

Taste and the Becoming of the Self

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Abstract

The paper focuses on instances of shaping one's self by personal selection and consumption of food as they appear in literary and movie productions today, such as: *Eat, Pray, Love*; *No Reservations*; *Julie and Julia*. Critical moments in life may bring about drastic changes which are also reflected in attitudes towards food. Food may be a means of seduction (as in Anthony Capella's new version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *The Food of Love*), of keeping the family together, or of imposing constraints. Eating what was forbidden before may be seen as a rejection of conventions and rules imposed by others and the society. One's way of cooking is a good indicator of his/her way of life, personal preferences and tastes, and relationship with other people.

Key words: identity, food, consumption, conventions, fiction, film

Intricacies of communication

The fact that food symbolizes the changing and becoming of identities helps us understand how eating habits can sometimes better define our personality than any other features of ethnicity, or other cultural belonging as food can most often celebrate connections to friends, neighbours, kin; it can turn into an instrument of fostering new relationships, of communicating feelings, states of mind, spirituality.

According to a common definition, communication basically means a transfer of messages from one party to another (Abercrombie 69-70) within a process that can take place at different levels, that is between individuals, between social groups, within a society or between societies. It can take the form of conversation, or an interpersonal interplay of meaning in which the message should be read in such a way that it gives meaning within a complex semiology of signs.

The decoding of these signs becomes more accurate when their reader considers consumption too as a way through which "people build up and reinforce their identities" (Caru 3) by constantly seeking to experience immersion into "thematic settings rather than merely to encounter finished products". (4)

Taste and identity

It is thought that Italians nurture the Latin variety of hedonism (Gabaccia 101), opening up new approaches to both sensory and spiritual pleasures by creating new tastes, new sounds, new forms, new colours, new feelings wherever they happen to live, teaching their dearest that life was not all "hard and earnest but an adventure to be enjoyed." (102).

If we consider David Chaney's demonstration of how lifestyle and social structure collude in the modern world, we might infer that any culture can be defined as the total of lifestyle of a people, namely, "their customs, attitudes, values, shared understanding that bind them together as a society" (Chaney 4), and that lifestyles help to map people's actions and the meanings of these actions within the patterns of everyday social life.

Bourdieu states that "ordinary experience of the social world is a cognition" (172) and is positive about the fact that "the art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living, in a "convivial indulgence" (179) marked by eating, respectively, drinking together. He also agrees that taste is the faculty of

immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values; it is the capacity to discern the flavours of foods which implies a preference for some of them (99).

Taste is also “the propensity and capacity to materially and symbolically appropriate a given class of classified and classifying objects and practices; it is the generative formula of lifestyle; it is a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces (e.g. furniture, clothing, language).” (173)

According to David E. Sutton (4-5), food can carry hegemonic identities through its very ability to connect the mundane, the pleasurable and the necessary as food is about commensality, that is eating to make friends, it is about competition, that is eating to make enemies, it is about identity creation and identity maintenance, whether that specific identity be national/ethnic/class/gender based.

Food is also about experiencing feelings, about trying to stage unusual states of mind and living extraordinary moments, because food offers such a wide range of possibilities to build meaning through its very substantialization, as Bruno teaches Tommaso to do in *The Food of Love* (2004):

‘If you want to make someone cry,’ Bruno said slowly, ‘you give them an onion to chop. But if you want them to feel sad, you cook them the dish their mother used to cook for them when they were small. You see the difference.’ (...) ‘And to make someone horny,’ Bruno continued, ‘well, that’s harder than crying, but certainly not impossible. Seafood, of course, has aphrodisiac qualities. Molluscs, too – like *lanarche ajo e ojo*, snails in oil and garlic. Perhaps some *carciofini* – baby artichokes cooked with mint, pulled apart with the fingers and dipped in soft, melted butter. Wine, obviously. And then, to finish, a burst of sugar, something light but artificial, so that you feel full of energy and happiness... but that’s only one side of the story.

