“Eat First”:

Motherhood and Italian American Gastronomy in the Films of Martin Scorsese

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The Italians of my parents’ generation are held together by the notion of the family. That is why the pasta sauce is so sacred to the Italian family.

Martin Scorsese (qtd. in C. Scorsese 3)

When Martin Scorsese filmed *It’s Not Just You, Murray*, the year was 1964, and the Italian American filmmaker was twenty-two years old and still attending New York University. In this short film of roughly fifteen minutes, Scorsese’s mother, Catherine Cappa Scorsese (1912–97), portrays the mother of the titular Murray, who continuously offers her son a plate of spaghetti (“Eat first,” she exhorts her son), thereby establishing two important features of Scorsese’s filmmaking: the importance of the family and gastronomy as identifiers of the ethnic values of Italian Americans in New York City, both of whose production of ethnic identities are explored by Simone Cinotto in his *The Italian American Table* published in 2013. With this in mind, those films by Scorsese where his own mother Catherine plays the role of a character’s mother, often portrayed in the act of cooking or serving food, further the “*representation of ethnicity*” (Braudy 27), which is analyzed in order to evaluate the role of gastronomy and motherhood in Scorsese’s cinema.

As Richard Gambino notes (160–82) and Susanna Tardi summarizes (95–100), the mother—as indeed the family itself (Gambino 1–41)—has always played an important role in the Italian and Italian American social system, and it does not come as a surprise that Scorsese features his own mother in films such as the already mentioned *It’s Not Just You, Murray* (1964), the feature films *Who’s That Knocking at My Door* (1967) and *Goodfellas* (1990), and the
(auto)biographical documentary *Italianamerican* (1974), which centers on Scorsese’s parents sharing their families’ often food-related histories, especially through his mother’s words as the main food provider and family caregiver. Catherine Scorsese, whose mothering roles in those films undergo a transformative maturation from the first pair to the second that parallels the director’s search for self, represents the Italian American mother *par excellence* as a daughter of Italian immigrants in the United States. For those communities of immigrants and especially for their women, the space of domesticity—the domus as a woman’s kingdom (Orsi 75, 129–49)—represented a place to (re)negotiate their own self in a new modern society, even if “Italian American domesticity fulfilled mostly ‘Italian,’ rather than ‘American,’ social ideals and values” (Tirabassi 69), so that “women come to embody the nation, and how ethnic communities and immigrants themselves viewed women immigrants as generators and maintainers of ethnic identity” (Zanoni 81). Certainly, this has also meant the formation and proliferation of stereotypes and clichés both ethnic and racial, whose social roles are well described by Ruth Amossy and Anne Pierrot (31–52) and are linked to the presentation of the self in everyday life situations and determined by social situations.\(^1\)

If *It’s Not Just You, Murray, Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, *Italianamerican* and *Goodfellas* play a major role in defining ethnic identities through the use of Scorsese’s own Italian American mother with her sense of domesticity and food, a different discourse would be appropriate for Scorsese’s feature films *The King of Comedy* (1982) and *Casino* (1995), where Catherine Scorsese is given cameo roles. In *The King of Comedy*, Catherine Scorsese is the unseen mother of the protagonist, Rupert Pupkin, portrayed by Robert De Niro. Even though she

