

William King

Professor Wilkerson

University Writing 1020

28 March 2013

Word Count: 3,621

Of Gangsters and Bakers: *Cake Boss*, Stereotypes, and the Italian American Identity

Introduction

For over half a century, Italian Americans have suffered stereotyping, misrepresentation, and falsification by American mass media. Hollywood hits like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Goodfellas* (1990) characterize Italians as vindictive, sociopathic criminals. MTV's *Jersey Shore* portrays the ethnic group's younger members as decadent partygoers lacking morality and sense. Rather than highlight Italian American achievements, contributions, or hardships, mainstream film and television seemingly focus solely on the negative. Understandably, the Italian American community has grown highly defensive of their ethnic identity, calling on filmmakers and media executives to end stereotyping. Activists and ethnic leaders see no end in sight to assaults on the Italian American identity.

Yet among the Sopranos and Corleones, a new family emerges: the Valastros. These Valastros are not gangsters, guidos or wiseguys; they are bakers. Owners of Marco's Bakery in Hoboken, New Jersey, the Valastro family bakes cakes for community events and locals. Their experiences have been documented on the TLC reality show, *Cake Boss*, since 2009. Instead of rendering Italian Americans in negative clichés, *Cake Boss* centers on community involvement,

the importance of family, and the culinary arts. An average episode of *Cake Boss* generally consists of the following: two local customers call for Valastro culinary expertise in designing elaborate cakes for events; head baker/owner Buddy Valastro designs the cakes, outlining the ingredients and methods required; an extended cooking process involving main family members and bakers; 2 finished cakes are delivered to the ecstatic, thankful customers. While formulaic, the show's structure allows for constant familial interaction, occasional exploration of the family's past, and ultimately expression of food's critical role within the character's lives and identities. The Valastro's Italian American heritage frequently arises among family members through vocabulary, appearance, and discussion. The most common example of this is Buddy's reflections about his late father Bartolo "Buddy" Valastro Sr., who emigrated from Southern Italy. He often talks about the honor of conserving family legacy, serving his community, and applying his father's culinary techniques to his work.

Cake Boss does not revamp Italian American portrayals through its broadcasting; Valastro complexions, accents, and behaviors fulfill common perceptions of Italian American society. Rather, it focuses portrayal of Italian American identity on food. The entire show revolves around the design, creation, and presentation of food. It relates Italian culture to this process with underlying references to heritage. Through a culinary focus, *Cake Boss* displays positive elements of the Italian American identity that contrast to conventional media depictions. Instead of planning the next heist or Saturday night, the Valastros of *Cake Boss* engage in the culinary arts. This could indicate a change in media stereotyping of Italian Americans, and perhaps a foreseeable end to the assault.

As a reality show, *Cake Boss* must be understood within a certain contextual framework. The medium's revolutionary concept—television without writers or script in favor of informal,

natural interactions between characters—attracts viewership for reasons unlike those of films or traditional TV. Reiss and Wiltz, in their 2004 study *Why People Watch Reality Television*, used Reiss’s “16 desires model”—a list of fundamental motives used to categorize human interaction—to evaluate this.

Table 1 displays each of Reiss’s 16 desires, which invoke specific joys that satisfy common emotional needs. Motives/actions can fall within any of these 16 desires. More complex

Table 1: Reiss’s 16 Desires Model

Name	Desire	Joy
Power	Influence	Efficacy
Curiosity	Knowledge	Wonderment
Independence	Autonomy	Freedom
Status	Prestige, attention	Self-importance
Social contract	Peer companionship	Fun
Vengeance	Getting even	Vindication
Honor	Observance of traditional moral code	Loyalty
Idealism	Improvement of society	Compassion
Physical exercise	Exercising of muscles	Vitality
Romance	Sex	Lust
Family	Raising children	Love
Order	Organization	Stability
Eating	Food	Satiation
Acceptance	Approval	Self-confidence
Tranquility	Inner peace	Safety, relaxation
Saving	Collecting	Ownership

Source: Reiss, Steven and James Wiltz. “Why People Watch Reality TV.” *Media Psychology* 6.4 (2004): 363-378. *EBSCOhost*. Web.

