An Evolving Relationship,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture*, ed. Kathleen Lebesco and Peter Naccarato (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 27-39.

<sup>10</sup> Anne L. Bower, “Watching Food: The Production of Food, Film, and Values,” in *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, ed. Anne L. Bower (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Gaye Poole, *Reel Meals, Set Meals: Food in Film and Theatre* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press Party, 1999), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Zimmerman, *Food in the Movies* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010), 265.

<sup>13</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 3 (Aug 1981): 494.

<sup>14</sup> Gina Almerico, “Food and Identity: Food Studies, Cultural and Personal Identity,” *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies* 8 (2014): 1-8.

<sup>15</sup> Neil A Wynn, “Review Essay Counselling the Mafia: The Sopranos,” *Journal of American Studies* 38, no.1 (2004): 127-132.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Alba and Philip Kasinitz, “Sophisticated Television, Sophisticated Stereotypes: The Sopranos (HBO), Created by David Chase,” *Contexts* 5, no. 4 (2006): 74-77.

<sup>17</sup> Roseanne Giannini Quinn, “Mothers, Molls, and Misogynists: Resisting Italian-American Womanhood in The Sopranos,” *The Journal of American Culture* 27, no. 2 (2004): 166.

<sup>18</sup> Marlisa Santos, “‘Leave the Gun, Take the Cannoli’: Food and Family in the Modern American Mafia Film,” in *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, ed. Anne L. Bower (London: Routledge, 2004), 209.

there is no meaningful work on food and foodways in *The Sopranos*, and a wide approach was taken to identify major areas of interest. Given the time and scope that the Master's thesis allows, and the many complexities of the subject, this work is intended as a broad basis for future deeper studies. As food film studies continue to develop, building on these foundations can only prove valuable.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives**

This research aims to answer:

What can a gastrocritical approach of *The Sopranos* tell us about food and foodways?

This thesis will provide background on *The Sopranos*; then, through analysis of food and foodways in the series, this study aims to demonstrate how they are used to indicate character, identity and plot, place and setting, and how the series fits within the gangster genre.

## Chapter Two – Background and Critical Considerations

This chapter introduces the HBO television series *The Sopranos*, providing background on the series, its on-air home, and its creator, David Chase, before examining it in the context of the wider gangster genre, and then looking at the critical considerations to date that place the series in the context of its portrayal of women, of Italian-American stereotypes and the role of psychotherapy.

### 2.1 *The Sopranos*: Overview

*The Sopranos* is an American crime drama television series that was created by HBO, Chase Films and Brad Grey Television, premiering on HBO on January 10, 1999. The series ran for six seasons and consists of 86 episodes, ending on June 10, 2007. It was broadcast both in the United States and internationally, and received critical acclaim from both the public and TV critics. *New York Times* reviewer Virginia Heffernan compared it to the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*<sup>19</sup> and another *Times* critic, Caryn James, described it as existing “at the juncture where pop culture and high art meet. Functioning on the levels of capicola and Proust, of movie lovers and film scholars.”<sup>20</sup> Over the course of its six seasons, the series won 32 Emmy awards and received 124 nominations: additionally, it earned 23 Golden Globe nominations and five victories.

*The Sopranos* narrative begins in the year 1999 in Northern New Jersey, juxtaposing the life of the main protagonist, Tony Soprano—a violent mobster—with the mundanity of suburban life and fraught family relationships. The Sopranos themselves are a multi-generational crime family, and the series charts the story of their attempted assimilation in suburbia against a backdrop of the many issues facing Americans on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The series becomes a vehicle for many topical issues of the time such as the increasing commercialisation and consumerism of American life, globalisation and the fragility of the United States following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

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<sup>19</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “The Real Boss of The Sopranos,” *New York Times*, February 29, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/29/arts/television-the-real-boss-of-the-sopranos.html>

<sup>20</sup> *Capicola* is a cured meat that is linked to the main protagonist's fainting spells that result from a childhood trauma. This will be discussed later in the thesis. Caryn James, “‘Sopranos’: Blood, Bullets and Proust,” *NY Times*, March 2, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/02/movies/tv-weekend-sopranos-blood-bullets-and-proust.html>

## 2.2 David Chase

Despite his Anglo-Saxon surname, *The Sopranos*' producer and writer, David Chase, grew up in a working class Italian-American community in New Jersey. His paternal grandfather had anglicised the family name from *De Cesare* to Chase. Chase's background is significant to *The Sopranos* in that he has admitted he based many of the characters and storylines on people he knew and events he grew up with. For example, both his cousin and uncle were connected to the *Boiardo* organised crime family. In addition, many of the names used in *The Sopranos* were based on the real names of his family members.<sup>21</sup> The verisimilitude of the series came from the mundanities of a world he had observed first-hand, some of which were food-related:

I want to tell the story about the reality of being a mobster -- or what I perceive to be the reality of life in organized crime. They aren't shooting each other every day. They sit around eating baked ziti and betting and figuring out who owes who money.<sup>22</sup>

To ensure authenticity, Chase paid great attention to the casting of individual characters, and was particular about casting Italian-Americans from the New Jersey and New York area. Along with some scenes shot at the Silvercup Studios on Long Island, NY, much of the series was shot on location in real businesses and real houses in New Jersey. Both the actors and locations contribute to the authentic portrayal of the suburban landscape and the *Italianità* of the characters.

## 2.3 HBO and *The Sopranos*: a New Direction for Television

*The Sopranos* was produced by and broadcast on HBO, an American pay-cable channel then owned by Time Warner. It is significant that the series was made by HBO rather than one of the traditional American TV networks—CBS, ABC, NBC—as HBO's subscription model freed it from advertising constraints, censorship and commercial breaks. The absence of commercial interruptions allowed *The Sopranos* to “seem cinematic” in comparison to other network television dramas.<sup>23</sup> It is no co-incidence that HBO originally stood for Home Box Office and from 1996, marketed itself as “It's Not TV, It's HBO.” Martin suggests that television was evolving from a “much maligned” medium that had a universal appeal to something that was

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<sup>21</sup> “Talking Sopranos #39 "90 Minutes w/David Chase." *YouTube.com*, acc. January 24, 2023.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TanrL\\_UuNck](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TanrL_UuNck)

<sup>22</sup> “Chasing TV,” *Salon.com*, acc. February 12, 2023,

<http://web.archive.org/web/19991011020817/www.salon.com/ent/int/1999/01/20int.html>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Z. Newman and Elaine Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 135.

closer to a work of art.<sup>24</sup> Schulman asserts that HBO's production model is closer to novels than commercial television<sup>25</sup> because viewers are able to build a relationship with the characters over a longer period of time. This long-form story-telling—enabled by the freedom of working with HBO—allowed for a more organic story arc and greater character development.

Tomasulo defines long-form narrative as “the representation of the world (or at least a nation) to an audience.”<sup>26</sup> He argues that *The Sopranos* is a harsh criticism of America, and conventional one-hour episodes interrupted by ad-breaks would have struggled to cover such a vast theme as the demand for weekly narrative closure in support of an ad-funded model would have made it difficult to develop complex themes. Long-form enabled *The Sopranos* to deliver a more epic scope and engaging drama. Like Schulman, Tomasulo argues that the long-form approach allowed viewers to explore their own individual reaction, thus extending the story beyond the screen. He suggests that the abrupt ending of *The Sopranos* continued the narrative well beyond the series itself by inviting theorising and speculation, claiming that “the narrative could, in fact, last a lifetime.”<sup>27</sup> Many long-running television shows contain growth and development in one episode, whereas long-term narrative might have each episode contributing to a narrative and character trajectory often leaving loose ends hanging. With *The Sopranos*, the main difference is the scale of the long-term narrative in that it truly is the “representation of the world (or at least a nation) to an audience.”<sup>28</sup>

The freedom of working with HBO also contributed to the further development of the “antihero.” In the decade between 1999 and 2009, HBO was at the forefront of this phenomenon through *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* (2002-2008) and then *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014). Shuster suggests that *The Sopranos*, followed by *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013) and *Better Call Saul* (AMC 2015-2022) exemplify this “new television”<sup>29</sup> where morally ambiguous characters replaced protagonists who were on the right side of the law. It has been argued that Tony Soprano paved the way for Walter White, the humble chemistry teacher turned

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<sup>24</sup> Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Schulman, “The Sopranos: An American Existentialism,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 39 no.1 (2010): 23-38.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Tomasulo, “Old Vino in New Bottles?: The Sopranos and Long-Form Narrative,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 35 no.3 (2018): 210.

<sup>27</sup> Tomasulo, 220.

<sup>28</sup> Tomasulo, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Shuster, *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

ruthless drug baron of *Breaking Bad*.<sup>30</sup> The viewing public were inviting characters into their living rooms that were “unhappy, morally compromised, complicated and deeply human.”<sup>31</sup> Lyons suggests that these antiheroes resulted from a world rife with white collar crime and corporate corruption, and these antihero characters are not the true villains. That other HBO production, *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), took crime drama into new territory. Its creator David Simon described it as a “visual novel” that provided a systemic analysis of urban corruption.<sup>32</sup> The revolutionary themes and style of *The Sopranos* placed it firmly in the vanguard of this new wave of television that was enabled by the creative freedom that HBO encouraged.

## 2.4 The Gangster Genre

As defined by the American Film Institute, the gangster genre is described as a sub-genre of crime movies and is hallmarked as one of the “classic genres” in its Top Ten list.<sup>33</sup> Gangster films are usually “centred on organized crime or maverick criminals in a twentieth-century setting.”<sup>34</sup>

The early years of Hollywood's success coincided with the “Roaring Twenties” of prohibition and post-prohibition American society. The Gangster genre has been described as a modern continuation of the Western genre.<sup>35</sup> The genre took off with early spoken-word films such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932). Their popularity led to a moral panic and this resulted in the 1934 Production Code Administration (the Hays Code) that stipulated that criminals should not be portrayed in a positive light.<sup>36</sup> More black-and-white classics followed such as *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *White Heat* (1949), recording the cultural clout of America’s gangland icons while firmly cementing the careers of James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson and Humphrey Bogart. They also

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<sup>30</sup> Siobhan Lyons, “The (Anti-)Hero with a Thousand Faces: Reconstructing Villainy in *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Better Call Saul*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2021): 230.

<sup>31</sup> Lyons, 244.

<sup>32</sup> Ian Rothkirch, “What Drugs Have Not Destroyed, the War on Them Has,” *Salon.com*, June 29, 2002, [https://www.salon.com/2002/06/29/simon\\_5/](https://www.salon.com/2002/06/29/simon_5/).

<sup>33</sup> American Film Institute, “American Film Institute Brings the Best of Hollywood Together to Celebrate ‘AFI’s 10 Top 10,’” press release, June 17, 2008, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140328082541/http://www.afi.com/Docs/about/press/2008/AFI10\\_top\\_10\\_release\\_June08.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20140328082541/http://www.afi.com/Docs/about/press/2008/AFI10_top_10_release_June08.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> American Film Institute, “American Film Institute Brings The Best of Hollywood Together.”

<sup>35</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 134.

<sup>36</sup> The Production Code of 1934 was a set of moral guidelines that were enforced from 1934 to 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America. It prohibited profanity, nudity, drug use, and miscegenation as well as any suggestion that the law could be broken. It also did not allow sympathy for criminals.



created antiheroes in the titular mob bosses whose complex, charismatic personalities allowed themes of power, violence, loyalty, and betrayal to be explored on the silver screen for the first time.

After a wartime and post-war hiatus, gangster movies emerged again in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974 and 1990), *A Bronx Tale* (1994) and *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), before being re-visited in *GoodFellas* (1990), a remake of *Scarface* (1983) and *The Untouchables* (1987). The Production Code was officially replaced in 1968 by the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA), the removal of censorship enabling creativity with regards to the portrayal of criminals.

From its inception, the gangster genre has been used as a platform for social commentary in the movie world, exploring issues such as race, assimilation, and the corruption associated with power and whilst some gangster movies romanticise the mob lifestyle, most present a compromised and critical view of organised crime and its subsequent impact on society.

*The Sopranos* pays particular homage to *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*. The series is littered with references to these films, and to a lesser degree to *Public Enemy*. The mobsters in *The Sopranos* are nostalgic for the old, pre-RICO days<sup>37</sup>, and believe the best days of organised crime are over. Much has been written about how *The Sopranos* is an evolution of the gangster genre. Thorburn describes *The Sopranos* as “the crime family for our age of therapy and Prozac.”<sup>38</sup> Nochimson posits that the series brought to light the moral dilemmas and emotional melodrama that had not previously been seen due to Production Code restrictions and one-dimensional macho representations of mafia figures. She claims that the series provokes the audience to consider the moral dilemma and ethics of such a lifestyle.<sup>39</sup> Gardaphé notes the Mafia’s 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges as mobsters like Tony Soprano struggle to maintain dominance in a changing world.<sup>40</sup> Fields observes that due to changes in society, a criminal such as Tony Soprano only has power as a killer and not a civilian: “Tony’s ongoing dilemma is that this sort

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<sup>37</sup> RICO stands for the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. It is a United States federal law that provides for extended criminal penalties and a civil cause of action for acts performed as part of an ongoing criminal organisation.

<sup>38</sup> David Thorburn, “The Sopranos,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Martha Nochimson, “Waddaya Lookin’ At?: Re-reading the Gangster Genre Through ‘The Sopranos,’” *Film Quarterly* 56 no.2 (2002): 2-13

<sup>40</sup> Fred Garadaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian-American Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 80.

of power has very limited currency in a culture of conspicuous consumption and progressive social changes.”<sup>41</sup>

Many writers have commented on post-modernism in *The Sopranos*. Booker and Daraiseh view *The Sopranos* through a post-modern lens that places the series at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century particularly as it relates to modern capitalism. They describe *The Sopranos* as the swansong of organised crime.<sup>42</sup> In this phase of late-capitalism, commodification has led to an erosion of traditional values.

