

GIOVANNA BELLESIA-CONTUZZI

# COMFORT FOOD, ACQUIRED TASTE, AND FUSION CUISINE

*A Migrant Journey*

**ABSTRACT** (*Comfort Food, Acquired Taste, and Fusion Cuisine. A Migrant Journey*) This essay looks at food through the lens of immigration by analyzing the work of migrant writers in Italy. Comfort food, acquired taste and fusion cuisine are used to illustrate different stages of the migration process. Migrant writers have often used food as a metaphor to describe their longing for their homeland, for an idealized time and place when they felt safe, secure in their identity. Cooking and eating, sharing and learning culinary traditions foster integration and develop acquired tastes in the destination culture. The result is a sense of belonging, but also the formation of a split identity and a partial loss of the original self. Fusion cuisine, a product of globalization, offers the possibility of two identities coexisting harmoniously within the same person.

**KEYWORDS** Comfort Food, Acquired Taste, Immigration

In the past decades, the study of food has evolved into a cross-cultural discipline. There are food historians, but also anthropologists, sociologists and literature scholars who study this subject from different angles, following different theoretical approaches. This essay will look at food primarily through the lens of immigration by analyzing the work of contemporary first and second generation migrant writers in Italy along with sociological texts written in recent years. The concepts of comfort food, acquired taste and fusion cuisine will be used to define the different stages of a migrant's assimilation journey.

Food historian Massimo Montanari defines food as “the repository of traditions and of collective identity,” a communication system that is “an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange.” He points out that food can overcome language barriers as it “can serve as a mediator between different cultures” (Montanari 2006, 133). Writing about food, using words to describe this alternative and effective method of communication should therefore reinforce the possibility of building bridges between cultures. It is a theme that encapsulates the challenges and rewards experienced by migrant writers as they adapt to new values and traditions.

Migrant writers have often resorted to food as a metaphor to describe their longing for their homeland and their families, for an idealized time and place when they felt safe,

accepted and secure in their identity. These feelings are echoed in the current definition of “comfort food” as a food that provides consolation or a feeling of well-being, a food prepared in a traditional style having a nostalgic or sentimental appeal. It is typically associated with childhood and is a great coping mechanism that helps overcome difficult moments.

The expression “comfort food” has been around at least since 1966, when *The Palm Beach Paper* used it in a story on obesity: “Adults, when under severe emotional stress, turn to what could be called ‘comfort food’ – food associated with the security of childhood, like mother’s poached egg or famous chicken soup” (Romm 2015). The concept existed well before the expression became popular though. Social researchers confirmed that “experiencing a threatened sense of belonging increased the likelihood of comfort food consumption” (Troisi et al. 2015, 58).

Although comfort food differs for everyone, attachment to the person who originally prepared it remains a constant, so much so that, in many languages, it is simply called *mother’s cooking*. In many cultures, a mother’s caring and nurturing is commonly expressed through food. In a recent article about Syrian refugees in Germany titled “At Ramadan, Migrants in Europe Dream of Family and Comfort Food,” a Syrian asylum seeker is quoted as saying he would pray for a reunion with his wife stranded at a camp in Greece, yet during Ramadan would miss his mother’s food more (Nasr et al. 2016).

Many migrants are men who come from traditional societies where cooking is considered an exclusively female task. Living together with other men they end up recreating a sort of home-life and learn to cook out of necessity, but the soothing function of comfort food remains important. This issue is presented in Palestinian-Italian writer Muin Masri’s “Dolce caffè, amare le donne,” which could be translated as “Sweet coffee, bitter women,” but also plays with the double meaning of *amare* as the infinitive of the verb *to love*. The story’s main character explains to his visiting mother that he learned to cook by “secretly watching her” in the kitchen when he was growing up. Not wanting her to realize how much he misses home as he “did not want to see her crying,” he restrains from telling her that he “never cooked out of hunger, but only because he felt nostalgic about her cooking” (Masri 2007, 121).<sup>1</sup>

In the short story “The Crossing,” taken from a chapter of Gabriella Ghermandi’s forthcoming novel *La bambina che resta*, it is the mothers’ foresight that saves the delirious captain of a migrant boat trying to cross the Mediterranean. Once again, the connection between mothers’ love and food is described as an essential component of childhood:

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<sup>1</sup> All translations, otherwise indicated, are mine.