\(^1\) For further reading on this topic, see Amossy and also Goffman.
remains off camera, we hear her nagging Rupert even while he is talking, clearly highlighting the importance of a controlling mother who reminds her son to catch the bus or to keep appointments, or asks him to lower the volume. In a film where the line between reality and fantasy is blurred, the mother’s voice serves as the most consistent element in Pupkin’s life, together with his girlfriend Rita. In fact, mamma Catherine Scorsese as an identifier of family tends to embody reality and genuineness in all of the films in which she played a mother’s role as a tactic to also reiterate the importance of ethnic values, such as in Casino where she is Artie Piscano’s mother. At the beginning of the film, one sees her in the background in a kitchen serving a meat-based sauce to a group of mobsters, while later in the film the audience sees Catherine in a longer sequence operating an Italian American grocery store in Kansas City with her son Artie. Catherine, who is often featured in the act of counting money, is upset with her son’s swearing and outbursts of anger: she worries that he is courting a heart attack, foreshadowing the events at the end of the film. The controlling and complaining mother figure is reminiscent of Pupkin’s mother and again bestows a nuance of spontaneity and reality upon the film. Moreover, as a seller of Italian produce, Catherine Scorsese—in her final role before her death—exemplifies the importance of Italian cuisine in the adaptation of Italian immigrants to American society, where consumption plays a major role, as explored by Elizabeth Zanoni in her essay, “In Italy Everyone Enjoys It—Why Not in America?”

To fully understand the roles played by the mother figure as the keeper of traditional family values and Italian American gastronomy as conveyed in several of Scorsese’s films, it is helpful to adopt the theoretical framework of Simone Cinotto’s study The Italian American Table, where the historian contextualizes the importance of food and family in New York City’s Italian American community in the first decades of the twentieth century up until the 1940s.
While it is recognized that food defines Italian American ethnicity (Cinotto 3), Cinotto explains how “the construction of Italian American food culture was a heavily gendered process, resulting in a feminization of the ethnic domestic sphere and in women’s specialized roles as supervisors of food preparation and consumption” (11). Furthermore, the role of the mother within the family as principally responsible for preserving the unity of the family and its moral values and traditions (57–71) helps to explain why this role is so firmly embedded in several of Scorsese’s films. This extends to the point of having his own mother reprise the role of a mother who prepares food for her son(s)—and, by extension, for her family—and her son’s friends, thereby reproducing the ethnic microcosm of the Italian American family in which ethnicity itself plays a major role. Moreover, to understand the presence of the mother in Scorsese’s films, one should not forget that “the prevalent image of the Italian immigrant mother in children’s memories is that of a woman completely absorbed by her role, ‘always’ busy in the kitchen and the home” (57), with the relationship between mother and children being defined as a “blood bond” (Orsi 82). This is why Catherine Scorsese acts in her son’s films as she acted in her own life, even cooking the meals for some of the scenes and for the cast (C. Scorsese 103), effectively blurring the borders between fiction and reality.

In one of Scorsese’s first apprentice films, It’s Not Just You, Murray (1964), “a dead-on satiric portrait of a readily identifiable street thug from Little Italy” (LoBrutto 58–59), Catherine Scorsese appears at five key moments, where she offers her son the same dish of spaghetti, a quintessential symbol of Italian (American) cuisine. Les Keyser has noticed a parallel between Murray’s mother offering him this dish and Catherine Scorsese “forcing food on her overworked son” (17) while he was attending New York University. In the first of these five key scenes, a mise en scène showing the young Murray—who “is meant to be a comic portrait of an
ineffective Mafioso who constantly deludes himself” (Kelly 40)—at the table in an Italian American kitchen, clearly signified by an espresso *moka* machine, also includes his silent mother. Stereotyping a woman from the Old World, she wears black clothes and a thick black veil, saying “Eat first” as she offers her son a dish of spaghetti, which is eaten by Murray between sips of red wine. Since Murray is recalling his memories, his mother’s voice is heard through Murray’s masculine voice-over. This depersonalization distances Murray from his Italian American mother and family to grant greater importance to his childhood friend Joe, who is revealed to be less trustworthy. Notwithstanding Murray’s apparent preference for Joe over his mother, the subtext of the film implies the recognition of the importance of the mother and, by extension, of the family as the sole loyal subjects, as evidenced by the presence of the mother during the most important moments of Murray’s life. Moreover, Murray’s mother prepares food for her son but she doesn’t consume it, instead urging him to do so. Murray claims, in fact, that his mother never provided him with great psychological insights beyond saying “Eat first” and then not eating herself.