behaviors (e.g spirituality) draw upon multiple desires (364-367). Reiss and Wiltz found correlations between desires of status and vengeance and watching reality TV (364-367). Status motives were suggested to reflect the self-importance felt by viewers who consider themselves

“ordinary”. Reality TV shows often focus on exposing “ordinary” lifestyles, implying that average people command enough importance to merit national media attention. Reiss and Wiltz claim that this could give “psychological significance to the viewership’s perception of superiority” (373-374). Vengeance motives apply primarily to shows that portray “competition and interpersonal conflict”, where watchers experience vindication through characters’ gains and losses (374). Reiss and Wiltz note that these findings are limited to 5 shows included in their study (*Survivor* (Burnett, 2001), *Big Brother* (Eligdoloff 2001), *Temptation Island* (Couan, 2001), *The Mole* (Gunzo Productions, 2001), and *The Real World* (Bunim/Murray Productions, 2001) and that future reality shows could appeal to different desires (374). While contemporary reality TV shows such as *Worst Cook in America* (Optomen Productions, 2013) continue to feature ordinary peoples and competitive environments, *Cake Boss* presents a divergence from the norm. In addition to exposing lives, it explores culture, history and ethnic identity. Reiss’s 16 desires model will be used to connect viewership motives and *Cake Boss*’s viewpoints of the Italian American identity, assisting in evaluating *Cake Boss*’s role within developments of Italian American media portrayal and possibly its place within the evolution of reality TV.

This project focuses on a single episode, “Familia, Fishing and Family History”, which depicts the Valastro's trip to Italy. During this, they explore their ancestral hometowns of Altamura and Lipari and visit Italian relatives. The hour-long special ends with Buddy finishing a cake for his cousin’s wedding and a celebratory dinner with traditional dishes. “Familia, Fishing and Family History” is particularly illustrative of depictions and explorations of Italian American identity. Analysis of the episode assesses whether the characterizations, settings, and themes of *Cake Boss* truly reflect change in media portrayals of the Italian American identity.

Food, family and the Italian American immigrant experience

The Italian American identity portrayed in *Cake Boss* appeals to Italian Americans' past with food and family. Complex and extensive, this history reaches far back into the Italian American experience, originating in their ancestor's trials and tribulations. Such an important part of Italian American identity must be understood to truly appreciate *Cake Boss*'s significance within Italian American media portrayal.

Italian Americans mostly derive from Southern Italian regions such as Sicily, Campania, and Calabria. Contemporary Italian American culture relates to this geographic origin (McGoldrick et al. 616). This relation particularly surfaces within the group's family values and food practices. McGoldrick, Giordano, and Garcia-Preto note that Italian Americans value family loyalty tremendously (617). Tightly-knit family structures result in large extended families living in the same neighborhood. They claim this behavior emerged due to prolonged, oppressive feudal rule in Southern Italy, where lords constantly abused peasants. Peasant descendants consequentially lost trust with those outside the family.

Italian American culinary habits reflect historical developments of the 19th century. The Kingdom of Italy's establishment in 1860 following Italian Reunification marginalized the agrarian South in favor of the industrial North. Poorly introduced capitalism advanced by national leaders worsened class division between former lords and peasants. As Diner outlines, "instead of the past's simple feudal relationships, a new order emerged, based on an intricate system of clients and patrons" (23). These intermediaries, who supervised the elite's farming estates and sold food to locals, based deals with clients on personal relations and social connections. Widespread injustice and corruption ensued, ultimately leading to lower class misery and starvation (Diner 23-26).

Experiences with starvation inspired the Southern Italian poor's veneration of food. Diner illustrates this through description of elaborate regional *feste* celebrations:

In Marta, on the Feast of the Madonna del Monte, townspeople encircled the picture of the Madonna with loaves of bread, framed by artichoke, cherries, lemons apples, and oranges, while local fisherman filed into church, making offerings of live squid and eel. *Feste* confirmed the sanctity of food. Food could hardly be mundane and prosaic if women and men carried it to the Madonna in acts of devotion. Far more than supplying the body with energy, the consumption of food through public religious ritual on sacred days of the Christian calendar emphasized its sanctity (Diner 44).