If you wanted someone to fall in love with you, you would cook them something very different, something perfectly simple but intense. Something that shows you understand their very soul. (...) You’d have to really know the person concerned: their history, their background; whether they are raw or refined, dry or oily. You would have to have tasted them, to know whether their own flesh is sweet or savoury, salty or bland. In short, you would have to love them, and even then you might not truly know them well enough to cook a dish that would capture their heart. (Capella 35)

Turning from fiction to film, the “cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values, and ideology in both sociality and subjectivity and therefore should be better understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewers.” (Teresa de Lauretis in Bower 3). Food is part of the way that, for over a century now, movies have been telling us who we are, constructing our economic and political aspirations; our sense of sexual, national, and ethnic identity; filling our minds with ideas about love and romance, innocence and depravity, adventure, bravery, cruelty, hope, and despair. (Bower 4)

In the food film genre, food has a star role, whether the leading characters are cooks (professional or domestic) or not. The camera often focuses in on food preparation and presentation so that in closeups or panning shots, food fills the screen. The restaurant kitchen, the dining room and/or kitchen of a home, tables within a restaurant, a shop in which food is made and/or sold, are usually the central settings. The film’s narrative line consistently depicts characters negotiating questions of identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or relationship through food. What is or isn’t eaten matters and has a certain meaning, and even in films not necessarily considered “food films”, the focus of the camera is on food and its setting.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, the role food plays in the main character's life is mainly conveyed visually, not through dialogue. It is the story of the unhappy Liz Gilbert (who describes herself

through her former appetite for life and her relationships with men: "I used to have this appetite for food, for my life, and it is just gone. [...] Since I was 15, I've either been with a guy or breaking up with a guy. I have not given myself two weeks of a breather to just deal with, you know, myself."), who decides to get a divorce and travel around the world looking for herself. The first part of her self-discovery takes place in Italy, where she learns "the Italian way" of "dolce far niente" and of noisy friends gathered around a good meal and a good wine.

Let's focus on some key scenes from the movie in order to see how they mark her transformation. Most of the scenes take place around restaurant tables on Roman streets, marking the way her encounter with another culture changes her understanding of herself and of life. In the first one, after arriving in Rome, Liz walks on its streets, enjoys the atmosphere and, seated on a bench, she eats an icecream. Next to her, two nuns are doing exactly the same thing. Liz turns her head, looks at them and smiles. The camera has performed a movement from the top of the church behind, to Liz, and then enlarges the view, following her gaze, to show us the two nuns, nonchalantly enjoying their icecreams. It's a city where everyone enjoys the small pleasures of life.

In the second scene: Liz learns Italian with her tutor, while having dinner on a terrace, surrounded by people doing the same thing, talking and enjoying their meals and life in the way Italians do. During Giovanni and Liz's conversation, the camera focuses on their dishes, on the way they appreciate the food and the wine. After this dinner, back to her room, Liz is slowly accepting the idea that she is alone [i.e. without a partner, *sol/a*.]

Next scene: seated alone, at a table on the street, Liz is served a plate of spaghetti, which seems like a challenge in the beginning (she looks at the dish as if gathering strength, she looks around to see whether there's anyone watching her, and then she digs her fork into the spaghetti, rolling it around), but is savoured completely by a triumphant, smilier and smilier Liz, who then proceeds by translating an article entitled: "Obesity, the Italian children are the fattest in Europe", and enjoying a glass of red wine. She has thus begun learning the Italian way of living, that specific "dolce far niente" her tutor will mention in the next scene.

But mastering the Italian relaxed lifestyle, the fact that she has become "a true Roman woman" is proved only when she is able to order an entire meal, for her and her friends, in Italian, with details. Then, and only then will she „pass" this stage in her life and be able to move forward to the next ones ("pray" and "love"). The proof that she is is given by her ordering a full meal for all of them. And, before leaving, she expresses her gratefulness to her friends by cooking them a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner.

In Naples, over a slice of the local pizza, she concludes: "I'm tired of saying no and going to bed remembering everything I've eaten the day before. [...] I'm going for it. I'm going to finish this pizza and tomorrow we'll go on a date and buy bigger jeans." She has now reached the phase of accepting herself even with a "muffin top" and simply enjoying life, and all this is due to her visit to Italy, to her contact with the Italian tastes and practices of daily life.