Moving forward, the audience sees the mother for a second time when Murray languishes in prison: she again brings her son a dish of spaghetti, feeding him through the cell bars. It is the same situation the third time, when Murray is laid up in the hospital: the mother arrives to feed him, and he kisses her, perhaps suggesting an Oedipal relationship. The fourth time, the viewers see the mother offering her son the usual dish of spaghetti while Murray is in his office speaking to Joe. The fifth and final time occurs at the end of the film: the mother is again framed with the dish of spaghetti following Murray. While clearly Joe goes beyond being merely a good friend to Murray, the mother’s presence with a dish of spaghetti in the most important and difficult moments of his life addresses two aspects: the centrality of the mother as food provider and the
role of food in conveying ethnic identities, even if they are acknowledged at a subtextual level only, as in the case of Scorsese’s first feature film.

*Who’s That Knocking at My Door* (1967) is, in fact, considered Scorsese’s debut as a narrative film director. As in *It’s Not Just You, Murray*, in this film about a young Italian American New Yorker dealing with a Catholic sense of guilt, Catherine Scorsese appears at the beginning of the film, even before the credits and title. Catherine is filmed in a kitchen preparing food, with a religious figurine featuring the Virgin Mary with her child in her arms in the foreground. As both Joseph Sciorra and Robert Orsi have discussed in their research, the cult of religious figurines has always been rather popular among Italian Americans in New York City, and it should not come as a surprise to see them in some of Scorsese’s films, with the director having grown up on Elizabeth Street—one of the most Italian American streets in the city.

At the beginning of *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, Catherine Scorsese is seen kneading a pizza-like dough, which she then fills with a mixture of meats. Not only is she framed in the background with the figurine in the foreground, but she is also framed through low-angle shots and extreme close-ups of her face underlining her importance and power, while the movement of her hands working the dough is filmed in close-ups and extreme close-ups, accentuating the strength of this woman, simultaneously worker and mother. Her hands represent not only the making of food but also the construction of a working-class family’s values and ethnic identity through hand-forged movements transforming the dough into a pie. Moreover, the figurine of the Virgin Mary clearly reiterates the idea that in the Catholic religion the mother is sacred and pure, and she is—or at least should be—the main reference point for her children both when they are growing up or, as in Murray’s case, already adults. This aligns with the idea of the mother as a Madonna figure that is contrasted against other women, as in the “Madonna-whore
“dichotomy” (Cavallero 52–57) explained by Robert Casillo: “Since the maternal ideal of the Virgin Mary was held as the highest ideal of womanhood, and since Italian American males desired a woman who most closely approximated this ideal, chastity was deemed essential in an unmarried woman. Otherwise, a woman was scorned as the virtual equivalent of a prostitute” (90). As Scorsese himself has also commented: “I grew up in a certain kind of culture: Sicilian, Roman Catholic; women were separate entities; and the madonna-whore dichotomy encouraged fear of them, distrust, and, because they didn’t seem to be like real human beings, difficulty in relating to them” (qtd. in Casillo 90).