“Sugar, that’s what’s needed.” All those who had gone before us had explained to us, “You calm delirium at sea with sugar.” “Sugar, does anyone have any sugar?” I asked. *Thank goodness for mothers*. The little boy’s mother pulled out a bag full of candy [...] “To keep him quiet at sea...” “I have some small packets of sugar,” said the mother of one of the smaller children. I, Mohammed and a young Eritrean man took hold of the *keptein* and we made him drink some water with a couple of packets of sugar in it, then we gave him two pieces of candy. After a while he was fine. At that point, we all took a piece of candy and put it in our pockets, like a kind of good luck charm. A life-saving pill. *Thanks to the mothers in our group* we had candy, some cookies, packets of dried fruit juice and finally the packets of sugar. (Ghermandi 2014. Emphasis mine)

The connection between mothers and food is also present in Ghermandi’s first novel, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, especially when she refers to *genfo* as comfort food. *Genfo* is Ethiopian porridge made from different flours and served with a hole in the middle for melted butter, spices, hot pepper and yogurt. Like all Ethiopian food, it is eaten without utensils. In one passage, the description of the protagonist, Mahlet, eating *genfo* after returning home from Italy, is symbolic of her readjusting to being with her family and to life in Ethiopia. Mahlet’s gestures are so lively and detailed that readers savor the food along with her, “I [...] ate breakfast, contentedly dipping my fingers into the soft dough of the *genfo*. I broke off pieces and dipped them into the melted butter spiced with *berbere*, then I dipped them again into yogurt and almost tossed them in my mouth.” Her mother, who prepared the dish, enjoys watching her eat with such gusto and comments, “You’re starting to feel better, this is the first time since your return that I see you enjoying your food.” The power of food and mothers to bring us back home is exemplified by Mahlet replying, “Perhaps” she answers teasingly, “it’s because you had not made *genfo* for me yet” (Ghermandi 2015, 146-7).

The nurturing role of mothers in the creation of a self and a mother tongue is underlined in *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* by Algerian-Italian author Amara Lakhous. In this novel food metaphors are used as literary images when an Italian woman praises the integration of her Algerian husband Amedeo. She compares his assimilation, his efforts to learn a new *mother-tongue*, with a baby drinking/assimilating milk. Her description of Amedeo’s efforts ends with a reference to the Lord’s Prayer comparing the Italian language to Amedeo’s daily bread as if to further distance him from his previous Muslim identity, when he lived in Algeria and his name was Ahmed: “I know that Amedeo speaks Italian better than many Italians. It’s his own doing, his will and his curiosity [...] Amedeo is self-taught, all you have to know is that he called the Zingarelli dictionary his baby bottle. He was really like a baby attached to its mother’s breast Italian was his daily bread” (Lakhous 2008, 104).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, sometimes, the ability of mothers to bring us back to our roots can be seen as an obstacle to integration. A good example of this strained emotional connection is found

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Ann Goldstein.

in Algerian-Italian author Tahar Lamri's short story "Il caffè" ("The Coffee") in which he describes the feelings of a man who, like him, grew up in Algeria but lives in Italy. Upon returning to his mother's home he defines the traditional *maida* she prepared for him as a round, low table "lavishly decked with my own childhood." Lamri also refers to Marcel Proust's famous *madeleine* as prototypically evocative. He appreciates the power of food to bring back involuntary memories and a person's past, but he perceives it as a threat that can weaken his resolve to continue leading an independent life abroad (Lamri 2007, 111).

Food as memory and its ability to comfort us by bringing us back in time while soothing our negative feelings is instead exemplified by Indian-Italian writer Laila Wadia in what appears to be a semi-autobiographical short story. In "Il segreto della calandraca" ("The Calandraca Stew Secret"), published in *Mondopentola*, a collection of stories on food and migration that she edited, Wadia states: "Dark moments can be overcome through olfaction. One needs to look for the flavors of the past, of a care-free time that often corresponds to childhood" (Wadia 2007, 132). Her protagonist visits Gerbini's, a multiethnic store in Trieste, to find comfort for her soul when she feels overwhelmed by homesickness, when her "body demands the flavors of her native India and her taste buds beg for a break from refined carbohydrates and cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil" (131). She describes her visits to this store as a return to her grandmother's lap, "warm, soft and saturated with the scent of cloves, ginger, mango, chili peppers, lavender and cinnamon." She refers to the store as a safe harbor in a restless sea, as a magic carpet able to transport her back home to India in an instant, able to turn her back into a little girl "running barefooted in a tropical garden." It allows her to see "her mother's sweet and relaxed expression while placing chicken legs in the tandoori oven," her father "dipping his fingers in a bowl of hot curry" and her little brother begging to lick the bowl where the almond pudding was prepared (132).