The touch of the local/personal culture

Theorists consider that at the level of emotional affect, the sense of one's national belonging, (that is the Italian identity as contrasted to the Laura Patterson's foreignness / Americanness in our example), is often inscribed in the "taken-for-granted practices of everyday life" (Morley 38) as national culture is most often understood as being "firmly rooted in what appears trivial" on the one hand, and on the other hand, as being "continually reproduced through the cultural practice of everyday life." (39) The efforts to seduce Laura by distinctly Italian meals is in fact an attempt to foreground the virtues of the traditionally local and regional food and its preparation, and it goes with an exquisite way of organization and distribution of the menu:

“Antipasto: verdure in pinzimonio. Primo: spaghetti all’amatriciana. Secondo: abbacchio alla cacciatore. Contorni: carciofi alla romana, asparagi con zabaione. Dolci: ricotta dolce; vino santo, biscotti. (...) Laura had never eaten before. It was as if these flavours had always existed, had always been there in her imagination, but now she was tasting them properly for the very first time. Each course was more intense than the last.” (Capella 47-8)

If Kermode is right when saying that “humanness needs aesthetic pleasures, pleasures of sex, food, conversation” (75), then Anthony Capella’s protagonists are right too when thinking that „Food can be a medium through which one can express oneself” (Capella 123), and when proving that, in Bruno’s eyes, “cooking is like magic, in a way. Spells are just recipes, after all” (131) and that one can really cast a spell on someone just by cooking” (131), even if this would be freaky, in a foreigner’s eyes / Laura’s.

Food and food selection can be easily connected with codes for communication allowing the providers / consumers to engage with each other in a series of exchanges, including feelings and passions within the larger process of consumption, the “very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape” (Douglas 37) and where one’s self features prominently, surrounded by the very materiality of flavours and tastes, as chef Bruno, sees it.

If you want someone to fall in love with you, you cook them something that shows you understand their very soul. (...) You’d have to really know the person concerned: their history; their background; whether they are raw or refined, dry or oily. You would have to have tasted them, to know whether their own flesh is sweet or savoury, salty or bland. In short, you would have to love them, and even then you might not truly know them well enough to cook a dish that would capture their heart. (Capella 175)

In one of his final attempts to conquer Laura’s attention and heart, Bruno cooks for both Laura and Tommaso a plain meal to emphasize the simplicity and authenticity of his feelings: “With a heavy heart Bruno prepared a very different meal to all the others he had cooked for Laura. A simple chicken stew, rich and hearty, to be eaten with chunks of dense Italian bread. Comfort food – all he could do to soften the heartache to come” (Capella 184), as if to prove that, in spite of the high sophistication and challenging creativity of our world, food still remains “the least controversial, the most typical, the most reliable the cheapest of all ways to find pleasure in life” (Gabaccia 231) and a resourceful means of stirring and communicating feelings.

In the film *No Reservations*, whose entire narrative centers around food, the main character, Kate Armstrong lives her entire life surrounded by the very materiality of flavours and tastes. She is the perfectionist master chef in a trendy Manhattan restaurant where she has become quite famous. Many of the scenes unfold in the kitchen of this restaurant. Cooking dominates Kate’s life, she has self-control issues (for instance, any criticism of her food expressed by the customers is perceived by her as a personal insult), so her boss insists on her going to therapy sessions, where she „torments” the therapist by talking only about recipes and by serving him dishes she cooks as “experiments”.

The film opens with a feminine voice describing with passion the way to cook quails, the passion in her voice being contrasted by the therapist’s uneasiness while listening to it. Kate has no personal life, so she only feels safe and secure in her kitchen, i.e. the restaurant kitchen, where she is in charge. She is famous for the food she makes with care, passion and thorough attention to detail. When her sister dies, she is named as the guardian of her nine-year-old niece Zoe. In her restaurant kitchen, her position is threatened by a new sous chef named Nick Palmer, who has recently joined the kitchen staff, and the kitchen becomes a battlefield between two personalities, two attitudes towards life: Kate’s solitary, cold, perfectionist one and Nick’s loose, warm, and noisy one.