However, because of its subject matter, its portrayal of Italian-Americans, its complex gender relationships and its innovative portrayal of psychotherapy, *The Sopranos* has managed to carve out a unique place not only within the gangster genre it naturally inhabits, but within wider popular culture. Before examining the role of food in the main sections of this thesis, I will explore critical considerations of *The Sopranos* from both pop-culture platforms as well as academic understandings of this ground-breaking series.

## 2.5 Critical Considerations

This thesis will focus on the role of food in *The Sopranos*, something which features heavily, and through gastrocriticism, allows us to learn much about the characters. Food and foodways are abundant in *The Sopranos* with scenes of food being eaten and prepared in every episode. The main protagonist Tony Soprano has an enormous appetite and he and other characters eat noisily and casually in a way that is not usually portrayed on screen. On a simple level, food is used symbolically as a signifier of Italian-American culture that adds realism to the series. The prevalence of pasta in the series is indicative of Italian-American food culture. Italians from different parts of Italy were brought together in America and were united by food - such as spaghetti and meatballs – a dish that was invented in America that became common in many Italian-American households.<sup>43</sup> This morphing of regional Italian foods into an Italian-American food is demonstrated by the way “Italian” sausage became commonplace. This ignores the regional variations that would be commonplace in Italy.<sup>44</sup> Another dish that is

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<sup>41</sup> Ingrid Walker Fields, “Family Values and Feudal Codes: The Social Politics of America’s Twenty First Century Gangster,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 37 no. 4 (2004): 615.

<sup>42</sup> M. Keith Booker and Isra Daraiseh, *Tony Soprano’s America: Gangsters, Guns, and Money* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), xiii.

<sup>43</sup> Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 53.

<sup>44</sup> Diner, 60.

frequently mentioned in *The Sopranos* is macaroni which was a food of affluence for Southern Italians, it embodied Italian-American food culture.<sup>45</sup>

In *The Sopranos*, food is central to the narrative and because much of the conversation revolves around it, thus acting as a social conversational currency. The language is rich with food references, specifically Italian-American terms such as: *gabagool*, *mortadell*, *sazeech*, *ricott*, *pastin'* and *mutzadell*. These words are among many of the dialectic bastardisations that are mentioned in the series. *Gabagool* (the term used for “capicola” in the Neapolitan dialect) is a cured meat that is a cross between prosciutto and sausage seasoned with a variety of flavours, such as wine, garlic and paprika. It is mentioned frequently in the series and became celebrated by Sopranos fans as a catchphrase.<sup>46</sup>

This Italian-American vernacular is significant as most immigrants came from the south of Italy and brought with them elements of language that don't formally exist in modern Italian. Food is used as a metaphor for a community that is stuck between the old country they left behind and the new one to which they have not been fully assimilated. Diner posits that Italian-Americans created a new identity that was built around food, many of them for their first time were able to enjoy the abundance of food in America and could afford to buy Italian ingredients such as olive oil and pasta.<sup>47</sup>

*The Sopranos* is laden with food references and much business is conducted around the dinner table. Tobin states that:

Any attempt at reviewing food in Italian culture must at the very least make a mandatory reference to visual culture. Has there ever been a movie about the mafia or an instalment of *The Sopranos* that does not contain a scene of bread breaking? The point is evident, the family that eats together, stays and slays together. The voracity of the mafiosi and their need for communion are both displayed in numerous scenes of repast.<sup>48</sup>

As well as these depictions of commensality, there is much evidence of common American foodstuffs and brands, which serve to emphasise that the Sopranos family are just an average American family, albeit a crime family.

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<sup>45</sup> Diner, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Jerksto, “Sopranos But Just Gabagool (Extended Cold Cuts Edition),” YouTube Video, 0.43, July 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsBipoG22Nw>

<sup>47</sup> Diner, 49-50.

<sup>48</sup> Ronald W. Tobin, “Thought for Food: Literature and Gastronomy,” lecture, University of California Television (UCTV), 21 May 2009, <https://youtu.be/76zhTYQcH>

In the many contemporary themes covered throughout its 86 episodes, *The Sopranos* squarely meets Tomasulo's definition of long-form narrative as "a representation of the world."<sup>49</sup> As such it has been scrutinised both at an academic and a recreational reading level. The volume and breadth of books and online blogs—too numerous to cover here—speaks to *The Sopranos*' popularity, legacy and influence. Polan includes a chapter in his book called *The Sopranos in the Marketplace* addressing the commercial exploitation of the series including official and unofficial merchandise, clothing, cookbooks and even bus tours.<sup>50</sup> The most common academic studies have been psychotherapy, gender issues (mainly the role of women), the gangster genre, and postmodernism.

### 2.5.1 Italian-American Stereotyping

Despite receiving almost universal critical acclaim, the series garnered criticism from Italian-American groups, who complained that the series was insulting and misrepresentative. Seven such groups condemned *The Sopranos* for "defaming and assassinating the cultural character."<sup>51</sup> Frank Guarini, chairman of the National Italian-American Foundation stated his goal was to get the series taken off air: "'The Sopranos' is a terrible stereotyping and unfair portrayal of Italian-American families."<sup>52</sup> After the third season (2001), the American Italian Defence Association (AIDA) filed a lawsuit with the aim of obtaining a declaration from the jury that the show offends Italian-Americans' dignity, rather than have the show cancelled. The lawsuit was dismissed, with Time Warner's counsel arguing that the public would NOT assume that all Italian-Americans are criminals or morally corrupt from watching the show.<sup>53</sup> Chase defended the series by claiming that the show never implied that every Italian-American was connected to the mob. In an interview he said: "Everybody in the thing is Italian, but the show really is about corruption: it's about good and evil. And in *The Sopranos*, there are good Italians and there are bad Italians."<sup>54</sup> Alba and Kasinitz argue that the series manages to cleverly acknowledge and ridicule the criticism that it perpetuates stereotypes; however, they

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<sup>49</sup> Tomasulo, 210.

<sup>50</sup> Dana Polan, *The Sopranos* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 143-196.

<sup>51</sup> Sandra Gilbert, "Life with (god) father," in *A Sitdown with the Sopranos: Watching Italian-American Culture on TV's Most Talked-About Series*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 16.

<sup>52</sup> Donna Petrozzello, "'Sopranos' Hits the Wrong Note with Italian-Americans," *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 1999, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-09-08-9909080134-story.html>.

<sup>53</sup> "Judge Throws Out 'Sopranos' Lawsuit," *AP News.com*, acc. March 5, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/23b218cdcedc19b7c5db72c12afd82dd>

<sup>54</sup> "Family Man," *Stanford Magazine.com*, acc. March 6, 2023, <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/family-man>

acknowledge that although the series is clever, the stereotypes can still be damaging to lower middle class Italian-Americans.<sup>55</sup>

### 2.5.2 Psychotherapy

What is unique about *The Sopranos* within the gangster genre, is that it explores vulnerability and masculinity in a new way. The core premise of the series is that New Jersey Mafia boss, Tony Soprano, is in therapy for a childhood trauma related to food, so it is not surprising that much has been written about *The Sopranos* and its relationship to psychotherapy. In 2001 the American Psychoanalytic Association gave awards to the writers and to Lorraine Bracco, the actor who played Dr. Melfi, for her role as “the most credible depiction of therapy ever portrayed in the cinema or on television.”<sup>56</sup> Flamini suggest that the series “puts the entirety of Italian-American culture on the couch, connecting our darker side of our history with our family feasting, religious fervour, and dolce vita...on the couch.”<sup>57</sup> He suggests that Italian-Americans can only understand their culture if they face the dark side of it, i.e. the violence that underpins and preserves the Mafia lifestyle. Food is the main reason why Tony seeks psychotherapy and this thesis will look at how else food drives the narrative in *The Sopranos*.

### 2.5.3 Gender Issues

Much has been written on gender issues in *The Sopranos*, mainly on the portrayal of women. Barecca argues that Italian-American women are underrepresented in popular culture and that the main female characters in *The Sopranos* are strong, complex and unapologetic. However due to their ethnicity, they are never fully accepted; she describes them as “neither stereotypes nor anomalies.”<sup>58</sup> On the surface, the women are portrayed as either homemakers or strippers: frustrated but devoted wives or frustrated mistresses (“*goombas*”), whose surface-level role appears to be to support and/or service men. Although the women do not appear to wield power, Fields argues that these “troublesome, strong female characters (Tony’s mother, wife, sister and

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<sup>55</sup> Alba and Kasinitz, 74-77.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Holden, *The New York Times on the Sopranos* (New York: ibooks 2000), 44.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Flamini, “‘Pa cent’ anni, Dr. Melfi’ : Psychotherapy in the Italian-American Community,” in *A Sitdown with the Sopranos: Watching Italian-American Culture on TV’s most Talked About Series*, ed. Regina Barecca (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002), 126.

<sup>58</sup> Regina Barreca, “Why I like the Women in The Sopranos,” in *A Sitdown with the Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on TV’s most Talked About Series*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 36.

daughter) upset the balance of power and enhance the anxiety Tony experiences.”<sup>59</sup> They have considerable strength that is not immediately obvious as they “commandeer power while seeming to wield none.”<sup>60</sup> Both Fields and Barecca overlook the disposable female characters: the strippers and the mistresses.

On balance, food is gendered in *The Sopranos*, with women doing the cooking at home, and men only really cooking for their fellow mobsters—their *famiglia*—something that will be covered in this thesis.

## 2.6 Summary

*The Sopranos* is rightly described as a “watershed in American popular culture.”<sup>61</sup> It generated interest and controversy at the time for its violence, its portrayal of Italian-Americans and its treatment of women. It has been written about and analysed in many different ways, but food, although abundant in the series, has not been covered in any detail. Although the series depicts and reflects the *fin de siècle* malaise of the era, there is still much interest in the series. Its themes are still relevant today and its popularity can be seen through the 179% increase in viewership through the HBO Now subscription streaming service during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Fields, 620.

<sup>60</sup> Barreca, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Thorburn, 2.

<sup>62</sup> “How the Sopranos Became an Unlikely Must-Watch During the Pandemic,” *Forbes.com*, acc. March 31, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/donreisinger/2020/07/17/how-the-sopranos-became-an-unlikely-must-watch-during-the-pandemic/>

## Chapter Three: Theory and Approach

This thesis is rooted in food and film studies and will use the disciplinary context and methodological approach of gastro-criticism. Typically used for literature, in this case gastrocriticism is applied to a television show, albeit one with an unrivalled cinematic reputation.<sup>63</sup> Gastrocriticism uses an approach developed by Anke Klitzing that provides a structured framework for watching movies through a “culinary lens.”<sup>64</sup> This chapter will show how such a multidisciplinary approach—gastrocritical combined with an understanding of film studies—may be a valid model of inquiry to examine food and foodways in *The Sopranos*.

### 3.1 Food Studies and Gastronomy

Although written about for centuries, food has not always been subject to academic study as it was considered to be too quotidian and belonging to the domestic sphere.<sup>65</sup> Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Epicurus, examined food from a diet and health perspective. However, it was not until the 1990s that food studies was established by universities in America. It encompassed foodways, gastronomy and culinary history, as well as discipline-based approaches.<sup>66</sup> Food studies is described as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and even transdisciplinary because, as Mac Con Iomaire points out, many early scholars came from disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, art history, philosophy and English literature.<sup>67</sup> More recent scholars have emerged from the area of film studies, such as Fabio Parasecoli, Anne Bower and Gayle Poole. Food studies has grown and gained recognition as an academic area of study over the past 50 years, creating a variety of disciplines and methodologies as “diverse as food itself”.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “How The Sopranos Changed TV Forever 20<sup>th</sup> Century Anniversary,” *Fansided.com*, acc. April 1, 2023, <https://fansided.com/2019/01/10/how-sopranos-changed-tv-forever-20th-anniversary/>

<sup>64</sup> Tigner and Carruth, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Marion Nestle and William A. McIntosh, “Writing the Food Studies Movement,” *Food, Culture and Society* 13 no.2 (2010):159-179.

<sup>66</sup> Nestle and McIntosh, 159-179.

<sup>67</sup> Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “From the Dark Margins to the Spotlight: The Evolution of Gastronomy and Food Studies in Ireland,” in *Margins and Marginalities in Ireland and France: A Socio-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Catherine Maignant, Sylvain Tondour and Déborah Vandewourde (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 129-153.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey Miller and Jonathan Deutsch, *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods* (Oxford; New York: Berg 2009), 8.

## 3.2 Film Studies

This thesis will apply gastrocriticism—an interdisciplinary approach using the academic discipline of gastronomy and food studies—to examine *The Sopranos*. Although it is a television show it has more in common with film due to its cinematic look, its production values and its long-form storytelling. Observers such as Biskind compared the series to European cinema,<sup>69</sup> so for the purposes of the thesis, *The Sopranos* will be treated as film.

Film studies dates back to the 1960s. Initially, there was a small body of work and analytical techniques were borrowed from other disciplines; however over time, it has become a broader and more respected field, and cinema is now recognised as a “powerful form or artistic, cultural and economic expression.”<sup>70</sup> As the field of film studies has grown, different cultural phenomena have been integrated into the discipline, making it more multi-disciplinary. Baron states that film scholars have viewed their field as “a multidimensional discipline that examines film practice in esthetic, economic, technological, and social terms.”<sup>71</sup>

### 3.2.1 Food and Film

Film studies predates food studies as an academic subject by several decades, although food has been part of agricultural, home economics (human ecology), and industrial studies, as well as appearing in anthropology and sociology courses.<sup>72</sup>

However, food has appeared on screen since the very inception of cinema. Significantly, one of the first things to be filmed was a meal in an early short film by the Lumière Brothers, *Repas de Bébé* (Baby’s Dinner) (1895). This black-and-white silent short consists of a single shot: Auguste Lumière, his wife and their infant daughter dining in a rural setting. The film was shown in a room in Paris’ *Grand Café* in December 1895, marking the beginning of cinema as an experiential medium.

