

Trace, Trauma and Tradition in *The Sopranos*

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Abstract

This paper uses gastrocriticism – literary criticism that draws on disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and cultural studies – as a lens to establish the use of food as a symbolic marker of traces, trauma and traditions in the HBO series, *The Sopranos*. *The Sopranos* is a story of an Italian-American crime family in which food is uniquely central to the plot: a mob-boss is in therapy due to food-related panic attacks. Food is used in a variety of ways; as a narrative device; as a symbol of greed, power and status; and as a token of ethnic and professional identity. In terms of tradition, the intertextual food tropes in *The Sopranos* continue the traditions of the classic Hollywood gangster genre, recalling expressions of Italian-American identity, family, esprit-de-corps and power. Trace elements are evident in further exploration of Italian-American identity: food offers insight into the nuances of Italian-American identity, and its evolution as the population becomes more assimilated, contrasting with their recollections of the “old country.” The traumatic premise of the series is uniquely food-related: Tony Soprano enters therapy to address blackouts triggered by the sight of meat. Early in the series Tony faints whilst grilling sausages and in season three, a “flashback” shows us the basis of his neurosis: as a child he witnessed his father punishing a debtor – the owner of Satriale’s Pork Store – by cutting off his fingers. *The Sopranos* is unique in its depiction and use of food, and this study shows how those depictions reflect traces, traditions and trauma.

Keywords

Commensality; gangster genre; food trauma; gastrocriticism; Italian-American; power; symbolism; identity; family; immigrants; foodways.

The HBO television show *The Sopranos* ran for six seasons from 1999 to 2007. Its 86 episodes were broadcast internationally, and received critical acclaim from both the public and TV critics. One *New York Times* reviewer compared it to the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.¹ This paper applies a gastrocritical approach (a lens through

¹ 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>.

which to view food and foodways in literature and film) to look at trace, tradition and trauma in *The Sopranos*.

Set in New Jersey, *The Sopranos* juxtaposes 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 twenty-first century.

HBO's subscription model freed it from network censorship and advertising constraints, thus enabling *The Sopranos* to “seem cinematic” in comparison to other television dramas.² Schulman asserts that HBO's production model is closer to novels than commercial television³ encouraging viewers to build a relationship with the characters over longer periods of time, allowing for a more organic story arc and greater character development.

Trace, trauma and tradition are very much part of that story arc: trace via an exploration of Italian-American identity expressed through food; tradition through the intertextual food tropes that express Italian-American identity, family, esprit-de-corps and power as established by the classic Hollywood gangster genre; while a uniquely food-related trauma sits at the heart of the series itself – Tony enters therapy to address blackouts triggered by the sight of meat.

This paper applies gastrocriticism as a model to examine food and foodways in *The Sopranos*. Coined by Ronald Tobin in 2002, gastrocriticism is defined as a “multidisciplinary approach that links gastronomy and literature,”⁴ and is a nascent form of literary criticism “focused on human relationships with each other and to the natural world through food.”⁵ Klitzing has developed a series of “gastrocritical reading questions”⁶ for analysing text, or in this case, television, and application of this framework reveals that food is abundant, and drives the plot, in particular highlighting the areas of trace, trauma and tradition in the series.

² Michael Z. Newman and Elaine Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 135.

³ Alex Schulman, “The Sopranos: An American Existentialism,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 39 no.1 (2010): 23-38.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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), 1.

⁶ Anke Klitzing, “Defining Gastrocriticism as a Critical Paradigm on the Example of Irish Literature and Food Writing: A Vade Mecum,” (PhD thesis, Technological University Dublin, 2023), 476-479, <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tourdoc/39/>.