In this film, food can be seen as a language. There is no conversation/communication between Kate and Zoey, they “speak different languages”, i.e., enjoy different food. Kate keeps forgetting that Zoey is a child who doesn’t like/eat the exotic dishes she prepares for her. But food is also a way of fostering new relationships: Nick finds the way to her heart by offering her something simpler and feeding her through a trick: he asks her to hold the spaghetti he has made for himself, and Zoe, who is hungry, starts eating them.

Kate’s inability of having personal relations is suggested by the fact that she doesn’t eat dishes prepared by others, and it will take a while until she trusts Nick well enough to accept his food. Accepting food is the start of communication here, as it was in Zoey’s case.

Food is everything to Kate, and she even defines herself only by relation to food, believing that she is nothing without her cooking. “This place is my life. This is who I am,” she tells Nick when she feels threatened by him at the command of the restaurant.

Understanding life is also simpler for her when put in terms related to her passion and job: “I wish there was a cookbook for life, with recipes telling us exactly what to do” she tells her therapist, who replies: “It’s the recipes that you create yourself that are the best.” Only then does she completely let her guard down and accepts that cooking is only a part of her life, as Nick has told her, and that in order to be balanced and happy she needs a family.

Thus, in *No Reservations*, food is used to show communication or the lack of it, competition and rivalry, a mark of identity and, in Kate’s case, the only way of defining herself in the beginning of the film, and also a way of changing this self-centered identity.

In the third film we are focusing on in this article, which is entitled *Julie and Julia*, food and identity are again closely connected in order to express the two main characters’ major life change.

Two books were blended for the script of this film: Julia Child’s *My Life in France* and Julie Powell’s *Julie and Julia*. In 1949, Julia Child, the wife of an American diplomat, is in Paris wondering how to fill her days. She tries hat making, bridge, and then cooking lessons at the famous French culinary school Cordon Bleu. There she discovers her passion for cooking and then writing French recipes for American housewives, (“the servant-less American cook” as she puts it). In 2002, Julie Powell, about to turn 30 and utterly bored by a job as an office government employee with an unpublished novel (and a habit of starting projects and not finishing them), decides to cook her way through *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, Julia’s cookbook, in a year and to blog about it. We go back and forth between these stories of two women learning to cook and finding achievement and success.

In this film, food is also very much about identity creation: Julia Child finds a meaning in her life and her own “voice” through her cooking and recipes, and Julie Powell fulfills her wish of becoming a writer.

Both women take up cooking out of a restless sense of drift — “I need something to do,” Julia complains to her husband; and that is exactly what Julie feels, after being humiliated by her college friends who boast with their important jobs and money. Working her way through the recipes and writing about the experience, Julie shows them all up. Similarly, Julia overcomes the xenophobia and sexism of the French culinary establishment and the refusal of an American publisher and becomes the person known as Julia Child, writer and TV chef.

In the film, cooking becomes more than an activity, it is almost an obsession, scene after scene shows us details of food preparation, linking it with the characters’ growing self-esteem and sense of identity.

In an interview, Nora Ephron, the writer and director of the movie, emphasizes that the film is about “changing your life Julie Powell is 29 years old, working as a temp, and suddenly writes her way to a career through her internet blog. And what I love about Julia Child’s story is

that she became a wildly successful writer and famous person on TV - at the age of 50. Women are sometimes in a better position than men to reinvent themselves.” (Lipworth 38)

Conclusions

If Capella's *The Food of Love* has shown us how to seduce someone by preparing specific meals that communicate understanding and feelings, the three movies mentioned above show that food can also be used to express rejection of the conventions imposed by society, self-acceptance, gratefulness (*Eat, Pray, Love*), obsessive behaviour, communication or the lack of it, trusting other people, redefining priorities (*No Reservations*), finding a purpose in life, a personal „voice”, a sense of identity, self-esteem, and accomplishment (*Julie and Julia*).

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