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Biskind, “An American Family,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2007, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2007/4/an-american-family>.

<sup>70</sup> Rick Altman, “Whither Film Studies (in a Post-Film Studies World)?,” *Cinema Journal* 49 no. 1 (2009): 135; Altman, 135.

<sup>71</sup> Cynthia Baron, “Dinner and a Movie: Analyzing Food and Film,” *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 9, no.1 (2006): 100.

<sup>72</sup> Bower, 11-12.



Lindenfeld and Parasecoli's work shows that historically, food in film has played important roles from slapstick humour to commentary on contemporary issues.<sup>73</sup> For example in the Charlie Chaplin movie *Gold Rush* (1925), Chaplin cooks and eats a shoe as a visceral comment on hunger during the Great Depression. In a later Chaplin movie, *Modern Times* (1936), a worker is shown being disastrously force-fed by a machine that is meant to save time and increase productivity, again critiquing capitalism through comedy.

In the 1980s, food began to play a starring role through a string of food-related movies, often classified as the "food film" genre,<sup>74</sup> defined by Bower as films where food plays a star role with a focus on preparation and cooking. The film's narrative "will consistently depict characters negotiating questions of identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or relationship through food."<sup>75</sup>

Examples of the genre include: Itami Juzo's *Tampopo* (1985) a film portraying a restaurant owner—a young single mother—obsessing over the perfect bowl of ramen, successfully using food as a vehicle to show the contradictions of Japanese society; Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) about a French chef exiled in Denmark, creating a sumptuous meal within the context of an ascetic, joyless community. While it featured many beautiful cooking and eating scenes, the film used food as a vehicle for themes such as community, religion, sacrifice and sensuality; *Big Night* (1996), a ground-breaking culinary celebration set in a failing Italian-American restaurant in New Jersey; Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) which uses food as an expression of eroticism and cruelty, provoking disgust with its concluding cannibalistic meal; *The Menu* (2022), a recent dark satire of the eccentricities of fine dining. Equally, the popularity of food in films is a global phenomenon with many parts of the world producing culinary cinema such as the French *Haute Cuisine* (2012) and the Indian *The Lunchbox* (2013). Additionally food has featured in animated movies such as *Ratatouille* (2007) and *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009).

As the genre grew, so did the body of scholarly work on the presence and role of food in movies. There has also been interest in films that feature food rather than just food-genre films. A food lens has been applied by scholars to a number of films, including *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The Godfather* (1972).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Lindenfeld and Parasecoli, 28-29.

<sup>74</sup> Bower, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Bower, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Bower, 195-208 and 209-218.

Poole, who wrote one of the first books on food and film, analyses food's ability to bring characters together on screen, conveying symbolic meaning and dramatic focus, describing food as:

a polysemous signifier that articulates in concrete terms what is very often internal, vague, abstract. Food provides a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty and the ineffable qualities of life.<sup>77</sup>

Poole also examines the connection between public consumption and issues of power and class, examining not just the “food film” genre but other films that include eating and preparation. These themes are also explored at length in *The Sopranos*, of which more below.

As James R. Keller argues, regardless of whether food plays a major or minor role in a film:

the culinary is highly suggestive of abstract cultural processes, such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, history, politics, geography, aesthetics, spirituality, and nationality, as well as more subjective conditions, such as obsession, indifference, depression, elation, rage, meditation, neurosis, psychosis, mental illness, mystical ecstasy, carnal desire and love.<sup>78</sup>

As Keller continues, food fulfils many functions on screen, adding realism—whether that be from a historical or geographical perspective—marking the passage of time, or providing dramatic potential as a symbol or metaphor. The depiction of food is more than just a signifier of class, identity and nationality:

...food scenes in film, not only signify social class, identity, and nationality, but also provide insight into the complex ways with which food and eating are entangled with other aspects of social/ cultural development.<sup>79</sup>

The intersection of food and film provides insights into the formation of culture and identity, as well as driving narrative. Therefore, a thorough gastrocritical investigation of *The Sopranos* as long-form cinematic narrative promises to offer rich insights in all these matters.

### 3.3 Gastrocriticism

Gastrocriticism is a nascent form of literary criticism “focused on human relationships with each other and to the natural world.”<sup>80</sup> It is rooted in the disciplines of gastronomy, food studies and literary studies. The term *gastrocriticism* was first coined by Ronald Tobin just over twenty years ago when he defined it as a “multidisciplinary approach that links gastronomy and literary

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<sup>77</sup> Poole, 2.

<sup>78</sup> James R. Keller, *Food, Film and Culture: A Genre Study* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2006), 1.

<sup>79</sup> Jane Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Anke Klitzing, “New Beginnings”, 1.

criticism” relying on “extensive research” in various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, medicine, semiotics and psychology to explore food in all aspects.<sup>81</sup> Klitzing states that a small number of scholars have begun to use the idea of gastrocriticism: De Maseneer on Latin-American Caribbean literature; Rønning on Australian travel writing; Tordoff on Ancient Greek drama; Ajulu-Okungu on Tanzanian literature; Roy on Italian literature; Climont-Espino on Latin-American writing; Fahy on vampire movies; Kiptiyah on Indonesian literature and Christou who adopts the term in her discussion on the philosophy of food in Atwood, Auster and Beckett.<sup>82</sup> Gastrocriticism was used to examine the works of Enid Blyton in a recent Masters thesis.<sup>83</sup>

Zimmerman states that in films “food and food scenes have often been used to communicate something more than meets the eye.”<sup>84</sup> He goes on to say that since the earliest days of filmmaking, food has been used to enhance stories: whether that be to depict a character, his or her ethnicity or class, state of mind or serve as a metaphor.<sup>85</sup> Food is a “highly condensed social fact”<sup>86</sup> and that makes gastrocriticism a suitable method of exploring food in films, and applying a gastrocritical lens to *The Sopranos* will provide deeper insight and understanding.

### 3.4 Applying the Theory

Klitzing proposes gastrocriticism as a structured way of examining food in literature, by developing a framework with which we form our culinary lens.<sup>87</sup> Klitzing has developed a series of “gastrocritical reading questions”<sup>88</sup> for analysing a text, or in this case, film. It starts with general questions, such as if food and foodways were not part of the text, would it be fundamentally changed? Are there instances of feasting or fasting? Of hunger, greed, appetite gluttony, excess? Are there instances of nourishment and feeding in the text? Is the eating disordered, and if so, what does that tell us? Do food and foodways in the text express or

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<sup>81</sup> Ronald W. Tobin, “Que est-ce que la Gastro-Critique? (What is gastrocriticism?),” *Dix-Septième siècle* 4, no. 217 (2002): 624; see also, Ronald W. Tobin, “Thought for Food: Literature and Gastronomy,” lecture, University of California Television (UCTV), 21 May 2009, <https://youtu.be/76zhTYQcHyI>

<sup>82</sup> Anke Klitzing, “PhD Progression Board Report” (unpublished manuscript. Technological University Dublin, 2021), 25.

<sup>83</sup> Rebecca Broomfield, “More Than Midnight Feasts?: A Gastrocritical Reading of Enid Blyton’s Malory Towers, St. Clare’s and The Naughtiest Girl in the School Series” (MA thesis, Technological University Dublin, 2022).

<sup>84</sup> Steve Zimmerman, 265.

<sup>85</sup> Zimmerman, 265.

<sup>86</sup> Appadurai, 494.

<sup>87</sup> Anke Klitzing, “New Beginnings”, 6-7.

<sup>88</sup> Anke Klitzing, “Gastrocritical Reading Questions”.

embody gender, class or ethnic relationships? How are food/ foodways interwoven in the meaning of the text? This is followed by more specific questions that are categorised, such as setting – which is broken down into verisimilitude and context; Narrative – examines the use of food as a plot device or formation or character and identity, both individual and communal; Meaning – questions whether food is used symbolically, thematically or cognitively; Author and Audience – asks what values are embodied in food/ foodways in the text and what effect does food/ foodways have on the reader; Genre and Text – asks what role food plays in defining the genre into which the text belongs and if there is a transtextual relationship.

All 86 episodes of *The Sopranos* were viewed for analysis using this gastrocritical framework. *The Sopranos* is the story of an Italian-American crime family and this firmly places it in the gangster genre, albeit a “major reworking of the gangster genre.”<sup>89</sup> Application of Klitzing’s framework reveals that food is abundant and drives the plot in many different ways, that food choices reflect character and pass judgement on them and that with food being such an important part of the Italian-American culture, it expresses communal identity in *The Sopranos*. Food plays a major role in the setting of the series, adding to the verisimilitude and context.

This gastrocritical approach may offer new insight into a series that has been much debated in both blogs and academia. The structured framework of critical theory aims to offer a clear look at the importance of food and foodways in the series.

### 3.5 Summary

The study of food in film is relatively recent but it is a burgeoning area. Gastrocriticism offers a multidisciplinary approach through its “culinary lens.”<sup>90</sup> By adopting a gastrocritical paradigm, new insight can be gained into *The Sopranos* and aid in its critical understanding, as well as providing insights that will be valuable for future film and food studies.

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<sup>89</sup> Patricia Keeton, “The Sopranos and Genre Transformation: Ideological Negotiation in the Gangster Film.” *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 10 no.2 (2002):131

<sup>90</sup> Tigner and Carruth, 8.

## Chapter Four – Food and the Gangster Genre

This chapter will examine the portrayal of food in the gangster genre, using gastrocriticism as a basis for understanding how its food-related tropes influenced *The Sopranos*. It will explore how *The Sopranos*' intertextuality recalls expressions of Italian-American identity, family, *esprit de corps* and power, all evident in *The Godfather* trilogy, *GoodFellas* and others.

Food features in *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas* as a narrative marker of communal authenticity of the Italian-American lifestyle, with an emphasis on "Italian". In *The Sopranos*, however, the portrayal of food goes beyond being a mere homage to the great gangster movies. Rather than being just a gesture of Italian identity, it acts as a deeper (and less romanticised) representation of Italian-American family life. In the case of *The Sopranos*, food is often the only true connection to Italian life. Set decades later than *The Godfather* (1945-1955) and *GoodFellas* (1955-1980s), *The Sopranos* represents a time when the connection to Italy had faded due to the characters' upward mobility and assimilation into American culture. In the spectrum of worlds represented by the term Italian-American, the Sopranos family is more American than Italian.

### 4.1 Gangster Genre Intertextuality

*The Sopranos* is laden with intertextuality, with quotes and allusions to gangster movies throughout the series. The term intertextuality was coined by Kristeva in 1966 and has gained widespread usage as scholars have attempted to learn the linkages between texts and how cultural perceptions of texts evolve. Kristeva defines intertextuality as the "transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another."<sup>91</sup> It is important to note that intertextuality in most theoretical writing was established in relation to linguistics and literature but in recent years has been adapted to analyse film and television.<sup>92</sup> David Lavery, who has edited three Sopranos essay collections and has written many articles on the show, has catalogued many "intertexts," which amount to a list of references to American popular culture, literature, and other cultures.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Julia Kristeva and Moi Toril, *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 111.

<sup>92</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2006), 174.

<sup>93</sup> David Lavery, *The Essential Sopranos Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 328-337.

The characters in *The Sopranos* are well aware of their gangster legacy but the series represents a jaded portrayal of an industry in decline, shackled by advances in law enforcement and the effects of RICO legislation, one of the reasons prompting Keeton to state that *The Sopranos* “is a major reworking of the gangster genre.”<sup>94</sup> As Tony tells Dr. Melfi: “It’s good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that and I know. But lately, I’m getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.”<sup>95</sup>

Symbolically, that “end times” feel is reflected in a transparent act of genre intertextuality, when *The Sopranos*’ Silvio Dante amuses the other gangsters with his Al Pacino impersonations. It is significant that of all the famous quotes from *The Godfather* trilogy—such as “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse” from *The Godfather* or, “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer” from *Part II*—Silvio chooses: “Just when I thought I was out they pull me back in,” from a pivotal scene in *The Godfather Part III*. There is a sense of the hopeless inevitability of decline in *The Godfather Part III*, and this scene further underlies this by the use of food – it stands in particular contrast to the sumptuous food scenes in earlier instalments of *The Godfather*, by being set in a small, messy kitchen. Pans of pasta crowd the small table, piled with uneaten plates, glasses and empty wine bottles. The sense of claustrophobia and of entrapment closes in on Michael Corleone as he submits to a diabetic stroke. It is fitting that out of all quotes he could have picked, Silvio chooses this one, echoing Tony’s sentiment that he feels that they have missed the “best days” of organised crime.

References to *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas* are rife in *The Sopranos*, and one scene in the first season links to these two most influential movies in the genre: Christopher Moltisanti (played by Michael Imperioli) is ordered by Tony to pick up some pastries from Rousso’s bakery. The shop assistant is rude to him and Christopher loses his temper and shoots him in the foot.<sup>96</sup> This genre intertextuality references *GoodFellas* when Tommy shoots Spider in the foot (Spider was also played by Imperioli).<sup>97</sup> Christopher then leaves with some cannoli, napoleons and *sfogliatelle*.<sup>98</sup> This scene also links to *The Godfather* and the memorable line “leave the gun; take the cannoli”, given as an order by Clemenza, after killing Paulie, showing

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<sup>94</sup> Keeton, 131.