Food as Traces of Identity

The Sopranos' is an exploration of Italian-American identity, where food offers nuanced insight into the evolution of that identity as the population becomes more assimilated, contrasting with their recollections of the "old country." Italian-American identity is bound up with food. 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."⁷ This is supported by Diner⁸ and Cinotto⁹ who argue the cultural work of Italian-American foodways in the US is inseparable from conceptions of Italian-American identity. This identity was formed by Sicilian and Abruzzese immigrants who came to the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth 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."¹⁰ It was their experience of being labelled as Italians in America that generated a unified (and often inaccurate) conception of "Italian" character and culture.¹¹ Their Italian cuisine was a hybrid of the sharing and blending of regional cuisines brought by immigrants.

In *The Sopranos* the traces of Italian heritage show how an Italian-American identity was created. On a simple level, food—such as the prevalence of pasta—is used to symbolically signify Italian-American culture and add realism. Italians from different parts of Italy were brought together in America and were united by food such as spaghetti and meatballs, an immigrant invention that became common in many Italian-American households. This morphing of regional Italian foods into an Italian-American food is demonstrated by the way "Italian sausage" became ubiquitous in America, ignoring the regional variations that would be commonplace in Italy.¹²

Food in *The Sopranos* 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 able to enjoy the abundance and choice of food in America. The comparative bounty in America

⁷ 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.

⁸ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 48-53.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 98.

¹¹ Rocco Marinaccio, "Cucina Nostra: Italian-American Foodways on Television," *Italian-American Review* 6, no. 2 (2016): 268-295.

¹² Diner, 60.

contrasted with the poverty in Italy and shaped Italian-American assimilation and 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.¹³

In *The Sopranos*, traces of old Italy are represented by Furio, a character who acts as a link to the old world having been sent from Italy to work for Tony. He never feels at home in New Jersey, becomes homesick and talks about how the smell of olives makes him sad.¹⁴ Furio is used as a device to show how removed New Jersey is from Italy, especially the scene where he returns from Italy and becomes sad driving past a strip mall replete with a Burger King and a massive American flag.¹⁵ The episode “The Strong Silent Type” ends with Furio drinking red wine whilst cooking spaghetti.¹⁶ In this poignant scene, he drains the pasta and then adds it 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 hints at a shared food culture but the microwaved ziti variant shows how that culture has fragmented. Calvo observed that “features of cuisine are retained even after when the original language of the culture has been forgotten.”¹⁷

Fischler wrote about the principle of incorporation— absorbing the outside world into the body through food—forming the basis of collective identity which is especially important in immigrant communities.¹⁸ We see several examples of incorporation in *The Sopranos* where old traditions are remembered through food, thus reinforcing the Italian-American identity, for example, the fried zeppole at the Elzéar of Sabran street festival.¹⁹ We learn that food defines the family: when AJ refuses to eat fried artichokes, calling them “cactus,” his grandfather replies: “You’re not Italian if you don’t like artichokes.”²⁰

The chef at the Nuovo Vesuvio, Artie Bucco, is one of the few non-mafia Italian characters. He desperately wants to serve authentic Italian cuisine, but his passion is ridiculed by a clientele only familiar with Italian-American food. Rozin suggests

¹³ Diner, 54.

¹⁴ S4E4.

¹⁵ S4E10.

¹⁶ S4E10.

¹⁷ Manuel Calvo, “Migration et Alimentation,” *Social Science Information* 21, no.3 (1982): 383-446.

¹⁸ Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” *Social Sciences Information* 27 (1985): 275-293.

¹⁹ S6E9.

²⁰ S4E11.

that flavour principles—in this case olive oil, tomatoes and garlic—are valuable markers for making food recognisable and acceptable, thus conveying a history of culturally accumulated knowledge.²¹ We see Artie seeking solace by cooking his grandfather's recipe for rabbit stew. After shooting the rabbit in his back garden, he uses an old handwritten recipe, an ode to Italy, to make the dish. It is a beautiful contemplative scene.²² Serving a peasant dish in a white-cloth restaurant illustrates the recognition of Italian food as cuisine in its own right. 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 of many immigrants.”²³ It is fitting that in this moment, Artie has his epiphany that he is better suited to being a cook than being a mobster.