Regarding *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, Lawrence Friedman specifically notes, “Ideal womanhood, predictably incarnated in the Italian-American wife and mother, is established in the opening scene. . . . Close-ups of a votive candle and a statue of the Virgin Mary seal the identity of the ideal woman with motherhood, nurturing, and the Catholic Church” (25). In exploring the influence of the Catholic Church on directors such as Coppola, DePalma, and Scorsese, Leo Braudy particularly addresses “(1) the importance of ritual narratives, (2) the significance of ritual objects, and (3) the conferral of ritual status” (19) with Scorsese “plac[ing] the performer/saint/devil at the center of his films” (25). As Vincent LoBrutto insightfully remarks on the second part of the opening scene, “When the pie is placed inside a hot oven, Scorsese dissolves to a single burning candle. . . . [I]t is a symbol of a religious blessing given to food, and it dissolves to the woman calling the children to the table as she takes the pie out of the oven” (71–72). Quite clearly, the scene contributes to the idea of a “childhood kitchen [as] . . . both comforting and claustrophobic” (Nyce 9). However, more than being claustrophobic, one can see the kitchen in terms of the ethnic representation of cultural roots, where a combination of family and Catholic values frame the existence of the young Italian Americans.
Additionally, in the opening scene of *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, after having baked this pie in the oven, the mother figure serves it to five young children (three girls and two boys whose connection to the main character is not clarified) seated around a table, while (as in the case of *It’s Not Just You, Murray*) she does not eat the meal. Although the audience does not hear her speaking, her brief appearance establishes the themes of the film: first, the importance of the family and especially of the mother as nurturer and feeder in the Italian American tradition; second, the importance of ethnic food as an identity marker; and third, as already discussed, the importance of the Catholic religion with values inherent in the mother figure of the Virgin Mary with its conception of guilt, especially towards sex. To reinforce these connections, “Madonna” Catherine Scorsese is seen again at the end of the film serving food to the children: cross-cutting edits alternate between the main character confessing his sexual sins in a Catholic church, statues of the Virgin Mary, and Catherine Scorsese serving food to the children around a table in a kitchen that also doubles as a living room.

The idea that the Italian American family gathers to eat at the table is even more prominent in the documentary *Italianamerican* (1974), where the director’s Sicilian American parents sit at the table with their son and eat their meal while sharing family stories that took place in the twentieth century both in Italy and in the neighborhoods of Little Italy and Canal Street in New York City, the first urban settlements of Italian immigrants in the New World. As Cinotto explains, “The equation of food and family—an Italian-inflected notion of the family that eats together—produced nation by circulating the values of a distinctive domesticity that eventually strongly identified diasporic Italians in private as well as public arenas” (3). In fact, in the documentary, the shots in the parents’ apartment are interspersed with footage from a few decades earlier featuring the neighborhood and with pictures from the private Scorsese family
archives. Clearly the documentary is autobiographical in form, presenting the search of a very young director, born in 1942, for his own origins, as confirmed thirty years later when he describes this film as “my documentary about my parents” (qtd. in Donato 202).

Utilizing the theories of Erving Goffman and Ruth Amossy, 2 Camille Gendrault describes the documentary as “a utilization of stereotypes that is not only playful but, more specifically, ironic, insofar as the representation reworks them and encourages the viewers to critically distance themselves from them” (153). Notwithstanding this useful framework, I propose a reading of the film not only as an ideal medium for presenting a family portrait and the Scorsese’s story across the decades and through stereotypes, but primarily as a way for the director to renegotiate his own identity, redefining it through food and family. Moreover, in contrast to Elizabeth Weis’ claim that “there is little anguish or self-investigation” (57) in the film, the search for the self by Scorsese should be seen as being filtered through his own parents as living repositories of the family’s roots. Eventually, Martin Scorsese’s journey crosses family history and the collective history of Little Italy in order to verify his own roots and the roots of his community, and in this way the search for the self is finally actualized. Beyond that, the food that mediates both the public and private spaces through the intrusion of the camera into the intimacy of the apartment is not simply Italian or Italian American, but more specifically, Sicilian. Hence it defines both a national and a regional identity while its consumption within the intimacy of the family, reunited at the table to retrace memories and traditions, reconfirms food as a means of transmitting the family legacy and the “private ethnic sphere” (Cinotto 45) with regard to diasporic communities. If young people such as Martin Scorsese accepted “the terms of this diasporic, food-centered domesticity” (49), those same younger generations were able to

2 See Goffman and also Amossy.
become independent outside of their families and renegotiate the rules, such as by the act of making the private sphere public through a documentary like *Italianamerican*, which transgresses tradition to produce “multiple identities” (50).