<sup>95</sup> S1E1.

<sup>96</sup> S1E8.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Imperioli is the actor who plays Christopher Moltisanti in *The Sopranos* and was Spider in *Goodfellas*.

<sup>98</sup> *Sfogliatelle* is a shell-shaped filled Italian pastry. *Sfogliatella* means small, thin, leaf/ layer as the pastry’s texture resembles stacked leaves.<sup>1</sup>

the incongruity of murder holding equal importance with an Italian-American wife's reminder to bring home dessert.

Other movies from the gangster genre, both older and more contemporary, are referenced in *The Sopranos*. In one key scene in season three, Tony is seen crying whilst watching *The Public Enemy* after his mother's funeral.<sup>99</sup> This black and white classic of the gangster genre is referenced earlier in the series when Junior throws a lemon meringue pie in his mistress's face<sup>100</sup> mimicking a famous scene in *The Public Enemy* when James Cagney's on-screen character shoves a grapefruit into the face of his girlfriend.

The power of these movies to determine Italian-American culture is immense, something reflected in *The Sopranos* directly: Dr. Melfi<sup>101</sup> is having dinner with her family and her ex-husband says: "Ask any American to describe an Italian-American in this country and invariably he's going to reference *The Godfather*, *GoodFellas* and the rest are gonna mention pizza."<sup>102</sup>

Through identifying intertextual elements, it is clear that the gangster genre influences both David Chase as producer, and the characters he created.

## 4.2 Food and Identity

The identity of Italian-Americans is bound up with food. As Fischler states: "Food is central to our sense of identity."<sup>103</sup> It is interesting that Italian food made such a big impact in America. Levenstein argues that Italians were the only immigrants "who managed to survive assimilation with their Old World food preferences at least identifiable" and who produced "the first major foreign cuisine to find widespread acceptance among native-born Americans."<sup>104</sup> He suggests this was due to the relative size of the Italian immigrant population and the relatively speedy incursion of its foodway into the American diet. This is supported by Diner<sup>105</sup> and Cinotto<sup>106</sup> who argue the cultural work of Italian-American foodways in the US is inseparable from

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<sup>99</sup> S3E2.

<sup>100</sup> S1E9.

<sup>101</sup> The actress Lorraine Bracco plays Dr. Melfi in *The Sopranos*. She also played Karen Hill in *GoodFellas*.

<sup>102</sup> S1E8.

<sup>103</sup> Claude Fischler, "Food, Self and Identity," *Social Sciences Information* 27 (1985): 275.

<sup>104</sup> Harvey Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930," in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 76.

<sup>105</sup> Diner, 48-83.

<sup>106</sup> Simone Cinotto, "Sunday Dinner? You Had To Be There!" in *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, ed. Joseph Sciorra (New York: Fordham, 2011), 11-30.

conceptions of Italian-American identity. This identity was formed by Sicilian and Abruzzese immigrants who came to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was in East Harlem of the 1930s where Italians were beginning to “forge a gustatory identity in the crucible of race and ethnicity.”<sup>107</sup>

It was their experience of being labelled as Italians in America that generated a unified (and often) inaccurate conception of “Italian” character and culture.<sup>108</sup> Their Italian cuisine was a hybrid of the sharing and blending of regional cuisines brought by immigrants.

The comparative bounty in America compared to the poverty in Italy shaped Italian-American assimilation and its foodways. As Diner notes: “Feasting upon dishes once the sole preserve of their economic and social superiors enabled [Italian immigrants] to mold an Italian identity in America around food. Plentiful, inexpensive American foods transformed the former regional *contadini* [peasants] into Italians and their food into Italian Food.”<sup>109</sup> To that end we see an abundance of food and feasting in *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*, and in turn, in *The Sopranos*. Communal meals are frequently eaten and will be looked at in the later sections. Cinotto calls Italianate food “the most eloquent symbol of collective identity for Italian-Americans.”<sup>110</sup>

This importance of food is evident in the opening moments of *The Godfather*: the spectacular wedding of Vito Corleone’s daughter, Connie. The thronging, opulent scene is laden with copious amounts of food and drink: pitchers of wine, mountains of fruit, plates of cookies and a massive wedding cake. We hear one guest exclaim: “I got two gabagool, capocol, and a prosciut!”<sup>111</sup> Against this backdrop, Corleone’s son Michael has returned from military service and has brought his WASP<sup>112</sup> girlfriend Kay to the wedding. He tells her that he is not in the family business, then asks her if she likes the lasagna, implying that the good food that she is enjoying is from the fruits of those enterprises. Although he tries to distance himself from his mafia family, he realises that the food binds them together. This tension between family on a blood-relation level and a mob level will be covered later.

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<sup>107</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 98.

<sup>108</sup> Rocco Marinaccio, “*Cucina Nostra*: Italian-American Foodways on Television,” *Italian-American Review* 6, no. 2 (2016): 268-295.

<sup>109</sup> Diner, 54.

<sup>110</sup> Simone Cinotto, *The Italian-American Food Table: Food, Family and Commensality in New York City*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>111</sup> These words are all Italian-American slang for cured meats.

<sup>112</sup> WASP is an acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, a person descended from Northern European, usually Protestant stock, forming a group often considered the most dominant, privileged, and influential in American society. [Cambridge Dictionary].



As Rotundo points out, immigrant populations tend to carry dual expectations of “hope for a new life and fixed ideas from an old life.”<sup>113</sup> Because of chronology, this expectation is played out in different ways in *The Godfather*, *GoodFellas* and *The Sopranos* as the Italian-American community becomes more embedded in American society, almost moving along a spectrum from Italian-American with the emphasis on Italian (*The Godfather*), Italian-American with equal emphasis on both (*GoodFellas*), and finally Italian-American with the emphasis more on American (*The Sopranos*). Food provides evidence in each case.

In *The Godfather I* and *II*, set between the early 1900s and the 1950s, the connection with Italy is still strong. In *GoodFellas*, set between 1955 and 1980, we see a more established immigrant community creating its own ostentatious, materialistic tropes. In *The Sopranos*, we see how that connection to the old life in Italy has diminished even further, exemplified in the scene when Richie Aprile brings Carmela tripe and tomatoes. She is delighted and he comments: “We are the only two people who still like tripe.”<sup>114</sup> Ironically, this scene shows how out of touch Aprile is, as he has just been released after ten years in prison.

At the end of *GoodFellas*, Henry Hill has entered the witness protection programme and is seen living in a non-descript suburb. He could be anywhere in America, rather than the Brooklyn neighbourhoods that had defined him. He orders a takeaway of spaghetti and marinara sauce, but when it arrives, he is disappointed with the inauthentic noodles and ketchup. His identity is bound up with Italian-American food: his disillusionment with his new life is symbolised by the meal.

Food is used symbolically in a similar scene of exile in *The Sopranos*: Vito Spatafore is forced to leave New Jersey when his homosexuality is discovered.<sup>115</sup> Initially he enjoys his new life and starts a relationship with a local diner cook, bonding over food,<sup>116</sup> but he soon reverts to making tomato sauce as he misses the excitement of his previous life.<sup>117</sup> In both cases—Henry in *GoodFellas* and Vito in *The Sopranos*—gastrocriticism reveals that food is used as a symbolic allusion to the Italian-American community that each character has left behind.

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<sup>113</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, “Wonderbread and Stugots: Italian-American Manhood and The Sopranos,” in *A Sidown With the Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on TV’s most Talked About Series*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 47.

<sup>114</sup> S2E8.

<sup>115</sup> S6E6.

<sup>116</sup> They bond over Johnny cakes, white corn pancakes which are a speciality of New Hampshire.

<sup>117</sup> S6E10.

### 4.3 Food and Family

Eating as a family is a constant trope in *The Godfather* trilogy, *GoodFellas* and *The Sopranos*. It is not surprising that Coppola (director of *The Godfather* trilogy), needing to create a genuine family environment on set, brought the cast together to eat before filming began.<sup>118</sup> Commensality in the literal sense means eating at the same table.<sup>119</sup> The mafia families have to stick together for self-preservation, so eating together is one way of strengthening that bond. As Fischler states: “In all cultures eating the same food is equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making commensals more alike and bringing them closer together.”<sup>120</sup>

Douglas suggests that eating together is suggestive of “purity” and “order” - an intact family that is harmonious.<sup>121</sup> This may explain why in the swirling chaos of the on-screen mobster lifestyle, the symbolic ritual of the family meal (in this case, “family” in the blood-relative sense), is used by the director—Coppola, Scorsese or Chase—to provide an anchor of normality. The positivity of one definition of “family” thus cancels out the negativity of the other. We see this trope often in the gangster genre. For example, towards the end of *GoodFellas*, amidst the chaos of avoiding FBI helicopters and stashing contraband, Henry cooks a family dinner. The image of him braising beef and pork shoulder in a tomato sauce are at odds with his manic drug-induced activity and paranoia. Food is used a plot device to show him trying to find some normality, some identity and some pride within his frenzied decline. The scene from *The Godfather* touched upon earlier—when Michael returns from military service and dines with Kay at Connie’s wedding—is shown as a deliberate contrast to the mafia activity around them. The young couple are clearly dining separately from the mobsters. In his Marine Corps uniform, Michael is physically dressed differently to the elegantly suited gangsters, and most importantly, the director delivers a moment of commensality where they are in a separate, contrasting, almost innocent bubble.

In *The Sopranos* the family dinner plays an important role as it establishes Tony as the head and provider of his unruly blood-family while he rules his mob-family with ruthless efficiency. Tony struggles to maintain control of his home life, with a disenchanted wife, a strong-willed adolescent daughter and a troubled pubescent son. He fears the consequences of the

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<sup>118</sup> “‘The Godfather’ at 50: Francis Ford Coppola Reflects on His Cast Bonding Around a Real Italian Dinner Table,” *Metacritic.com*, acc. March 1, 2023, <https://www.metacritic.com/news/the-godfather-francis-ford-coppola-cast-bonding-dinner/>

<sup>119</sup> Jeffery Sobal and Mary K. Nelson, “Commensal Eating Patterns: a Community Study,” *Appetite* 41, no. 2 (2003): 181-190.

<sup>120</sup> Claude Fischler, “Commensality, Society and Culture,” *Social Science Information* 50, no. 3-4 (2011): 540

<sup>121</sup> Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* (1972): 61-81.

disintegration of family life, thus reflecting contemporary fears of the disintegration of the family meal.<sup>122</sup> When Tony's daughter, Meadow, goes to college, Carmela (his wife) is adamant they continue with the ritual of the family meal: "It is very important...that we don't become one of those families that eats standing up at the counter."<sup>123</sup> *The Sopranos* portrays real, mundane family moments in a way that previous films in the genre have not. It shows how vulnerable Tony Soprano is as a family man and how little power he wields at home, a unique departure for the gangster genre, reflected in Fields' observation that Tony only has power as a killer and not a civilian.<sup>124</sup>

#### 4.4 Food and the Other Family

The previous section explored the portrayal of family dining within a *literal* interpretation of the word "family", whereas this section explores the portrayal of food within the context of the mob family.

Gastrocriticism reveals that one of the main food tropes in the gangster genre is that the viewer is regularly shown mobsters cooking for one another. Wrangham reminds us of the division of the sexes with men cooking in public whilst women cook in the private and domestic sphere.<sup>125</sup> Deutsch's study of male firefighters cooking in American firehouses reveals male behaviour when performing stereotypically feminine roles, showing that men tend to reinforce their male identities by using profanities or parodying women through humour to maintain their masculinity when cooking;<sup>126</sup> and we see evidence of this particularly in *The Sopranos*. This nurturing expression of *esprit de corps*, identity and camaraderie stands in stark contrast to the viewer rarely being shown the same mobsters cooking for their families unless they are manning a barbecue.

In *The Godfather*, for example, just after Gatto's murder, Clemenza shows Michael how to cook a rich *ragù* with sausage and meatballs in mouth-watering detail. Despite being murderers, the scene shows Clemenza—and by extension, the mob—as nurturers and providers with traditional food, based on old recipes from their homeland. Diner points out that Italian male

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<sup>122</sup> Anne Murcott, "Lamenting the 'Decline of the Family Meal' as a Moral Panic? Methodological Reflections," *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* 43, no.1 (2012): 97-118.

<sup>123</sup> S3E3.

<sup>124</sup> Fields, 615.

<sup>125</sup> Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 148-155.

<sup>126</sup> Jonathan Deutsch, "'Please Pass the Chicken Tits': Rethinking Men and Cooking at an Urban Firehouse," *Food and Foodways* 13 no.1-2 (2005): 91-114.

immigrants had a history of cooking for themselves as before their female partners followed them many men lived together in groups so they had to find ways of feeding each other.<sup>127</sup>

In *The Sopranos* there are several examples of the mobsters cooking for each other. This is a regular feature of the back room at the Bada Bing strip club, but one notable example is Ralphie teaching Jackie Junior to make red sauce in an intertextual scene referencing Clemenza's tutorial with Michael. Ralphie's step-by-step guide on how to make the perfect gravy and macaroni (New Jersey speak for *ragù* and spaghetti), is equally mouth-watering.<sup>128</sup>

Tomato sauce also features in *GoodFellas*. In prison, we see Paulie doing the preparation and Vinnie making a tomato sauce with veal, beef and pork. Even while incarcerated, these men have power which they use to bribe the guards to get good quality ingredients.

This scene stands in contrast to Junior in *The Sopranos* who operates a racket from the psychiatric facility in which he is incarcerated.<sup>129</sup> Instead of fine food and whiskey, his bargaining chips are Sprees candy and cans of soda. This transtextual contrast between the prison scenes reinforces how times had changed for organised crime in the decades between *GoodFellas* and *The Sopranos*.