Trauma and Food at the Core

At its core, *The Sopranos* is an exploration of trauma: its main premise being that a Mafia boss requires therapy to treat a childhood trauma related to food. Flamini suggests 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...”²⁴ 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.

Tony Soprano enters therapy to deal with fainting spells triggered by the sight of meat. The title of the series—*The Sopranos*—references “singing”,²⁵ the mafia slang for breaking the code of *omertà* (silence).²⁶ Here, Tony is breaking *omertà* just by talking to his psychiatrist, but the reason that he is doing so puts food front and centre of the show. In the first episode, Tony faints whilst grilling sausages at a birthday party,²⁷ prompting him to seek therapy. In season three, a “flashback”

²¹ 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.

²² S6E7.

²³ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 54.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “sing like a canary,” accessed April 9, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sing-like-a-canary>.

²⁶ Oxford Reference, s.v. “omertà,” accessed July 4, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100249610>.

²⁷ S1E1.

allows us to see the basis of Tony's neurosis: opening the refrigerator at home and eating gabagool triggers a gruesome memory from 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.²⁸ *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.²⁹ 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 father brought home from Satriale's. Many years later, recounting this story to his therapist Dr. Melfi, 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."³⁰ She refers to this as Tony's Proustian moment – "one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood,"³¹ – a clear indicator of food-related trauma in *The Sopranos*.

O'Neill suggests food in films is increasingly "both plot and motive,"³² and a gastrocritical approach reveals how food drives the narrative in *The Sopranos*, functioning as a key device; as an embodiment of the lead character; as a signal of outlier status and as a symbol of greed. Greed is evident in the way Tony's gang eat and behave. Many of them, including Tony are obese, and his size and weight results in countless jokes and comments, albeit behind his back for fear of retribution.

Food-related trauma is not just the main story line of *The Sopranos*, it is also evident in the intergenerational trauma of being descended from poor immigrants. Mennell – citing Bruch's clinical study of mothers of obese children – notes the psychological pressure to overeat is often rooted in past hunger, perhaps in a previous generation. The mothers were poor immigrants who had suffered hunger in the past, and to them, being fat indicated success and freedom.³³ Many of *The Sopranos* cast are obese, which may in part be attributed to deprivation suffered by their forebears combined with the abundance of food in contemporary America.

²⁸ S3E3.

²⁹ Jerksto, "Sopranos But Just Gabagool (Extended Cold Cuts Edition)," YouTube Video, 0:43, July 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsBipoG22Nw>.

³⁰ S3E3.

³¹ S3E3.

³² Molly O'Neill, "Eye Candy," *New York Times Magazine*, November 17, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/16/magazine/food-eye-candy.html>.

³³ 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.

***The Sopranos* – a Continuation of Gangster Food Traditions**

Although not a film, *The Sopranos* fits the definition of a gangster movie as it is “centred on organized crime or maverick criminals in a twentieth-century setting.”³⁴ *The Sopranos* pays particular homage to *The Godfather* trilogy, *GoodFellas* and *Public Enemy* (1931) to which it is littered with references. The mobsters in *The Sopranos* are nostalgic for the old, pre-RICO days³⁵ and believe the best days of organised crime are over. Thorburn describes *The Sopranos* as “the crime family for our age of therapy and Prozac.”³⁶

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. Set decades later than *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*, *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.

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* – 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 that he feels that they have missed the “best days” of organised crime.

References to food scenes from *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 to

³⁴ American Film Institute, “American Film Institute Brings the Best of Hollywood Together.”

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ David Thorburn, “The Sopranos,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 3.

collect some pastries from Rousso's bakery. The shop assistant is rude to him and Christopher angrily shoots him in the foot.³⁷ This references *GoodFellas* when Tommy shoots Spider (also played by Imperioli)³⁸ in the foot. Christopher then leaves with some cannoli, napoleons and *sfogliatelle*.³⁹ 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 the incongruity of murder holding equal importance with a wife's reminder to bring home dessert.