Why does Scorsese opt for a documentary? A documentary is an art form well-suited for a representation of reality and, most of all, distinct in its ability “to convey to us the impression of authenticity” (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* xiii). If Scorsese’s documentary is a classic documentary in terms of form and content, as defined by Gary Rhodes and John Springer in their book *Docufictions* (4), and in terms of the modes of representation of reality, *Italianamerican* is simultaneously an interactive and partially self-reflexive documentary, as per Bill Nichols’ theorization of the four modes of representation: (1) expository, in which the director informs the audience through an omniscient narrator; (2) observational, in which the director tends not to intervene, leaving the events to unfold by themselves; (3) interactive, in which the director interacts with the audience through interviews where interviewees are conscious of the camera; and (4) reflexive, in which the director reflects on cinema itself in a kind of meta-documentary (*Representing Reality* 32–75). In fact, in the first sequence of the documentary (and even before the title), the viewers are exposed to Scorsese’s approach to documenting his parents:

When I made *Italianamerican*, I left the slate and the sync-tone at the beginning of the first scene of the film. I wanted you to know that these people knew they were on camera, so you could see that they were making the adjustment, that very human adjustment people make when they’re in front of a camera. And then I let the scene just play out in real time as it happened. You were getting the tone of a real relationship, for better or for worse. (qtd. in Donato 203)
Beyond making sure that there was awareness of the presence of the camera on the part of the audience, the parents, and the crew, the interactions of Scorsese and his troupe with his parents highlight the interactivity of the documentary itself, where mostly two-shots (two people in the frame) and singles (one person in the frame) with medium-shots and close-ups are used because, as Scorsese explains, “The human being, the human face, had to become the event. What I learned from my parents was that it’s always the people who give you the truth as people” (qtd. in Donato 202).

Moving into analysis of the documentary, the very first sequence focuses on gastronomy, using shots transitioning from the general to the particular: the son talks to his mother, whom he asks about il sugo (the sauce), thereby identifying its “Italianness.” The request for the story behind the sauce right at the beginning of the documentary—with Catherine Scorsese’s recipe presented in the end credits as a closure and statement of the relevance of motherhood and gastronomy as identifiers of Italian American identity— informs the audience of two important aspects: first, that the story of the Scorsese family and of many Italian American families who immigrated to the U.S. and now reside in New York City is transmitted from one generation to the next through Italian gastronomy; second, that the sauce—and consequently the Italian (or, more properly, the Sicilian) cuisine—sets the tone for the documentary and highlights the importance of both cuisine and family as identity loci. In this case, the reconstruction of family history takes place in two key private spaces: the kitchen, embodying the present through Catherine’s act of cooking, and the dining/living room, where Catherine and her husband Charles interact with their son—first on the couch, and then at the table where individual and collective memories are reconstituted. In fact, as Mary Pat Kelly notes, “If the stories stir painful memories, then food soothes. The conversation constantly draws a guest (or audience) into the
center of the family and its experiences” (19). As Cinotto further explains, “Memory, deployed most instrumentally during convivial family gatherings, became vital for the production of the ideology of the *famiglia* in America” (59).

It is in such a context that, while Catherine is in the kitchen preparing the sauce, her husband recounts how his own mother cooked for a large family, thereby unifying the concepts of food and family in a conversation in which Catherine continues to participate. The scenes circulate between the mother in the kitchen, explaining the preparation of the sauce and the meatballs while criticizing Italian American women who are unable to cook them, and the father talking about the intricacies of cooking and of his family’s origin. This cross-cutting introduces the idea that Catherine learned more from her mother-in-law than from her own mother, in part to make her husband happy, reinforcing Cinotto’s claim that “[t]he male dominance in food choices was reproduced in newly formed households when the wife, to please her spouse, accepted her mother-in-law as her cooking instructor” (42). The preparation of the sauce from the recipe of her mother-in-law is further paralleled through the sharing and consumption of a meal. In fact, the father remembers the common tradition of eating at the neighbors’ homes, to the point that buildings and the neighborhood itself became like a big family, thus extending the limits of the private space. In contrast to this sense of the enlarged private space of Italian American communities, the idea that emerges from Martin Scorsese’s parents’ words is that traditionally the woman’s *regnum* is largely limited to the kitchen, as it is also portrayed in Scorsese’s films where that is his mother’s archetypal environment. In this context, as a woman who provides the family with nutrition, and as a mother and a feeder, she remains at the center of the family universe. As Cinotto explains, “The ‘good Italian woman’ started out as a girl trained to cook in the ‘Italian tradition’ and became a wife and mother who used her skills to please her
family in an ‘Italian’ expression of dedication and care for which she expected affection, recognition, and respect” (12). In fact, in the documentary, recognition is given to the mother not only through the food but also through the sharing of photographs taken by her (and her husband) in Italy for their thirty-ninth anniversary, which she describes in detail. Through pictures mostly showing convivial banquets resplendent with food, the two shores of the Atlantic are confronted with one another and reunited, together with the Italian and Italian American families who meet at the dinner table to talk and renegotiate their selves.