## 4.5 Food Symbolism

Certain foods can evoke strong memories and feelings of nostalgia in the protagonist; the madeleines in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*<sup>130</sup> is a good example of this. Food is a connection to the past through food memories<sup>131</sup> and film studies reveals the symbolic use of such techniques in movies. Oranges feature regularly in *The Godfather*, connecting the underworld of New York to the citrus groves of Sicily. The use of oranges is two-fold, signifying a longing for Sicily—Williams wrote that first generation Italians were distrustful of American commercial methods of preservation and processing and would cling to their basic food habits<sup>132</sup>— and marking imminent tragedy.

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<sup>127</sup> Diner, 74.

<sup>128</sup> S3E9.

<sup>129</sup> S6E15.

<sup>130</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past Vol 2* (London: Woodsworth Editions, 2006).

<sup>131</sup> David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

<sup>132</sup> Phyllis H. Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America: A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers and Physicians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 52, 61-66.

Coppola uses their appearance throughout his 1972 masterpiece. Vito buys oranges from a street seller and is shot; fruit scatters all over the street as he falls. Before the horse's severed head appears in Woltz's bed, a pile of oranges are seen at the dining table he shares with Tom Hagen. Then towards the end of film, Vito peels an orange and makes faces with the rind to entertain his grandson, before collapsing into his tomato bed and dying of a heart attack.

The orange motif is copied in *The Sopranos*: Tony is shot whilst buying orange juice from a newsstand on the street.<sup>133</sup> The fact that he is buying a bottle of orange juice rather than fresh fruit is both an intertextual nod to the tropes of the genre and another indicator of how much times have changed for turn of the century gangsters.

Like *The Godfather* scene with Clemenza's post-murder *ragù*, there are instances of red wine and steak feasts in *The Sopranos* as a metaphor for bloodshed. Barthes contends that "the prestige of steak evidently drives from its quasi-rawness. In it, blood is visible," and this imbues the consumer with a "bull-like strength."<sup>134</sup> After a botched holdup, Tony and Christopher kill two bikers and then gorge on steak and red wine.<sup>135</sup> Another act of post-killing communion is seen between Tony and Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero who eat steak after committing murder. Whereas Puss dives in heartily, the meal seems to trigger a moment of doubt in Tony who asks a unusually philosophical question of his fellow murderer, about whether he believes in God.<sup>136</sup>

In this way *The Sopranos* continues gangster genre tropes but also subverts them, turning them into exposés of human frailty. *The Sopranos* takes this theme to an extreme in the episode "Pine Barrens." Paulie and Christopher hunt a Russian criminal in a frozen forest, fuelled by promising each other that they will go to Morton's<sup>137</sup> and have a steak after the kill. Instead, they get lost in the dark, snowy woods and seek shelter in an abandoned truck overnight. The only "food" they can find are out-of-date ketchup and mayonnaise sachets from a burger restaurant that they find discarded in the truck. Hardly the steaks they imagined.

In *The Godfather*, Sollozo and McCluskey are shot dead by Michael Corleone during a dinner they share in Restaurant Louis. This scene is pivotal as it is Michael's first murder and marks

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<sup>133</sup> S1E12.

<sup>134</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957; transl. Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1972; New York: Noonday Press, 1991).

<sup>135</sup> S6E9.

<sup>136</sup> S2E9.

<sup>137</sup> Morton's The Steakhouse is an upmarket chain of steak restaurants with locations in the United States, founded in Chicago in 1978.

the start of his involvement in his family's crime business. The symbolism of food and dining in this scene is multi-layered. Primarily, it stands in contrast to the "innocence" of the meal Michael and Kay share at the wedding at the start of the movie. The sharing of food normally implies trust but here it brings death. A waiter brings the diners—Michael, Sollozo and McCluskey—salad and wine. McCluskey asks: "How's the Italian food in this restaurant?" and Sollozo tells Michael: "Try the veal. It's the best in the city." Later Michael retrieves a gun hidden in the toilet and kills them both. Michael had previously declared that he never wanted to be part of his father's business, so committing this murder in the restaurant is an act of self-betrayal, placing him on a path that he never wanted to be on. The upturned dining table at the end of the scene is a symbol of the troubles that lie ahead.

The final scene of *The Sopranos* is set in a New Jersey diner and echoes much of the stage direction in the Louis' scene: the furtive glances towards the door in particular. The venue is different and shows how the glory days the mob are over.<sup>138</sup> Instead of the white table cloth Italian restaurant in New York, *The Sopranos* features a shabby diner, Holsten's.<sup>139</sup> AJ comments that "the onion rings are the best in New Jersey", a deliberate intertextual contrast to the veal served in Louis'.

## 4.6 Food as Power

Food is commonly used as a symbol of power in the gangster genre, often as a way to flaunt wealth and influence. Dietler states that "food is a prime political tool, playing a prominent role in social activity concerned with the relations of power."<sup>140</sup> He suggests that hosting feasts is a way of acquiring and maintaining power that involve the competitive manipulation of commensal hospitality toward the acquisition of what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital."<sup>141</sup> Few scenes do this better than the grand opening of *The Godfather*, in which the lavish wedding feast displays Vito's power and wealth. We witness the subordination of the guests in the way that Luca Brasi is rehearsing his words of gratitude to the host, Vito. In *GoodFellas*, Paulie Cicero plays the role of the generous host in his home. Santos states that

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<sup>138</sup> S6E21.

<sup>139</sup> Holsten's is a diner in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Dietler, "Feasts and Commensal Politics in the Political Economy: Food, Power and Status," in *Prehistoric Europe in Food and The Status Quest*, ed. Polly Wiessner and Wulf Schiefenhövel (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 87-125.

<sup>141</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), 15-29.

Food is glue that binds together the often contradictory elements of the America Mafia way of life – the seeming incongruities of family, tradition, and religion joined with murder, bloodshed and brutality.<sup>142</sup>

Food is also used in *The Sopranos* to demonstrate Tony's power, both at home and outside. At home, while not on the same level as Connie's wedding feast in *The Godfather*, he regularly plays host, and often uses dining-out as an opportunity to exert power, for example in season five when Finn, Meadow's boyfriend, attempts to pay for dinner in a restaurant and incurs Tony's wrath: "You eat. I pay."<sup>143</sup> In all three films, gastrocriticism reveals that unequal commensal hospitality is used to legitimise authority and enhance leadership.

#### 4.7 Summary

Through the application of gastrocriticism, this chapter demonstrated that *The Sopranos* references and develops the food tropes evident in the gangster genre. Amongst others, its intertextuality recalls expressions of Italian-American identity, family, *esprit de corps* and power all evident in *The Godfather and GoodFellas*. What is significant about *The Sopranos* though, is the way that such themes have been brought up to date, offering a more complicated, self-conscious depiction of mobsters. We see Tony's struggle to maintain dominance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century against a backdrop of globalisation. Through the lens of food we can see how *The Sopranos* is an evolution of the gangster genre.

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<sup>142</sup> Santos, 209.

<sup>143</sup> S5E9.

## Chapter Five— Food Defining Character, Identity and Plot

As O’Neill suggests, food in films is increasingly “both plot and motive,”<sup>144</sup> and a gastrocritical approach reveals how food drives the narrative in *The Sopranos*. As previously stated, “food is central to our identity,”<sup>145</sup> and we see this in the way the Italian-American characters in *The Sopranos* are defined through what and with whom they eat. Application of Klitzing’s framework reveals that food is uniquely central to *The Sopranos*’ plot and often mirrors food-related tropes from the wider gangster genre. It also functions as a key narrative device; as an embodiment of the personality of the lead character; as a vehicle to access the subconscious; as a symbol of greed; as a symbol of power and as a signal of outlier status.

### 5.1 Food as a Plot Device

The premise of the series is uniquely food-related: the head of the DiMeo crime family—Tony Soprano—goes into therapy to deal with fainting spells triggered by the sight of meat. The title of the series—*The Sopranos*—references “singing”, the mafia slang for breaking the code of *omertà* (silence).<sup>146</sup> Here, Tony is breaking *omertà* just by talking to his psychiatrist, but the fact that he is doing so because of food (and in particular, Italian cold cuts) puts food front and centre of the show. If food was not present, *The Sopranos* would be fundamentally changed. Incidentally, those cold cuts—*gabagool*, *prosciutto*, *mortadella*, *bresaola*, *salami*—all add to the Italian-American authenticity of the series.

In the first episode, Tony faints whilst grilling sausages at his son’s birthday party,<sup>147</sup> prompting him to seek therapy. In season three, a “flashback” device allows us to see the basis of Tony’s neurosis: when opening the refrigerator at home and eating gabagool, he has a flashback to his childhood in Satriale’s Pork Store where he witnessed his father cutting off the owner’s finger as a punishment for an unpaid gambling debt.<sup>148</sup> Young Tony is overwhelmed and faints, needing stitches as a result of the fall. Immediately returning home after witnessing this violent act, he saw how his otherwise cold and unaffectionate mother was aroused by the free meat his

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<sup>144</sup> Molly O’Neill, “Eye Candy,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 17, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/16/magazine/food-eye-candy.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” 275.

<sup>146</sup> *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “omertà,” accessed July 4, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100249610;jsessionid=02D8D664B93B489E0B458FDDDD0E4E427>

<sup>147</sup> S1E1.

<sup>148</sup> S3E3.



father brought home from Satriale's. Many years later he recounts this story to his therapist Dr. Melfi, and she explains that the attack was triggered by the combination of witnessing the violence, the sexual tension between his parents, and the fact that he might one day "be called upon to bring home the bacon."<sup>149</sup> She refers to this as Tony's Proustian moment – "one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood,"<sup>150</sup> *The Sopranos* is unique as the premise of the story is a mob boss in therapy because of food, thus making it a ripe subject for gastrocriticism.

## 5.2 Food and Tony Soprano

Besides the central conceit of the show, food acts as an embodiment of the lead character's complex persona, whose inherent personality contradictions are evident in his food choices. Food is used to show the contrast in Tony between the cold-blooded killer and his occasional childlike playfulness and also as evidence of his greed; his resultant physical characteristics become both part of the plot-line and a source of mockery from rivals and associates alike.

As mentioned, Tony feasts on rare steaks after committing violent crimes. But at home he has a soft, innocent side. We see his child-like demeanour when we frequently observe him watching television and eating ice-cream out of the tub. At home many of his food choices are infantile, such as Honey Comb and Sugar Puffs cereal, Magnum ice-creams, Coca Cola and then later in the series diet Coke when he is trying to lose weight. We see a playful side to him when he and his son, AJ, make ice cream sundaes and end up squirting Reddi-wip<sup>151</sup> in each other's faces.<sup>152</sup> These food choices portray an endearing multi-dimensional character and not just a stereotyped villain, and this places the viewer in a difficult position.

### 5.2.1 Appetite and Greed

Veblen argued that wealthy individuals consume conspicuous goods to advertise their wealth.<sup>153</sup> We see Tony's materialism evident in his collection of expensive watches and his

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<sup>149</sup> S3E3.

<sup>150</sup> S3E3.

<sup>151</sup> Reddi-wip is a canned sweetened whipped cream.

<sup>152</sup> S1E7.

<sup>153</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: Unwin Books, 1970).

fifty-five-foot yacht.<sup>154</sup> These trappings, along with Carmela’s housewife status and life of leisure, are an economic trophy to demonstrate Tony’s wealth.

Tony is portrayed as greedy which is shown in two ways on screen: through his voracious appetite for women (over twenty different women over six seasons), and through his extraordinary appetite for food. As Dr. Melfi, his therapist points out to him: “You don’t have to eat every dish of rigatoni. You don’t have to fuck every girl you meet.”<sup>155</sup>

Tony’s appetite seems constantly on display: he rarely walks into the kitchen in the family home without going to the fridge; usually eating leftovers, cold cuts or swigging juice straight from the carton, and is rarely seen in the staff room at Bada Bing or at Satriale’s without food—usually cold cuts, sandwiches or pastries—in hand. Fischler describes this as “the refrigerator syndrome.”<sup>156</sup>

A diner scene in season four shows Tony’s inability to restrain his appetite. Bobby Baccalieri orders steak and fries whilst Tony—trying to be good—orders scrambled eggs, “no oil” and tomatoes. When the food arrives, Tony becomes envious of Bobby and orders a rare steak.<sup>157</sup>

In a later episode, Tony and Carmela visit Nori, a sushi restaurant.<sup>158</sup> They smugly congratulate each other at being able to eat “a \$40 piece of fish that flew in first class,” but Tony’s appetite is so great that before their next dinner date there, he goes for lunch alone.

In mafia-speak the term “eating alone” is slang for being greedy and not sharing criminal spoils.<sup>159</sup> The literal act of eating alone is frowned upon in many or most cultures. For most people a solitary meal is a highly undesirable situation and often is not considered to be a meal at all.<sup>160</sup> Fischler asks:

why is solitary eating perceived negatively – obvious answer would be is that it is not social, thus the solitary eater incurs suspicion for excluding him/herself from communal eating: suspicion of some sort of treachery, poisoning or spell of some kind; suspicion of undue eating (without sharing). As it were, food seems to be perceived as a zero-sum game: not taking part may be equated with secretly taking an undue part of the whole.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> His boat is moored in Sea Bright is an affluent New Jersey coastal town.

<sup>155</sup> S6E1.

<sup>156</sup> Claude Fischler, “Food Habits, Social Change and the Nature/Culture Dilemma,” *Social Science Information* 19, no. 6 (1980): 946.

<sup>157</sup> S4E1.

<sup>158</sup> S6E1.