When the protagonist of Wadia's story has difficulty replicating her mother-in-law's *calandraca*, a typical Istrian stew her husband is longing for, it is Mr. Gerbini, the Italian owner of the multiethnic store, who helps her find the secret ingredient. It turns out to be a mixture of spices and Hungarian sweet paprika. "With tears in his eyes" her husband acknowledges that her *calandraca* is now surprisingly close to his mother's. His emotional reaction to this comfort food seems to support the woman's suspicion that the missing ingredient might also simply be the "flavor of nostalgia" (134).

Food's power to bring people back home and help them regain a lost or forgotten identity is beautifully illustrated in Tahar Lamri's collection of stories *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* ("The Sixty Names of Love"). Lamri's interest in the process of understanding one's true self is evident from the first pages, where he quotes Whitman's poem *Perfections*: "ONLY themselves understand themselves and the like of themselves/As souls only understand souls" (1886). Whitman's thoughts are reflected in "Solo allora, sono certo, potrò capire" ("Only then, I am sure, I will be able to understand") the story of Jean Marie, born and raised in France by Algerian immigrant

parents who wanted to have him completely integrated into French culture. He does not speak Arabic and visits Algeria for the first time to fulfill his father's dying wish of being buried in his native village, a wish expressed when, at the end of his life, he suddenly realized he did not "want to be buried in the land of the others" (33). Jean Marie falls in love with the country, perhaps as a reaction to his father's long rejection of it. Whatever the motivation, he decides to move to Algeria to find his roots. It is while savoring a traditional meal with an Algerian family that he begins to appropriate his lost identity, and begins the search for his true self:

The room was filled with the smell of cardamom, cumin, caraway seeds, pepper and other spices. Jean Marie drank the fragrant chorba, he slowly savored the very tender chicken with olives, and had a second helping of lamb sprinkled with orange blossom water. He was completely taken by the food, everyone ate in silence. [...] He felt as if he were on a journey, the journey leading him back towards his true self. (Lamri 2006, 31)

Indeed, food brings people together and reminds them of their roots. In the initial pages of *La mia casa è dove sono* ("My Home is Wherever I am"), Igiaba Scego writes about visiting relatives in the UK. They belong to the same family, but took different paths to exile. "In our pockets, each one of us had a different Western citizenship," yet their hearts were all aching for the same loss. "We mourned Somalia, lost to a war we could barely understand" (Scego 2010, 13-14). It is only after eating together a traditional Somali meal that they begin to tell each other their stories and share their memories. Scego's sister-in law prepares a traditional chicken dish, something the author does not normally like, but she ends up loving this time. "It melted in our mouths [...] for a moment the land disappeared from under our feet. After that chicken, our stories met and became intertwined. Our bellies full, we let ourselves go to the memories of our homeland, now lost and faraway" (12).

The power of conviviality to bring people together is also present in another short story included in *Mondopentola*, "La coccinella di Omero" ("Homer's Ladybug") written by Bosnian-Italian author Božidar Stanišić. Here he reminds his readers of food's communicative power by personifying different courses that create a bond among the people sharing them at the table. He defines these special dishes as "those able to create a dialogue between ingredients and sauces," and compares them to "artworks able to have a conversation with their own contents, words, colors, sounds, or shapes" (Stanišić 2007, 34).

In the same volume, this personification of food is also present in Brazilian-Italian writer Christiana de Caldas Brito's short story "Cronaca di una *feijoada brasileira*" ("Chronicle of a *feijoada brasileira*"), told from the point of view of a black bean who, having fallen off during the *feijoada* preparation, decides to remain part of the dish by becoming its storyteller. The bean describes being shipped with other fellow beans from Rio the Janeiro to the Rome airport, and this time it is the food that is seeking comfort, "It was comforting to know that our point of arrival, after being tossed in the

belly of a 747, would be an Italian belly.” The beans are concerned and worry whether Italians will like them. “Will they be ready to accept us? Will they be prejudiced when they see how black we are? Those worries distressed them, but they were normal ponderings of a migrant bean” (De Caldas Brito 2007, 50).