The topos of the trip is reintroduced when Scorsese’s father Charles talks about his own father who arrived in America around 1901. The story is narrated while Martin Scorsese and his parents sit at the dinner table, thereby confirming that both collective and individual memory passes through the family intimacy recreated at the table, which is also a fundamental moment of the private sphere in which identity is renegotiated and reconstituted. In fact, it is not by chance that Catherine Scorsese is at the table when recounting the story of her father’s application for citizenship, which represents the attempt to Americanize his identity. After thirty years in the United States, not only had Catherine’s father still not learned the language, but even his sugo still retained the Italian (Sicilian) color and taste, while the sugo of his daughter as a second-generation Italian American already bore the connotation of a transition where the origins are recalled but distant.

The documentary concludes with a close-up of Catherine Scorsese, whose on-screen shot is then captured in a photograph that transitions from color to black and white like the old family pictures shown throughout the documentary. The mother is then “resurrected” prior to the end credits and shown worrying about someone getting offended by things that she said in the documentary. When she realizes that the crew is still filming, she gets angry with her son and
exclaims, “Marty, I’ll kill you” (M. Scorsese, *Italianamerican*). The inclusion of certain private and intimate elements in autobiographical or biographical documentary remains at the center of debates, as John Katz and Judith Katz’s reflections on the ethics of the autobiographical documentary have shown. Reflecting on the issue, they lay out the “rules of ethics” (Katz and Katz 120) for autobiographical documentary—namely consent, disclosure, motives, and construction:

Regarding consent, . . . cultural standards require a somewhat higher degree of protection for family members than for strangers. . . . Because we think that consent is not purely voluntary when family members are filmed, our assumptions about consent contaminate our judgment about disclosure. To the extent that disclosure seems involuntary; the film-makers look unethical. A similar dilemma faces autobiographical film-makers regarding their motives. . . . [T]he authors argue that the justification of autobiographical film . . . lies exactly in its value as an educative and humanizing behind-the-scenes view of others. Lastly, regarding construction, autobiographical film-makers seem especially forthright in their acknowledgement that the films they offer us are personal constructed visions of reality. . . . In offering themselves as part of the interaction, they demonstrate the constructive nature of film-making. (131–33)

To what extent is it permissible to include scenes that a family member expressly asked not to be included? Martin Scorsese ignores his mother’s request by leaving in the documentary at least one scene that his mother asked him to cut (Weis 57): Is this ethical? Scorsese’s filmmaking might be seen as unethical for failing to offer further protection to family members. Yet, Scorsese’s decision to leave the scene in—which is directly connected to the documentary’s motives and construction—might be read as an act of independence of the director from his own
mother and from his community’s ethnic rules at the end of a journey whose goal has been the construction of one’s own self through the identities of his parents and New York City’s Italian American community. Thus, in this case, it is possibly justifiable to break the rules of consent and disclosure, especially when Scorsese as a filmmaker makes a decision inherent to a search for his own self and as a statement of independence from his ethnic community. However, notwithstanding this quest for independence, the mother figure remains important for Scorsese, who still features Catherine in the role of a mother character in three further feature films: the briefly analyzed *The King of Comedy* and *Casino*, and most of all in *Goodfellas*, where Catherine Scorsese plays the role of Tommy De Vito’s mother.