<sup>159</sup> “The Ultimate Mafia Glossary,” *National Crime Syndicate.com*, acc. April 20, 2023, <https://www.nationalcrimesyndicate.com/ultimate-mafia-glossary/>

<sup>160</sup> Patricia Pliner and Rick Bell, “A Table for One: The Pain and Pleasure of Eating Alone,” in *Meals in Science and Practice*, ed. Herbert Meiselman (Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, 2009), 169-189.

<sup>161</sup> Claude Fischler, “Commensality”, 540.

Tony's greed and eating alone highlight that he is taking more than his fair share, showing that there is no honour amongst him and his comrades.

Food poisoning also plays a role in driving the narrative. Besides demonstrating the consequences of Tony's greed, it provides a convenient vehicle to access the characters' subconscious. In the second season, Tony goes to an Indian restaurant with Big Pussy. Later the same evening he has a second meal at Nuovo Vesuvio, the restaurant owned by his childhood friend, Artie Bucco.<sup>162</sup> As a result of food poisoning, Tony experiences fevered dreams. In his delirious subconscious, Tony imagines Big Pussy as a talking fish – a vision which confirms something he had suspected but not wanted to admit – that one of his best friends is a FBI informant. The next morning, Dr. Cusamano confirms it was most likely the mussels eaten at Vesuvio that made him sick. The reality is that the Italian food rather than the Indian food upset him, symbolising the betrayal he feels from his friend.

Tony's appetite affects his on-screen appearance. On a physical level he eats hurriedly, enthusiastically and noisily, and over the six seasons of *The Sopranos*, he puts on significant weight which makes his movement slow and his breathing laboured, but conspires to make his character literally larger than life.<sup>163</sup>

## 5.22 Food as a Source of Mockery

The plentiful availability of food is a prerequisite for the development of obesity. In the world's affluent societies obesity is most prevalent in the lower and poorer strata in contrast with the Third World where it only occurs among the privileged few. Mennell states that clinical evidence suggests that psychological pressures to overeat are often rooted in past hunger, perhaps in a previous generation, quoting a study by Bruch of mothers of obese children in America who were poor immigrants and had suffered hunger during their early lives. To them being fat indicated success and freedom.<sup>164</sup> Many of the Italian-Americans in the series are obese, which may in part be attributed to deprivation suffered by their parents and grandparents combined with the availability and abundance of food in contemporary America.

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<sup>162</sup> S2E1.

<sup>163</sup> Some online fan-sites guesstimate that Tony's weight gain is over 60lb (over 27kg) from season one to season six, and the first episode of the final season (S6E13) features him weighing himself in the bathroom at home, with the scales registering over 280lb (nearly 130kg).

<sup>164</sup> Stephen Mennell, "On the Civilizing of Appetite," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4 no.2-3 (1987), 397 citing Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa and the Person Within* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 15.

Tony's size and weight gain results in countless jokes and comments, albeit behind his back for fear of retribution. Ralphie Cifaretto, for example, constantly mocks Tony to other mobsters during seasons three and four, openly asking fellow soldiers Vito and Eugene, "You think I'm afraid of that fat fuck?"<sup>165</sup> The rival Lupertazzi crime family regularly use Tony's size as a way to mock him: Phil Leotardo refers to Tony as "Porkchop."<sup>166</sup> Only Tony's very close cousin, Tony Blundetto (Tony B), ever mocks him to his face and only *just* gets away with it. In the episode "Rat Pack" Tony B has just been released from fifteen years in jail and jokingly quotes a Jackie Gleason song to Tony: "M'boy are you FAT!"<sup>167</sup> Tony Soprano clearly doesn't take the comment well but such is his affection for his cousin that he woundedly laughs it off in front of the gang. Later, when alone, Tony threatens him and menacingly explains: "Things have changed around here and I'm the boss of the family. You don't make fun of me."<sup>168</sup>

Tony B learns his lesson but continues to joke about his cousin out of earshot. In the aptly titled episode "Cold Cuts,"<sup>169</sup> Christopher describes Tony as "a heart attack waiting to happen" which prompts Tony B to joke about Tony's weight: "Our bodies are 86% water. At his last blood test he was 65% zeppole."<sup>170</sup> Tony B dies at Tony Soprano's hand three episodes later.

### 5.3 Food and Family

There is a high cultural value placed on families eating meals together.<sup>171</sup> The fears about the decline in families dining together are an indication of imagined nostalgia for the social value placed on domestic life.<sup>172</sup> The family meal is a place where gender and class inequities get created and reproduced. Not only are women responsible for the actual physical maintenance of the household and its members but also for creating "the meaningful patterns of everyday

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<sup>165</sup> S3E8.

<sup>166</sup> S6E13.

<sup>167</sup> S5E2.

<sup>168</sup> S5E2.

<sup>169</sup> S5E10.

<sup>170</sup> A zeppole is an Italian pastry - a deep-fried dough ball

<sup>171</sup> Simone Cinotto, "'Everyone Would be Around the Table': American Family Mealtimes in Historical Perspective, 1850-1960," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 111 (2006): 17-34; Anne Murcott, "Lamenting the 'Decline of the Family Meal' as a Moral Panic? Methodological Reflections," *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* 43, no.1 (2012): 97-118.

<sup>172</sup> Alice P. Julier, "Meals: 'Eating In' and 'Eating Out,'" in *Handbook of Food Research*, ed. Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco and Peter Jackson (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 338-351.

life.”<sup>173</sup> This work to get food on the table is often disguised as love and caring, making it invisible, making domestic food labour a central form of gender.<sup>174</sup>

Gastrocriticism shows that the family dinner plays an important role in *The Sopranos*. As a plot device it allows family tensions to surface, establishing Tony as the patriarch and Carmela as the food labourer. Food is very gendered as Tony only cooks when he is barbecuing. Breakfast in the Soprano kitchen features in most episodes, with the nurturing Carmela usually dressed and ready for the day as she cooks for and serves her family. She rarely eats with them but ensures her two children and Tony, who is usually in his dressing gown, are fed. Tony plays a similar role to the children, often moodily mooching in the fridge.

As covered earlier, the ritual of the family meal is used to provide an anchor of normality: a visual and symbolic contrast to killing and corruption. When Tony and Carmela separate, Tony’s sister Janice understands the importance of the family meal and tries to take on the role of the matriarch by making Sunday dinner for Tony, AJ, Meadow and Bobby.<sup>175</sup> Meadow comments that it is good of Janice to keep the Sunday tradition going but AJ ungratefully and bluntly points out that the clam chowder was canned. However, when AJ returns to his mother and she asks what they had for dinner, he lies and tells her they had roast beef – being fully aware, even at a young age, of the symbolic power of family meals.

## 5.4 Food and Italian-American Identity

Food is inextricably linked with the Italian-American identity. Fischler wrote about the principle of incorporation—food going from outside to inside—forming the basis of collective identity which is especially important in immigrant communities.<sup>176</sup>

We see several examples in *The Sopranos* of incorporation such as the fried zeppole at the street festival for Elzéar of Sabran.<sup>177</sup> Old traditions are remembered through food, thus reinforcing the Italian-American identity. We learn that food defines the family: when AJ

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<sup>173</sup> Marjorie De Vault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 178.

<sup>174</sup> De Vault, 13.

<sup>175</sup> S5E1.

<sup>176</sup> Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” 275-293.

<sup>177</sup> S6E9.

refuses to eat fried artichokes, calling them “cactus,” his grandfather replies: “You’re not Italian if you don’t like artichokes.”<sup>178</sup>

The Italian-American identity is distinct from Italian identity and this dichotomy between Italy and modern America is shown throughout the series. In an earlier episode, Tony describes Dr. Cusamano as an “Italian but ‘merigan...a Wonderbread wop. He eats his Sunday gravy out of a jar.”<sup>179</sup> This reflects Tony’s disdain for the Cusamano family as they have rejected their Italian culture through their rejection of real *ragú*.

The character Furio is a link to the old world having been sent from Italy to work for Tony. His “official” job is making mozzarella at Vesuvio, but he is one of Tony’s thugs. He becomes homesick and talks about how the smell of olives makes him sad.<sup>180</sup> Furio is used as a device to show how removed New Jersey is from Italy, especially in the scene where he returns from Italy and his sadness is evident when he drives past a strip mall replete with a Burger King and a massive American flag.<sup>181</sup>

The episode “The Strong Silent Type” ends with Furio drinking a glass of red wine whilst cooking spaghetti.<sup>182</sup> He drains the pasta and then adds the spaghetti into some gently simmering tomato sauce, before grating fresh parmesan and starting to eat. The scene then cuts to Tony microwaving ziti and sitting down with a glass of milk. This juxtaposition of one Italian and one Italian-American reveals how much the Italian-Americans have changed. There is a shared food culture but the microwaved ziti and glass of milk speaks to how the culture is fragmenting. Calvo observed that “features of cuisine are retained even after when the original language of the culture has been forgotten.”<sup>183</sup> Tony does not speak Italian but is connected to his homeland through food, albeit an microwaved dinner.

## 5.5 Food and Power

We see many examples of Tony use food symbolically as a political tool<sup>184</sup> through the meals that he hosts: dinners, wakes, birthday parties, charity events and bridal showers. This hospitality demonstrates the Sopranos’ wealth and power, which is further evident when

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<sup>178</sup> S4E11.

<sup>179</sup> S1E10.

<sup>180</sup> S4E4.

<sup>181</sup> S4E10.

<sup>182</sup> S4E10.

<sup>183</sup> Manuel Calvo, “Migration et Alimentation,” *Social Science Information* 21, no.3 (1982): 383-446.

<sup>184</sup> Dietler, 91.

Carmela and Tony enlist their friends—restaurateur Artie Bucco and his wife, Charmaine—to cater an event in their home; but ultimately, Charmaine is offended when Carmela treats her like a servant.<sup>185</sup>

Throughout the series, Thanksgiving—a significant annual feast in the United States—is used as a plot device to mark the passing of time, and—because it places key characters together around the family dining table—to drive the plot forward. For example, Carmela invites the recently widowed Rosalie Aprile, her son Jackie and her boyfriend, Tony’s caporegime Ralphie Cifaretto, to spend Thanksgiving dinner with them. Tony orders Carmela to disinvite them because he has been disrespected by the hot-headed Ralphie. Carmela makes up an excuse about her father being ill; however, it is obvious to Ralphie that he has been excluded, leading to feelings of rejection. This action of exclusion from an important shared food event creates a social boundary highlighting the social difference with outsiders from the insiders.<sup>186</sup> This form of exclusion is a symbolic marker of distance and enmity<sup>187</sup> and has repercussions that ultimately see the demise of Ralphie.

Despite their wealth, the Sopranos do not fit in with their assimilated Italian-American neighbours, the law-abiding Cusamanos. Although the Sopranos have economic capital, they lack what Bourdieu terms cultural capital<sup>188</sup> which exists in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalised state.<sup>189</sup> The Sopranos display objectified cultural capital, which is demonstrated through material possessions used symbolically to confer status. This can be seen through their large house, Tony’s watches and Carmela’s ostentatious jewellery.

The Sopranos lack embodied capital, but gastrocriticism reveals their desire for institutionalised cultural capital through food. The institutionalised state is “a certificate of cultural competence”<sup>190</sup> which is awarded from an institution, such as an academic qualification, that in turn endows social status. Carmela seeks institutionalised cultural capital for Meadow by wanting her to go the prestigious Georgetown University and tries to bribe her neighbour Jeannie Cusamano’s twin sister, Joan—a Georgetown alumni and attorney—to write a college recommendation for Meadow’s college application. Using her culinary skills,

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<sup>185</sup> S1E3.

<sup>186</sup> Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott and Anneke H. Van Otterloo, *The Sociology of Food – Eating, Diet and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

<sup>187</sup> Maurice Bloch, “Commensality and Poisoning,” *Social Research* 66, no.1 (1999): 133-149.

<sup>188</sup> Bourdieu, 15-29.

<sup>189</sup> Bourdieu, 18.

<sup>190</sup> Bourdieu, 20.

Carmela shows steely determination and offers Joan a pineapple ricotta pie - “I don’t think you understand I want you to write that letter...Don’t make me beg here.”<sup>191</sup> Carmela has used food to assert her power and in doing so has become more like her husband.

Carmela’s desire for cultural capital results in an affair with Mr. Wegler, the school guidance counsellor, in order to secure better grades for AJ.<sup>192</sup> Tony does not suspect the affair until he finds Carmela’s leftover duck in the fridge and asks her: “Since when do you eat duck?”<sup>193</sup> It is significant that her new act—adultery—is exposed through trying new foods.

Carmela also uses food to try to seduce a priest. It is a spiritual seduction rather than a physical one but we again witness her wielding the power of her cooking. While Tony is away, Father Phil comes to the house late at night saying: “I have a jones for your baked ziti.”<sup>194</sup> When Carmela finds out that her friend, the recently widowed Rosalie is also feeding Father Phil, she throws away the dish she made for him and confronts him:

I think you have this M.O. where you manipulate spiritually thirsty women and I think a lot of it is tied up with food somehow, as well as the sexual tension game.

Carmela is well aware of the power that she commands through her food skills.

## 5.6 Food as a Signal of Outlier Status

Fischler points out that “the way a group eats asserts its diversity, hierarchy, organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently.”<sup>195</sup> Most of the characters in *The Sopranos* are portrayed as food-loving Italians with food being central to their identity; however, food is also used as a marker of “otherness”.

One such character with anomalous eating habits is Tony’s mother, Livia. She is callous and neophobic and her negative character is exaggerated through her relationship with food. Food is a source of anxiety to her; rooted in the fact that how and what we eat may be the most important cause of disease and death. As Paul Rozin puts it: “Food is fundamental, fun, frightening and far-reaching.”<sup>196</sup> Tony recalls that his father ate clams and Worcestershire

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<sup>191</sup> S2E8.

<sup>192</sup> S5E6.