De Caldas Brito’s use of irony and humor to advance her social engagement is an effective tool to denounce problems, but the next step is finding a solution. The recent fields of *culinary diplomacy* and *gastrodiplomacy* have given official recognition to the power of food to bring people together and mediate conflicts. Valerie Gecowets clarifies these two concepts by explaining that “culinary diplomacy is the high cuisine, the official manifestation of a state’s power through food” (2015). A good example of culinary diplomacy would be the hosting of a 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic by an American Embassy, or the recent creation of *The American Chef Corps*, “a network of more than 100 of America’s most renowned chefs, participating in programs both in the US and abroad to foster cross-cultural exchange and to highlight American cuisine through the shared experience of food”. Gastrodiplomacy, instead, defined as “the street food [...] the sharing and exchange of foods between cultures [...] a grass root movement” is precisely what migrants bring to our globalized world” (Gecowets 2015).

In the already mentioned short story “Il segreto della calandraca,” Wadia applies the concept of gastrodiplomacy to literature by defining the Gerbini’s multiethnic store in Trieste “The United Nations of flavors.” She sees this store as the living proof that peaceful coexistence is possible, “Only in this place did I see unleavened bread hugging Palestinian garbanzo beans, Indian sauces not distancing themselves from a nearby Pakistani sauce, third-world tapioca and cassava in the front shelf, above oversize packages of Frankenstein foods, made in the USA” (Wadia 2007, 132-33).

Cooking and eating can project us into the future. Sharing one’s culinary traditions and learning new ones are ways to begin the process of integration, to develop acquired tastes in the destination culture. According to a 2015 study by Censis, the Italian Social Study and Research Institute, “Food has become a testing ground for the hybridization of Italian culture because of the ever-increasing number of different cultures present in Italy. Foreigners living in Italy appreciate and cook Italian food, they buy Italian products, modify and combine their dishes with Italian ingredients” (2015). The research was conducted in three major Italian cities, Milan in the north, Rome in the center and Palermo in the south. The results indicate that during their first year in Italy, most (86.5%) immigrants eat typical dishes from their country of origin daily. The percentages change with time and reflect the process of integration. One to five years after arriving in Italy, 34.7% of immigrants eat Italian food every day, and the numbers increase to 45.7% after the fifth year of residency. Food is also seen as a powerful means for cultural exchange as 40.5% of foreigners reported having cooked typical dishes from their own countries for Italian friends and 50.2% participated in multiethnic dinners.

Learning to truly enjoy different food brings a sense of belonging, but also the formation of a split identity, and a partial loss of the original self. Several writings center

on second generations' rejection of traditional foods that they see as the older generations' refusal to develop an "acquired taste" and assimilate to the new culture. In her autobiographical short story "Ruben," Gabriella Kuruvilla, born and raised in Italy by an Italian mother and an Indian father, denies the influence of food on the formation of her own identity, "Certainly I ate a lot of rice with curry and not much pasta with tomato sauce. But being in front of a hamburger does not make people feel American" (Kuruvilla 2005, 84). Kuruvilla's statement could seem to be at odds with Massimo Montanari's suggestion that food might be the first way to connect with different cultures, but only if we forget that creating connections does not substantially modify people's identities, especially when they are perceived as an imposition:

Food is culture *when it is eaten* because man, while able to eat anything, or precisely for this reason, does not in fact eat anything but rather *chooses* his own food, according to criteria linked either to the economic and nutritional dimensions of the gesture or to the symbolic values with which food itself is invested. Through such pathways food takes shape as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity. (Montanari 2006, XI-XII)

In Wadia's "Curry di pollo" ("Chicken Curry"), translated by Monica Hanna, Anandita, the Italian-born teenage daughter of Indian immigrants calls her parents "Indian Flintstones" and complains about their lack of assimilation to Italian life, "My parents [...] think they still live in a mud hut in the obscure village of Mirapur, in central India, with their two cows and three goats. But for over twenty years now they've lived here in downtown Milan" (Wadia 2006, 150). Her rejection of her Indian origins and her desire to embrace Italian cultures is exemplified by her rejection of Indian food. She calls the snack her mother has her carry to school "Indian bread stuffed with deceased vegetables" (154), and informs the reader that she regularly throws away this "bag of Indian bread filled with vegetables strangled in oil and spices" (153).