The rarity of foods beyond staple grains further sanctified food. Expensive goods like meat and pastas were limited to festivals and primarily consumed by the elite (Diner 31). When these poverty stricken peoples immigrated to America during the late 19th century, they found great abundances of food. Rather than depend on wily middle men for their next meal or wait till festivals to enjoy sausage, Italian migrants indulged in former luxury foods daily (Diner 49). Many Italian Americans ate several meals that included imported steaks, pastas, vegetables and beer despite poverty and unemployment (Diner 51). This great food influx into Italian American lifestyles did not dilute ancestral reverences of nourishment. Italian Americans continued to prize food highly, centralizing Italian foods within their identity (Diner 53).

Legacies of Southern Italian oppression, poverty, and starvation have major consequences for the Italian American identity. Family remains a centerpiece of social structure and interaction. Food embodies past cultural experiences and defines social expression. To the ire of Italian Americans, media diverts popular focus away from this integral experience, depicting Italian American livelihoods as those of crime, violence, and immorality. *Cake Boss*, however,

realigns subject matter to familial and culinary aspects of the Italian American identity, subtly illuminating the important Southern Italian connection.

Later generations, language and the great struggle with Hollywood

Italian American leaders dismiss any “realignments” of mass media focus. Since the 1930s, film and television have featured Italian Americans mostly as Mafia affiliates, leaving Italian American organizations and rights groups perpetually skeptical of Hollywood’s intentions. In a 2010 report, the Order Sons Of Italy in America (OSI), an Italian American fraternal organization, and the National Committee for Social Justice (CSJ) decried recent popularizations of the guido/guidette stereotype by *Jersey Shore* and several *Saturday Night Live* episodes (OSI 3-10). Various commercials, institutions and events that promoted Soprano-like characterizations of Italian Americans were also scrutinized. The report demanded fair media treatment; CSJ president Santina Haemmerale denounced media producers and executives for “not extending sensitivity to the nation’s 26 million Italian Americans” despite recent initiatives to recognize other ethnic groups’ sensitivities (OSI 16).

OSI viewpoints are typical of Italian American activism. Their conservative, defensive position seems steadfast. Opinions similar to the OSI’s originate not only in media developments, but also in Italian American intergenerational conflicts, assimilation difficulties, and experiences during World War II.

World War II’s effects on the Italian American identity

Italy’s Axis allegiance from 1939-1943 encouraged public suspicion of Italian Americans. While contempt towards non-English speakers had existed in America for generations, Carnevale notes that “during the war years, Americans found renewed reason to be suspicious of Italians and other enemy aliens along with their native language.” (7). Government policy further

compounded problems. From 1941-1942, 600,000 other non-resident Italians were labeled “enemy-aliens” by the government, promoting employment discrimination and general anti-Italian sentiment (Carnevale 8). Resulting tensions between Italians and non-Italians forced many Italian Americans to quicken their assimilation into mainstream American culture to avoid distrust.

Many Italian Americans avoided speaking Italian publicly to better Americanize themselves. Italian language newspapers became dominated by English articles. Italian American associations began promoting English use among members. Some reportedly denied all knowledge of Italian despite lifelong fluency (Carnevale 13). Italian Americans considered linguistic transition necessary to prove patriotism to fellow Americans during wartime, hopefully discouraging anti-Italian prejudice. These efforts were costly, eroding outward expression of the Italian American identity and diminishing the importance of linguistic knowledge (Carnevale 20).

Accelerated assimilation of Italian Americans created knowledge rifts between younger and older generations. As De Fina states, second and third generation Italian Americans demonstrate significantly reduced knowledge of Italian compared to immigrant relatives (357). However, both De Fina and Carnevale agree that losses in Italian fluency did not undermine ethnic identification or pride. Carnevale identifies post-war successes of Italian American singer Louis Prima’s Italian-inspired songs among the second generation as a signifier of “continued attachment to the language” (20). De Fina observes no correlation between loss in linguistic knowledge and loss in respect for “heritage language”—the ancestral language of an ethnic group—within the Italian American community. She discovered in a 2012 study that newer

generations of Italian Americans communicate with Italian expressions and idioms among the family, indicating the survival of spoken Italian (374).