<sup>193</sup> S5E6.

<sup>194</sup> S1E5.

<sup>195</sup> Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” 275.

<sup>196</sup> Paul Rozin, “Food is Fundamental, Fun, Frightening and Far-Reaching,” *Social Research* 66 no.1 (1999), 9-30.



sauce, whereas his mother never ate anything raw.<sup>197</sup> Livia's pessimism is described by her brother-in-law, Junior, in food terms as being "...like a woman with a Virginia ham under her arm, crying the blues 'cause she has no bread."<sup>198</sup> Her negativity is evident in many food-related interactions; for example, when eating pork at a family dinner she recounts a story in the newspaper about a family in Obispo dying of trichinosis.<sup>199</sup> She is difficult to please: when Tony brings her macarons she turns her nose up saying they are too sweet, and when Carmela brings her ricotta pie, she refuses it because of her cholesterol. When Carmela explains it was made with low fat cheese, she responds: "Yeuch."<sup>200</sup> When Livia is in hospital, Artie Bucco takes her duck *ragù* with cavatelli, again her response is negative – "Ugh! It's Northern."<sup>201</sup> Being from Avellino, near Naples, there is an inverted snobbery about the Northern Italians, particularly as Ray points out: "By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, northern Italians had already played a part in denigrating the diet of their southern compatriots."<sup>202</sup> Her negative attitude to food reinforces her outlook on life. Her joyless attitude to food is indicative of her extremely negative personality.

Tony's sister, Janice, is similar to Livia: both are manipulative and calculating. Janice's relationship with food changes depending on the personality she is trying to project. When we first meet her she is going through a hippy phase. She is a vegetarian who has renamed herself Parvati after living in a commune on the West coast. She comes back to New Jersey and temporarily lives with Tony and Carmela; the family deride Janice's soy milk and tofu in the fridge.<sup>203</sup> In research by Roth there was a perception that vegetarians were "unpatriotic, un-American, and even downright un-family like"<sup>204</sup> for rejecting meat. When Janice decides she wants to stay in New Jersey, she reinvents herself as a mob wife and soon gives up her vegetarianism: "God I love marrow, just like Ma. Remember Ma with a bone? It sounded like half-price day at a liposuction clinic."<sup>205</sup> she says to Tony whilst sucking marrow out of a bone. Janice decides she wants to be part of the New Jersey family and realises the importance of food within that community. She is aware of her shortcomings in that she cannot cook but she

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<sup>197</sup> S1E7.

<sup>198</sup> S2E8.

<sup>199</sup> S1E13.

<sup>200</sup> S1E11.

<sup>201</sup> S1E13.

<sup>202</sup> Ray, 96.

<sup>203</sup> S2E3.

<sup>204</sup> LuAnne K. Roth, "'Beef. It's What's for Dinner' Vegetarians, Meat-Eaters and the Negotiation of Familial Relationships," *Food, Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (2005): 188.

<sup>205</sup> S4E6.

woos the widowed Bobby Baccialieri with food – bringing him baked ziti — that she tries to pass it off as her own when it is actually from Vesuvio.<sup>206</sup> She also tries to pass off Carmela’s lasagna as her own, telling Bobby that she made it; however, Junior correctly identifies it as Carmela’s famous lasagna that is known for “basil leaves under the sausage.”<sup>207</sup>

## 5.7 Summary

Application of gastrocritical frameworks revealed many things, including that because of Tony's neuroses, food is uniquely central to this drama (food as a plot device). Food adds realism to the story of an Italian-American family (food as verisimilitude) and also shows how removed they are from the old country and have created a new Italian-American identity (food as context).

Commensality is very important holding the Soprano family together; however it is also used to exclude people. Food is used to add depth to many key characters, and anomalous food choices are used to show personality quirks. Food is used as a key narrative device; as an embodiment of the personality of the lead character; as a vehicle to access the subconscious; as a symbol of greed; as a symbol of power and as a signal of outlier status.

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<sup>206</sup> S5E3.

<sup>207</sup> S5E3.

## Chapter Six – Importance of Food in Place and Setting

The period in which *The Sopranos* was set was an important time of increased visibility of food and foodways across the cultural landscape, all of which are reflected in the show which add to the verisimilitude and context. This chapter looks at the importance of place and setting in *The Sopranos* from a gastrocritical perspective.

The series is set against a backdrop of globalisation and commoditisation, the rise of food television, celebrity chefs and the rapid expansion and dominance of franchised chains such as Starbucks. The early episodes overlap with an unprecedented period of growth for the coffee chain: by the time of the second season in 2000, Starbucks had 3,500 stores in the USA, up from only 84 just a decade earlier.<sup>208</sup> This chapter also looks at the physical locations which function as food-related Third Places in the series: Satriale's store and the restaurant Vesuvio, which acts as a barometer for the evolution of Italian-American cuisine.

### 6.1 Popular Food Culture in *The Sopranos* Era

The early 2000s marked a period of growing interest in food with an explosion of television food shows. The Food Network channel saw a period of massive growth and by 1997 was the second fastest-growing cable network.<sup>209</sup> Gilbert describes this intersection between cooking and celebrity culture as “culinary exhibitionism” and “culinary voyeurism.”<sup>210</sup> To use a term Guy Debord coined decades earlier, this period was “the society of the spectacle”<sup>211</sup> as the rise of food media meant images supplanted genuine human interactions. This popular food culture is evident in *The Sopranos* with references to Food Network chefs and shows. Superstar chefs Wolfgang Puck,<sup>212</sup> Bobby Flay<sup>213</sup> and Rachel Ray<sup>214</sup> are all mentioned and we see Livia watching Emerill Lagasse on the television from her hospital bed.<sup>215</sup> Using the Food Network as a backdrop and referencing these celebrity chefs adds to the realism of the series and provides a culinary context of the period. This rise of cooking as a spectator sport and the cult

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<sup>208</sup> “Timeline,” *Starbucks.com*, acc. April 27, 2023, <https://stories.starbucks.com/uploads/2019/01/AboutUs-Company-Timeline-1.6.21-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>209</sup> Scripps, “Food Network President and CEO Erica Gruen Leaving Network,” press release, November 12, 1998, <https://scripps.com/press-releases/190-food-network-president-and-ceo-erica-gruen-leaving-network/>.

<sup>210</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* (New York: Norton, 2014), 203.

<sup>211</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. Reprint, Detroit: Black & Red, 1977.

<sup>212</sup> S3E5.

<sup>213</sup> S412.

<sup>214</sup> S6E17.

<sup>215</sup> S2E2.

of celebrity was predicted by Boorstin in 1962,<sup>216</sup> and is partially attributed to America changing from a producing country to a consuming culture.<sup>217</sup> Rousseau concludes that despite the deluge of information, we are neither better fed nor educated: “The more food media we consume, the less incentive we have to think for ourselves about how we eat.”<sup>218</sup>

The influence of celebrity chef culture on Carmela is seen in series three when she proudly serves Mario Batali’s green bean recipe at a family gathering.<sup>219</sup> The dish—cooked in garlic, anchovy paste, red pepper flakes and parmesan cheese—is a departure from her standard repertoire and she is proud of that. Batali’s show *Molto Mario* ran on the Food Network between 1996 and 2007 and he challenged the stereotypical expression of Italian-American ethnicity by presenting diverse histories and traditions with a regional focus. His show pioneered a novel form of food television, set in an open kitchen where he cooked for three guests; chatting with them while imploring them to eat. It was a departure from the traditional format of instructional cooking as exemplified by Julia Child.<sup>220</sup> *Molto Mario* provided viewers insight into Italian-American culture. Ferraro suggests that Batali represents an instance of “feeling Italian” and foodways provide a way of enabling all Americans to “feel Italian.”<sup>221</sup> It is fitting that Carmela who proudly makes Italian-American food—for example, pasta is served as a main course rather than a primo, as advocated by Batali—had been sufficiently influenced by the Food Network to try cooking a different Italian recipe.

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<sup>216</sup> Megan Garber, “The Image in the Age of Pseudo Reality,” *The Atlantic*, December 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/the-image-in-the-age-of-pseudo-reality/509135/>.

<sup>217</sup> Amy Henderson, “Media and the Rise of Celebrity Culture,” *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no.4 (1992): 49-54.

<sup>218</sup> Signe Rousseau, *Food Media: Celebrity Chefs and the Politics of Everyday Interference* (London: Berg, 2013), xx.

<sup>219</sup> S3E3.

<sup>220</sup> Marinacco, 288.

<sup>221</sup> Thomas Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

## 6.2 Commoditisation and Globalisation

The 1990s was a period of free-market economics underpinned by changes in technology, business and government policies.<sup>222</sup> Parasecoli points out that whilst “post-industrial societies in the US, Western Europe and Japan have seen their food systems move more towards mass manufacturing, intensification and industrialization in the past few decades,” there has been a countermovement with growing interest in “authentic” and “typical” food.<sup>223</sup> To a degree, this can be observed in *The Sopranos* with the wide variety of processed food and drinks consumed on screen,<sup>224</sup> contrasting with the artisanal ingredients and dishes that Artie Bucco serves at Vesuvio. He takes great pleasure in serving fine Italian fare such as quail stuffed with fennel sausage,<sup>225</sup> zucchini flowers,<sup>226</sup> and porcini-dusted ravioli.<sup>227</sup> As mentioned previously in chapter four, the difference between the bargaining chips of Junior in his prison – Sprees candy and cans of soda<sup>228</sup> – contrast with the fine food and whiskey that we see in the prison scenes in *GoodFellas*, is indicative of the power of large food corporations.

Coffee is used symbolically in *The Sopranos* to show the impact of globalisation on communities and traditions. The 1990s’ interest in coffee was driven by the aforementioned proliferation of Starbucks, the so-called ‘second wave of coffee’<sup>229</sup>. This introduced the concept of varied countries-of-origin whilst popularising traditional Italian milk-based espresso drinks. In the first season, Pussy and Paulie visit a Starbucks-esque coffee shop and ask for an espresso and a coffee. The barista explains that the “café du jour is a New Zealand Peaberry,”<sup>230</sup> triggering a rant from Paulie about how the Italians invented coffee culture and yet other people are profiting from it. Astonished, he asks:

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<sup>222</sup> “The Globalization of Politics: American Foreign Policy for a New Century,” *Brookings.edu*, acc. April 21, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-globalization-of-politics-american-foreign-policy-for-a-new-century/>

<sup>223</sup> Fabio Parasecoli, “Geographical Indications, Intellectual Property and the Global Market. Taste, Power, Tradition. Geographical Indications as Cultural Property,” *Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property* 10 (2017):13.

<sup>224</sup> Many brand names are mentioned in *The Sopranos*. See appendix for full list.

<sup>225</sup> S2E5.

<sup>226</sup> S2E13.

<sup>227</sup> S6E6.

<sup>228</sup> S6E15.

<sup>229</sup> Jonathan Gold, “La Mill: The Latest Buzz,” *LA Weekly*, March 11 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081219141056/http://www.laweekly.com/2008-03-13/eat-drink/the-latest-buzz>.

<sup>230</sup> S1E2.

How did we miss out on this? Fucking espresso, cappuccino. We invented this shit...And it's not just the money. It's a pride thing.

He goes on to bemoan the commodification of Italian foods –

All our food—pizza calzone, buffalo mozzarella, olive oil—we gave them the gift of our cuisine. But, this is the worst. This espresso shit.<sup>231</sup>

Paulie's indignance over the corporate appropriation of his Italian heritage is played up to comic effect, but reflects a general trend of what was happening at the time to Italian food in America. The cultural backdrop of *The Sopranos* shows a shift in how the perception of Italian food has changed; Italian-American foods like pizza or spaghetti and meatballs became synonymous with Americans and American food.<sup>232</sup> In chapter four, we considered the fact that in the spectrum of worlds represented by the term Italian-American, the Sopranos are now more American than Italian.

In the episode "Commendatori", Tony, Christopher and Paulie visit Naples for business but are keen to retrace their roots.<sup>233</sup> Upon arrival, they feel alienated as modern Italy turned out to be different to what they expected from films (we see Tony watching *The Godfather Part II* before the trip) or what they have experienced in New Jersey. Paulie feels a deep personal connection to his homeland but speaks only a few words and becomes annoyed when his attempts at conversation over a morning espresso are ignored by the locals. His alienation is seen at dinner when he rejects the squid ink pasta and asks for "macaroni and gravy." For Paulie, Italian food is tomato-based cuisine and he mistakes the tradition of Italian-American food for contemporary Italian food. Ironically, when they are in their hotel rooms Mario Batali is on the television in the background. Foodways thus serve a central symbolic function looking to reclaim and recover Italianate identity from the distorted imagery present in mainstream American culture.

The commoditisation of food is shown in series six when Patsy Parisi and Burt Gervasi attempt to extort money from a new Starbucks. The manager refuses and tells them that the till management system would make that impossible. When they realise the futility of offering protection to a corporate behemoth, Patsy comments: "It's over for the little guy."<sup>234</sup> This

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<sup>231</sup> S1E12.

<sup>232</sup> Ian MacAllen, *Red Sauce: How Italian Food Became American* (Lanham: Bowman and Littlefield, 2022), 8.

<sup>233</sup> S4E8.

<sup>234</sup> S6E7.

comedic interaction in the coffee shop shows one of the effects of culinary globalisation on organised crime.