Because of her father's old-fashioned ideas about dating and penchant for arranged marriages, when she invites her Italian boyfriend Marco to dinner, she also invites her best friend Samantha as a cover, telling her parents he is dating Samantha. The whole meal becomes a charade. Anandita wants to give Marco the impression that her family is integrated into Italian life so she begs her mother to cook Italian food. The mother first teases her, but understands her daughter's desire to belong to the place where she was born and raised and goes along with her request, "I'll make spinach *pakor*as and a nice chicken curry tonight,' [...] she says, [...] I look at her annoyed. [...] Seeing my eyes turn into petroleum wells, Mom starts to laugh. 'I'm joking! I'm joking! I'll make penne in tomato sauce, like we agreed.' I breathe a sigh of relief" (154).

But her father remains adamant about his dislike for Italian pasta that to him tastes like "rubber tubes." During dinner, he praises his mother's chicken curry "the best in the entire district of Mirapur" and goes as far as enthusiastically reciting the whole recipe "First she ground three types of peppers with other spices – mustard, coriander,

cardamom, poppy, cinnamon, cloves, then she fried them with onion and garlic and finally she added a tomato, coconut milk and chicken” (157). Anandita’s father is then horrified to discover the unconventional use of curry in Italy when Marco announces he once had curry on pizza along with cream and mushrooms and actually liked it. Oblivious to the father’s reaction, Marco makes matters worse by adding “once we got a packet of risotto with shrimp and curry. Mom made it one night. It was really good. You just need to add a spoonful of parmesan and a pat of butter” (156).

Wadia uses food as a metaphor for the older generations’ resistance to assimilation, but the conversation also points to the introduction of ethnic food in the once homogenous and traditional Italian diet. According to the *Transnational Food Manual*, edited by INMP, The Italian National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty, between 2003 and 2008 the sale of ethnic food products in Italy increased by 60%. Falafels, kebabs, nachos, tex-mex sauces and noodles gained popularity among the young, especially among upper-class Italians between the ages of 20 and 45 (Marrone et al. 2010). The Mediterranean diet is changing to keep up with the increasingly multi-ethnic Italian society. Previously unknown foods are being added. The Italian Pediatric Society has even created a transcultural food pyramid and introduced flavors and foods that are new to Italians, like millet, sorghum, amaranth, and quinoa: “Dulce de leche, fried plantain and nachos are featured alongside cookies and chips as foods to eat occasionally. While ‘new’ types of fruit and vegetables have been introduced, namely lychees, mango and cassava leaves.” (Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition 2017).

New foods and cooking styles are not the only innovations brought about by transnational cuisine. Table manners and food rituals are also quite different and need to be respected and learned. Ethiopian food is not alone in not requiring eating utensils. Wadia points this out in “Chicken Curry” by having Anandita’s father further embarrass her when he declares that his daughter is unaccustomed to eating with forks, “We don’t like this stuff, we like curry, and eating with our hands” (Wadia 2006, 156).

Cultural differences do not necessarily need to be depicted only as barriers, as Gabriella Ghermandi demonstrates in “Easter Dinner,” also included in *Mondopentola*. In this short story, she turns the introduction of Alem’s Italian boyfriend to her Ethiopian grandmother into an occasion to use food and eating habits to gain her approval. Grandmother Berechti tries her best to cook impossibly spicy food, because “A man who cannot stand spicy food on his tongue, won’t be able to stand the spicy personality of Ethiopian women” (Ghermandi 2007, 74). While Alem and her mother are actually unable to eat such hot food, the boyfriend manages to eat an abundant portion. Grandmother Berechti, described as “the fierce warrior” who had defeated all of her granddaughter’s previous white boyfriends, is immediately taken aback when he, thoroughly prepared by his girlfriend, knows how to rip a piece of *ingera* bread, dip it in the sauce, roll it around the meat into a perfect cone, “a man’s mouthful, with the center among his fingers and the tip of the cone touching his palm” and then tosses it into his mouth seemingly unaffected by the spiciness of the food. He does not even ask for



water; he continues eating “like a man,” trying everything, always taking the food in front of him without ever reaching over in other people’s part of the common dish. Alem’s grandmother continues to test him by serving *tibsi*, a meat dish, in a bed of hot chili peppers, “a fiery hell” that turns the grandmother’s expression from doubt into marvel when he happily accepts eating seconds and compliments her cooking. It is only after this true test of fire that the grandmother begins to accept Alem’s boyfriend and engages in conversation with him. She asks him about his job, his family, his life. The final test comes with coffee, when the grandmother, after performing the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony, hands him a scalding cup. He is Alem’s first “white boyfriend” who does not ask for a saucer and is able to sip the hot coffee holding the scolding cup the proper way. “He held the cup firmly in his hands like a real Habescià,” a term Ethiopians sometimes use to define themselves. When he finishes the third cup of coffee, the grandmother looks at him and announces “his eyes are a thousand shades of green, like Alem’s father’s” (78). That was it, he had passed the test and by accepting Ethiopian food and respecting its customs, had gained Alem’s grandmother’s approval.