In one of the most famous scenes from *Goodfellas*, Catherine, who is dressed at first in light pink (and later in light blue) as in the documentary *Italianamerican*, thereby again blurring the borders between fiction and reality, prepares food for Joe Pesci (as Tommy), Robert De Niro (as James), and Ray Liotta (as Henry) when they show up in the middle of the night with a cadaver in the car. Scorsese shares that the scene at the table did not follow the script, relying instead on the improvisational talents of the three actors and the director’s mother, who was able to re-perform in front of the camera the role that she performed in her everyday life. Scorsese recalls his mother’s acting:

That was her—she was serving her son food, just as she had served me and my brother when we lived at home and brought our friends. Her son may be a murderer, she may know it and she may not know it, or she may be looking the other way, but it doesn’t matter, because he’s her son and she’s happy to see him. That’s the truth of the scene, and the truth of my mother’s scene onscreen—her son may be a murderer, but he’s still her son who’s made good and who’s come home. (qtd. in Donato 202–03)
In fact, Catherine’s performance is very natural and spontaneous, recalling not only her performance in the documentary *Italianamerican*, where Scorsese uses the same camera angles as in the *Goodfellas* meal scene, but also her performance in many of the other Scorsese films in which she appears. In fact, whereas in *Goodfellas* Scorsese introduces the night scene at the table with a master shot (framing the table with the three men and the mother with medium close-ups), the next camera angles in both *Goodfellas* and *Italianamerican* are mostly two-shots and singles with medium close-ups.

Likewise, in *Goodfellas*, Catherine serves the food to the three men, but she does not join them to eat, which is reminiscent of *It’s Not Just You, Murray* and the opening scene of *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*. This is a statement confirming first that the production of the meal is gendered—what Cinotto defines as a “feminization of the ethnic domestic sphere” (11)—and second that there is a subordination of the feminine element to the masculine element given that the mother does not eat but simply monitors that the men are eating and are well fed. This also recognizes the merits of production and conservation of tradition, namely through quality food transmitted from one generation to the next (67) and “the equation of food and family” (3), with the Italian American family eating at the table, which is even more realistically rendered in the documentary *Italianamerican* where the idea of the Italian American mother as the steward of gastronomic and culinary ethnic traditions is reinforced.

As this analysis of films across Scorsese’s career confirms, the Italian American director has undoubtedly paid homage to his ethnicity, which he accomplished in part by casting his own mother in the role of a mother cooking for her son(s) and her family. Moreover, it is the Italian American—possibly Sicilian—food prepared by the mother that carries a precise gendered, social, gastronomic, and ethnic connotation. It is specifically Catherine Scorsese who helps the
director to define those family values that are renegotiated by Scorsese himself, as his search for the self passes through Italian American gastronomy and motherhood. Furthermore, Catherine’s mothering roles themselves have transformed across the films: while in both It’s Not Just You, Murray and Who’s That Knocking at My Door she is a silent Italian American mother wearing black, cooking for her children, and very likely intended to invoke an Old World stereotype, in Italianamerican and Goodfellas, as a mother dressed in colors (pink and blue) rather than black, she emerges as a stronger talkative Italian American woman, prioritizing family and ethnicity through complete meals. In fact, while in the first pair of films Catherine Scorsese serves only a single dish (spaghetti and a sort of meat pie), in the second pair of films she serves full meals, yet still without consuming them in front of the camera. Even as the mother’s role has gone through a (re)definition and maturation in these four films, the gendered and mothered preparation of food continues to be an identifier of ethnicity even as it goes through generational changes. However, notwithstanding an overall development of the mother figure within Italian American society, the mamma’s first and foremost command remains: “Eat first.”

Works Cited