We see an abundance of food and feasting in *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*, and in turn, in *The Sopranos*. Cinotto calls Italianate food "the most eloquent symbol of collective identity for Italian-Americans."⁴⁰ Commensality in the literal sense means eating at the same table.⁴¹ 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."⁴²

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. Against this backdrop, Corleone's son Michael has returned from military service and has brought his WASP⁴³ 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.

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 has diminished even further, exemplified in the scene when Richie Aprile brings

³⁷ S1E8.

³⁸ Michael Imperioli is the actor who plays Christopher Moltisanti in *The Sopranos* and was Spider in *Goodfellas*.

³⁹ *Sfogliatelle* is a shell-shaped filled Italian pastry. *Sfogliatella* means small, thin, leaf/ layer as the pastry's texture resembles stacked leaves.

⁴⁰ Simone Cinotto, *The Italian-American Food Table: Food, Family and Commensality in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.

⁴¹ Jeffery Sobal and Mary K. Nelson, "Commensal Eating Patterns: A Community Study," *Appetite* 41, no. 2 (2003): 181-190.

⁴² Claude Fischler, "Commensality, Society and Culture," *Social Science Information* 50, no. 3-4 (2011): 540

⁴³ 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].

Carmela tripe and tomatoes. She is delighted and he comments: “We are the only two people who still like tripe.”⁴⁴

Douglas suggests that eating together is suggestive of “purity” and “order” - an intact family that is harmonious.⁴⁵ 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 directors —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.

Gastrocriticism reveals that one of the main food tropes in the gangster genre is 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.⁴⁶ 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;⁴⁷ and we see evidence of this particularly in *The Sopranos*. This nurturing expression of identity and *esprit de corps* 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 the mob as nurturers and providers with traditional food, based on old recipes from their homeland. Diner points out that Italian male immigrants had a history of cooking for themselves as many men lived together in groups before their wives followed them over.⁴⁸

The Sopranos features several examples of mobsters cooking for each other, one notable example being 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.⁴⁹

Certain foods can evoke strong memories and feelings of nostalgia in the protagonist; the madeleines in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*⁵⁰ is a good

⁴⁴ S2E8.

⁴⁵ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* (1972): 61-81.

⁴⁶ Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 148-155.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ Diner, 74.

⁴⁹ S3E9.

⁵⁰ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past Vol 2* (London: Woodsworth Editions, 2006).

example of this. Food is a connection to the past through food memories⁵¹ 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 habits⁵²—and marking imminent tragedy. In *The Godfather* 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.⁵³ The fact that he is buying a bottle of orange juice rather than fresh fruit is both an intertextual nod to the tradition of the genre and another indicator of how much times have changed.

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.”⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ Few scenes do this better than the 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

⁵¹ David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

⁵² 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.

⁵³ S1E12.

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ 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 American Mafia way of life – the seeming incongruities of family, tradition, and religion joined with murder, bloodshed and brutality.⁵⁶

Food is also used in *The Sopranos* to demonstrate Tony's power, both at home and outside. At home 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."⁵⁷ In all three films, gastrocriticism reveals that unequal commensal hospitality is used to legitimise authority and enhance leadership.

Conclusion

By applying a gastrocritical framework, many insights on food and foodways were gleaned: *The Sopranos* shows how an immigrant community still clings to traces of the old world through food in a new country. Trauma around food drives the narrative but also it touches on a deeper intergenerational trauma. *The Sopranos* references and develops many of the food tropes and traditions evident in the gangster genre. Its intertextuality recalls expressions of Italian-American identity, family, *esprit de corps* and power all seen in *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*. *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 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 a symbol of greed; as a symbol of power, as a token of identity, and as a signal of outlier status. Food drives the plot and adds realism to the story of an Italian-American family showing how removed they are from the "old country" but still cling to traces of that old country. Commensality is important to the Soprano family, binding them together; however it is also exclusionary and reinforces the link to their Italian identity. 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.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ S5E9.