Coffee returns as a sign of masculinity in “Caffè nero senza zucchero” (“Black coffee, no sugar”) by Salvadorian-Italian author Carlos Rodriguez. The young protagonist, after his first sexual encounter, is offered some black coffee, without sugar, “as *machos* like it” (Rodriguez 2002, 74). Coffee is a recurrent symbol, present in many writings by migrant authors. In his essay “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes noted that the context of a food might conflict with its nutritive substance, “all food serves as a sign among the members of a given society” (1997, 29). Coffee is a case in point, as in many societies, especially in the industrialized western world, it is consumed quickly to increase alertness because of its caffeine content, but in many slower-paced cultures it is prepared slowly, sipped calmly, and follows precise rituals linked to relaxation and a real coffee-break. Coffee can be an acquired taste, yet when it is not an addition, but rather a modification of the original taste, it can also be seen as a rejection of a migrant’s country and family.

This situation is clearly depicted in “Il caffè,” Tahar Lamri’s short story, when the main character gulps down a hot, bitter coffee instead of the traditional sweet concoction savored slowly by his family. His mother sees this drastic change in taste as evidence that he is no longer her son. She stares at him at length and then announces, “I had a son... He left one day, twenty years ago... they came to tell me he had died abroad, I didn’t want to believe it. Today, I am sure of it” (Lamri 2007, 113). In the same story the difficulty of reverting back to old habits is also illustrated through the protagonist’s criticism of Algerian unstructured meals. Accustomed to Italian separate courses presented in a specific order around a rectangular table, he finds himself “at home, but disoriented” (111).

In *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Graziella Parati comments on the use of food as “an effective trope that allows a migrant writer to also

manipulate stereotypes about Italianness” (2005, 77). Italians’ entrenched eating habits and stereotypical passion for espresso are at the center of “Döner Kebab,” a short story by German-Italian writer Nora Moll about a young Italian visiting his German girlfriend’s parents. Moll manages to describe her Italian protagonist distaste for German food and his hosts’ meager diet, through her sarcastic choice of words and by keeping the German word for coffee in the original, as if the German version did not even deserve to be translated into Italian. “Tough reality here, tough like the whole wheat rolls served for breakfast... They are covered with a large quantity of seeds: sunflower, pumpkin, poppy, and oat flakes,” not to mention many other “little thingies” that turn them into something similar to “pig feed.” He ends up “watering” the rolls, as if they were plants, with several cups of Kaffee. He then comments on the German habit of adding butter, jam, honey and, sometimes, sausages to the rolls. Being Italian though, in the morning he would not be able to digest such heavy foods. In the mornings, he is accustomed to having only the “simple and marvelous coffee spouting out of his Italian espresso maker. Just coffee, that’s it!” (Moll 2007, 125). Apparently, there is hope for the new Italian generations, as he confirms the possibility of developing an acquired taste when he ends up consoling himself with kebabs from a Turkish food stand in Berlin.

With the passing of time and the progress of integration, acquired taste sometimes turns into comfort food. Two examples can be found in “Dismatria” (“No Motherland”) by Igiaba Scego and Kossi Komla Ebri’s “Mal di...” (“Home... Sickness”). At the end of Scego’s short story, after using suitcases and closets as a way to describe the transient nature of refugee life, the main character discovers her mother has a suitcase filled with memories of Italy ready to bring back to Somalia, should they ever be able to return. In the suitcase, among other strange things there are a package of spaghetti, a plastic Parmesan cheese and a small bottle filled with water (Scego 2005a, 19). The choice of water seems to remind the readers that water is as a precious resource for immigrants who, like Scego’s mother, came from arid, desertic regions. Acquired taste as comfort food returns in Komla Ebri’s story about the sister of a Togolese immigrant married to an Italian, who moves to Italy to work as a caregiver for her brother’s family. As the narrating voice, she talks about her difficulty in adapting, overcoming the language barrier, and learning to cook Italian food. She is forbidden from preparing Togolese food that takes too long and makes the whole house stink for days. She is dismayed by her brother’s transformation and rejection of his origins and seeks comfort in food, but the cassava flour and peanuts she brought from Togo do not last long enough. At first, she cannot get accustomed to eating pasta all the time and missed the food she used to eat with her hands at home. With time, she learns to appreciate Italian food, moves out of her brother’s home and gains her independence. When he goes to visit her, she prepares him traditional food. Away from his Italian wife and children, her brother enjoys the Togolese food she prepares for him, and reverts to his old self.