Although Tony's crew bemoan the effects of globalisation, it is ironic that Tony is responsible for destroying the old ethnic neighbourhood when he sells a landmark family business – Caputo's Poultry – to developers. Patsy and Burt are on their extortion rounds again and go to collect their regular protection money from Caputo's and are informed that it will soon become a Jamba Juice,<sup>235</sup> a large American chain of juice bars. The proliferation of juice bars reflects the changing eating habits from what the anthropologist Mary Douglas defined as a meal<sup>236</sup> to smaller meals that are consumed outside of the home. Fischler state that: "Nibbling is the new pattern, and it goes on almost twenty-four hours a day."<sup>237</sup> Mintz argues that eating outside of meals has made eating desocialised.<sup>238</sup> Fischler described this way of eating as "gastro-anomie."<sup>239</sup>

### 6.3 The Third Place

In *The Sopranos*, coffee is by far the most consumed drink in the series. In almost every episode Carmela makes a fresh pot of filter coffee each morning, and Tony's crew are frequently seen imbibing espressos outside of Satriale's. Satriale's is a legitimate business that sells a variety of meat, pork, sausage and deli-style sandwiches, as well as pastries and espresso. It was acquired illegitimately by the Soprano family as part of a debt owed to Tony's father. Tony and his crew regularly meet outside on the street drinking espresso. Oldenburg emphasises that beverages such as coffee are key to the idea of the Third Place, suggesting that "the general rule is that beverages are of such social importance as to become veritable social sacraments."<sup>240</sup> Oldenburg suggests that the Third Place is somewhere for people to meet and enjoy each other's company away from family, describing it as a "loud and boisterous" place.<sup>241</sup> He describes it as a place where "men who still work in small shops will be found to

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<sup>235</sup> S6E8.

<sup>236</sup> Douglas, 61-81.

<sup>237</sup> Claude Fischler, "Food Habits, Social Change and the Nature/Culture Dilemma." *Social Science Information* 19, no. 6 (1980): 946.

<sup>238</sup> Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 213.

<sup>239</sup> Fischler, "Food Habits."

<sup>240</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 1998), 183.

<sup>241</sup> Ray Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, "The Third Place," *Qualitative Sociology* 5, no. 4 (1982): 278.

keep a few chairs around the store in which they spend many happy hours with friends who drop by”<sup>242</sup> and “entertain each other without the trappings of their social status and personal problems.”<sup>243</sup> Tony and his crew definitely laugh and entertain each other with their camaraderie and off-colour jokes during these coffee meetings. However, this is a subversion of the Third Place as Satriale’s is also the scene of several murders including the grisly dismembering of Richie Aprile through a meatgrinder.<sup>244</sup>

Satriale’s shows how important food is to the Italian-American community. In the very first episode, Silvio tells Paulie that his wife, Gabriella, sends him there regularly because she thinks that it sells the best *capicola*. The store positions food at the centre of Italian-American culture; however, its presence is a reminder of the brutality and violence that exists alongside it.

## 6.4 The Evolution of Italian Cuisine

The restaurant Vesuvio is employed in the series as a narrative device and also as a signifier of Italian-American assimilation into American culture. Vesuvio is an upmarket restaurant that shows the upward mobility of Italian-Americans and the enhanced status of Italian food since Artie’s grandfather arrived in America and opened his restaurant. Ray posits that Italian food was dismissed for a long time by Americans as the Italians were poor and derided: “When American Italians climbed out of the ghetto...Italian food was re-assessed in the American imagination.”<sup>245</sup> The low status of Italian cuisine versus French is indicated by the initial habit of giving French names to Italian food – such as “*Spaghetti Italiana*.”<sup>246</sup> By the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, Italian cuisine was on the curriculum at the Culinary Institute of America.<sup>247</sup> Most of the clientele at Vesuvio are Italian-American which supports Fischler’s theory that eating a food makes one become more like that food, then those sharing the food become more like each other.<sup>248</sup>

After a fire, the restaurant is rebuilt and renamed Nuovo Vesuvio, and becomes a setting for business dinners with Tony and his crew, awkward meals for Carmela and Tony, lunches for Carmela and her girlfriends, and family. One significant family meal takes place at the end of

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<sup>242</sup> Oldenburg and Brissett, 269.

<sup>243</sup> Oldenburg and Brissett, 275.

<sup>244</sup> S2E12.

<sup>245</sup> Ray, 96.

<sup>246</sup> Levenstein, 77.

<sup>247</sup> Ray, 99.

<sup>248</sup> Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity”, 275-293.



the first series.<sup>249</sup> It is a stormy night and the Soprano family home loses power, so Tony, Carmela, Meadow and AJ venture out for dinner. Tony, recovering from a hit on his life, is trying to rekindle the bond with his nuclear family. He toasts his family and reminds them to “remember the little moments.” Eight years later those words haunt him when AJ reminds Tony of them in the final scene of the last episode, “Made in America.” We see the family eating together but instead of the haven of Nuovo Vesuvio eating Italian food, they are in a shabby diner eating onion rings.<sup>250</sup>

Artie is one of the few non-mafia Italian characters and desperately wants to serve good quality Italian cuisine, but his passion is ridiculed by some of his clientele who just want familiar Italian-American food. Rozin suggests that flavour principles - in this case olive oil, tomatoes and garlic – are valuable markers for making food recognisable and acceptable. As mentioned earlier in chapter four these ingredients convey a history of culturally accumulated knowledge.<sup>251</sup> In the episode “Tell Tale Moozadell” Artie serves burrata and explains he had it flown in from Italy that day. He describes it as “a lot more subtle and smoother than mozzarella with an almost nut-like flavour.”<sup>252</sup> Artie cares about his ingredients and at that time, despite a growing “food-obsessed culture,”<sup>253</sup> burrata would not have been as ubiquitous as it is today.

Through cooking we see Artie connecting with his heritage. After burning his arm – a result of an ugly incident with a mobster – he seeks solace by cooking his grandfather’s rabbit stew. He shoots the rabbit in his garden as it was eating the rocket he was growing from seeds that he had smuggled back from Italy. He uses an old handwritten recipe, that is an ode to Italy, to make the dish. It is a beautiful contemplative scene which calms Artie.<sup>254</sup> Serving a peasant dish in a white-cloth restaurant illustrates the recognition of Italian food as cuisine, although as Ray suggests, this may be because “culture, it seems, follows global and social capital.”<sup>255</sup> Although Artie is far more assimilated than his grandfather, he understands that “eating bountifully did not mean eating like Americans,” for “to abandon immigrant food traditions for the food of Americans was to abandon community, family, and religion, at least in the minds

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<sup>249</sup> S1E13.

<sup>250</sup> S6E21.

<sup>251</sup> Elizabeth Rozin, “Culinary Themes: Traditional Seasoning Practices Provides Both a Sense of Familiarity and a Source of Variety,” *Natural History* 90, no.2 (1981): 6-14.

<sup>252</sup> S3E9.

<sup>253</sup> Willa Zhen, *Food Studies: A Hand on Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019),12.

<sup>254</sup> S6E7.

<sup>255</sup> Ray, 109.

of many immigrants.”<sup>256</sup> It is fitting that in this moment, Artie has his epiphany that he is better suited to being a cook than being a mobster.

## 6.5 Summary

The 1990s marked a period of growing food media and having characters discuss and even prepare real-life recipes adds to the realism of the series. Food systems were going through a period of change, moving toward mass production, but with a counter movement towards authenticity. Both Satriale’s and Vesuvio play a role in driving the narrative forward. The use of Satriale’s as a Third Place shows the importance of having a neutral meeting place, even for gangsters, whereas Vesuvio provides a marker for how Italian cuisine has evolved from red sauce Italian-American cuisine, and how much more assimilated Italian-Americans have become.

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<sup>256</sup> Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 54.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusion

This thesis applied a gastrocritical approach to explore food and drink in the HBO series *The Sopranos*.

Gastrocriticism is an emerging methodology typically used for literature, but in this case, it is applied to a long-narrative form television show, albeit one with an unrivalled cinematic reputation.<sup>257</sup> It draws on the scholarship from a range of fields and a “culinary lens”<sup>258</sup> is constructed through which the series is viewed. A structured framework of enquiry, using gastrocritical questions<sup>259</sup> has been employed to offer a systematic approach; for example exploring narrative, setting, characterisation, genre through food and foodways can provide a deeper understanding of the series. By adopting a gastrocritical paradigm, new insight can be given to *The Sopranos* and aid in its critical understanding, as well as providing insights that will be valuable for future film and food studies.

By applying a gastrocritical framework, many insights on food and foodways were gleaned. *The Sopranos* fits into the gangster genre, so the previous portrayal of food in this genre was examined as a basis for understanding how its food-related tropes influenced the series. *The Sopranos* references and develops many of the food tropes evident in the gangster genre. Amongst others, its intertextuality recalls expressions of Italian-American identity, family, *esprit de corps* and power all evident in *The Godfather and GoodFellas*. What is significant about *The Sopranos* though, is the way that such themes have been brought up to date, offering a more complicated, self-conscious depictions of mobsters. For example, *The Sopranos* represents a time when the connection to Italy had faded due to the characters’ upward mobility and assimilation into American culture. Through the lens of food, we can see how *The Sopranos* is an evolution of the gangster genre.

If food were not part of the text, *The Sopranos* would be fundamentally changed. Food plays a major role in driving the narrative in *The Sopranos*. Food is uniquely central to the plot—a mob-boss in therapy due to food-related panic attacks—and is used in a variety of important ways; as a key narrative device; as an embodiment of the personality of the lead character; as

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<sup>257</sup> “How The Sopranos Changed TV Forever 20th Century Anniversary,” *Fansided.com*, acc. April 1, 2023, <https://fansided.com/2019/01/10/how-sopranos-changed-tv-forever-20th-anniversary/>

<sup>258</sup> Tigner and Carruth, 8.

<sup>259</sup> Klitzing, “Gastrocritical Reading Questions”.

a vehicle to access the subconscious; as a symbol of greed; as a symbol of power, as a token of identity, and as a signal of outlier status (characters are often defined by what they eat and with whom).

Food drives the plot and adds realism to the story of an Italian-American family showing how removed they are from the “old country” with their new Italian-American identity. Commensality is important to the Soprano family, binding them together; however it is also exclusionary. Food is used to add depth to many more characters than just Tony, and anomalous food choices are used to show personality quirks.

*The Sopranos* is set in a time of increasing visibility of food and foodways across the cultural landscape, all of which are reflected in the show: the series is set against a backdrop of globalisation and commoditisation, the rise of food television, and celebrity chefs. A hallmark of the series was its realism and these references all add to its verisimilitude.

A gastrocritical viewing of *The Sopranos* has provided a more in-depth understanding of the series. Looking at food and foodways offers insight into the nuances of the characterisations and Italian-American identity, and how this identity is evolving.

## 7.2 Further Recommendations

As Christopher Moltisanti says, “food is all everyone talks about”<sup>260</sup> and that makes *The Sopranos* well placed for further gastrocritical viewing. The abundance of food and foodways make the series ripe for more focused analysis using a gastrocritical methodology. This study of *The Sopranos* was broad as it was based on 86 episodes, but there is room for more detailed analysis, either by season or by focussing on one of the key themes.

At present, because academic studies on food in *The Sopranos* are scarce, one challenge was narrowing down an area on which to focus. One area that warrants more analysis is perhaps that of disordered eating as there are several obese characters as well as one character with anorexia. Comedy and food in *The Sopranos* is a potential area for more study as there are several instances of comedic petty behaviours by these hardened criminals around food, such as Paulie Walnuts stealing pastries from a hotel buffet,<sup>261</sup> and gangsters stealing chocolates from a fellow mobster who is in a coma.<sup>262</sup> There are several instances of the gangsters feasting

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<sup>260</sup> S2E7.

<sup>261</sup> S6E15.

<sup>262</sup> S3E5.

on bread and wine, so another avenue might be to look at the religious symbolism of food. Food and gender is an area that should be further studied as food is very gendered in *The Sopranos* with women tending to most of the domestic food preparation and men only cooking for other men. Using gastrocriticism to delve deeper will unearth areas of academic interest.

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## Appendix: Foods and Brands Mentioned

Top 10 Most Consumed Food in the Sopranos	Times Mentioned
Hot beverages - mostly coffee	85
Pasta	66
Red wine- Ruffino, Chianti and Barolo	52
Vegetables	37
Soft drinks	34
Cold/deli meat: gabagool, bresaola, salami, hams	28
Juice	16
Sausage	15
White wine	13
Ice Cream	13
Cereal	13

Types of Food	Times Mentioned
Italian dishes (excluding pasta, cold meat and cheese)	80
American food	29
Indian food	1
Sushi	4
Mexican food	3
Jewish food	8

### American Chains Mentioned

Dunkin' Donuts  
 Krispy Kreme  
 Morton's the Steakhouse  
 Outback Steakhouse  
 Panera Bread  
 White Castle

### Food Network Chefs Mentioned

Bobby Flay  
 Emeril Lagasse  
 Mario Batali  
 Rachael Ray  
 Wolfgang Puck

Unusual Food	Character
Dandelion salad	Feech La Manna
Duck, quail, zucchini flowers	Artie Bucco in Vesuvio Restaurant
Johnny Cakes	Vito Spatafore
Rusty Nail	Tony Blundetto
Tofu, soy milk	Janice
Water chestnuts and bacon in duck sauce	Tony's father's mistress

Brands
Amaro
Bazzini Nuts
Belvedere Vodka
Boar's Head
Budweiser
Campbell's Soup
Carvel Ice Cream
Chef Boyardee
Coca- Cola
Entenmann's
Evian
Froot Loop cereal
Glenlivet
Honeycomb cereal
Jimmy Dean sausage
M&Ms
Magnum Ice cream
Minute Maid
Mott's Apple Juice
Nathan's Hot Dogs
San Pellegrino
Perrier
Ramlösa
Reddi-wip
Ritz crackers
Rolling Rock
Snapple
Spree candy
Swiss Miss Hot Chocolate
Tic Tac candy
Toblerone
Tropicana orange juice
Whitman's chocolates