Interestingly, when the protagonist finally returns to Togo she has difficulty readjusting to her village life and moves to a larger city. Even there though, she sometimes feels restless because as a “tenant of two homelands” she is sometimes happy and sometimes feels “cloven [...] a bit unbalanced” as if a part of her remained in Italy. She does realize she would be longing for Africa if she returned to Italy, but also accepts that perhaps a part of her now longs for Europe. Her solution is to buy spaghetti, tomato sauce and meat to prepare an Italian meal. It is a combination of comfort food and acquired taste that allows her to belong to both worlds.

Igiaba Scego’s short story “Salsicce” seems to confirm that integration can be spread through food as food helps the protagonist of her story create a collective Italian and Somali identity. The protagonist of this short story who, like Scego was born and raised in Italy by Somali parents and is a Sunni-Muslim, does not reject Somali food, but tries to eat pork sausages to prove her Italian identity.

I look at the shameless parcel and I ask myself: Is it really worth it? If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am Italian just like them? Exactly the same as them? Or will it all have been a useless act of bravado? [...] My beautiful passport is burgundy red, and it proclaims, to all intents and purposes, my Italian nationality, but does that passport speak the truth? Deep down, am I truly Italian? (Scego 2005b)<sup>3</sup>

When the protagonist, at the end of the story cannot swallow the “unclean” pork sausages, she decides that eating them would not make her more or less Italian or Somali, and affirms the need of many first and second-generation migrants to stay true to both of their identities, to create a fusion of two wholes. She feels Italian when she eats something sweet for breakfast and Somali when she drinks tea with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon, and that is just fine with her.

Differently from Scego, who separates her two culinary traditions, other writers mentioned in this essay evoke the possibility of the merging of different cuisines through fusion. The disdain felt by the Indian father of the protagonist of “Chicken Curry,” is described in comical terms by the author, but it is a sad example of the failure to “fuse” cultures together. Younger Italians, growing up in a multiracial and multicultural country, among first and second-generation migrants, are much more open to combining ingredients and experience flavors which were once unknown to the Italian palate. This is also proven by the wealth of international ingredients carried by Italian supermarkets today. These ingredients are slowly finding their way into traditional Italian meals and also help supplement the diet of the increasing number of

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<sup>3</sup> This short story, originally published in *Metamorphoses*, the journal of the Five College faculty seminar on literary translation in 2005, was translated by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto and is now available on line. Accessed June 9, 2017. <http://www.warscapes.com/retrospectives/food/sausages>.

Italians with dietary restrictions. Many bars offer cappuccino made with soy milk, a primary example of basic fusion cuisine necessitated by food intolerance, but other choices are simply dictated by evolving taste. Spices like ginger and turmeric are now added to Italian dishes. Already in 2002, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article about the popularity of Fusion cuisine in Milan, during fashion week. (Galloni 2002).

When considered in the context of migration, fusion should not be perceived as the old attempt to reproduce a deformation of the migrant's cuisine with an approximation of the original ingredients, as many hyphenated restaurants did and still do. In the United States, for instance, Italian-American restaurants serve food that is neither Italian nor American. It is a cuisine that transforms and separates rather than uniting. Nowadays, fusion is meant to blend cultures. This is not a new development, after all. There seems to be nothing more Italian than pasta with tomato sauce or pizza. Yet they both require tomatoes a "new world" import, brought to Europe by the Spaniards in the XVI century.

Fusion cuisine has always existed. It combines the best elements of different culinary traditions and blends the flavors together in a harmonious way. Hopefully, our globalized future will include the same appreciation for people who move across borders. In the meantime, migrant writers in Italy continue to offer their perspectives, to educate with their writings, to bring new dishes to the Italian table. It is important for Italians to learn to savor them.

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