Despite evidence suggesting that the Italian language remains indispensable to the Italian American identity, OSI offers courses in Italian to members. This program probably hopes to regain Italian language knowledge lost during World War II. Linguistic re-education highlights the OSI's discontent with Italian language abandonment and mid-20th century events. Their strife and resolute positions relate directly to these experiences.

Italian Americans and mass media

Stereotyping of Italian Americans has been common practice in Hollywood and beyond for decades. From gangster films to national "Italian" chain restaurants, mass media has practically commodified the Italian American identity. Italian foods, characterizations, and cultures today embody brands, ideas, and meanings that are bought and sold at the market. Within his study of Italian restaurants, Girardelli identifies eight traits used by marketers to sell "Italian" products to consumers: openness, expressivity, romance, family, rusticity, Old World/memory/nostalgia, slow-paced lifestyle, and genuineness (319). Branding of "Italianness" through these traits allows marketers to form an Italian American "package"—a set of symbolic cultural constructs designed to simplify products and ease consumption (Girardelli 311). While the Italian American package encourages some positive effects (family unity, compassion, and expression), its "hodgepodge of authentic Italian fakes" oversimplifies and bastardizes Italian history and identity—all to the aggravation of the OSI (Girardelli 322-323). The film and television industry's Italian American package shares some traits with those listed by Girardelli. Romance and Old World memories certainly feature prominently within *The Godfather Part II* (1974), where romantic tension and connectedness to heritage define gangster

protagonist Michael Corleone's character development. Yet Hollywood's interpretation of Italianicity mostly encompasses darker themes of injustice, selfishness, and deceit. Cavallero explains that the "gangster" package arose in the 1930s with movies like *Little Caesar* (1931). Italian American gangsters in these films threaten Anglo-American ideals, especially the Protestant Work Ethic and the fabled American Dream. Cavallero notes that these developments created "value judgments on the virtue of assimilation, warning audience members about the corrupting influence of ethnic others" (53). He recognizes three Italian American stereotypes used frequently by movie studios: the gangster (sociopathic, murderous criminal), *fesso* ("fool" in Italian, usually moronic, brawny street thug), and trickster (similar to the gangster, though more savvy than smart). They all undermine core American values through their selfish, childish schemes, and continue to today in *The Sopranos*.

Cavallero argues that the gangster package's media prominence distracts organizations like the OSI from positive media depictions of Italian Americans, inciting excessive, unnecessary stereotype anxiety (61). In his research on Italian American media developments in 1987, Cortes recognizes the positive change Cavallero describes with the release of movies like *Moonstruck* (1987) and *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), dubbing it an "Italian American Counterattack" (122-123). These observations undermine OSI viewpoints, suggesting that their aggressive stance against stereotyping could be overblown.

Italian American stereotype activism's roots in 20th century abuses by American society and mass media firmly positioned it within the Italian American mindset. Could *Cake Boss* provide further support to Cavallero's claims against the continuation of Italian American media abuse or just exemplify another false package?

Cake Boss

“Familia, Fishing and Family History” begins with Buddy Valastro introducing the family’s trip to Italy. He briefly expresses the importance of his return to the “motherland” and absorbing heritage. The camera then cuts to the Valastro’s arrival in Altamura, Buddy’s mother’s hometown. His ecstatic mother emotionally proclaims her joy in returning to Italy to reunite family. Buddy agrees, stating that he looks forward to “learning about where we came from”. Many Italian relatives are soon introduced. Everyone converses in some level of Italian, confirming De Fina’s conclusions on the importance of heritage language among Italian Americans. Already, themes of family and heritage are expressed strongly within the collective Valastro Italian American identity. Family and heritage continue to feature prominently throughout.

Soon, Buddy begins baking cakes with his family members during the vacation, using local cooking facilities to create cakes for his cousin-in-law’s baby shower and second cousin’s wedding. Cooking takes about one-third of the episode’s runtime. Throughout his baking process, Buddy reiterates the importance of cooking for family; he apparently was asked to create the baby-shower cake last second, all the while dedicating full effort in the name of “mia familia”. Here values of family and food intersect, expressing the ancestral feelings of Italian Americans discussed by Diner and so sought after by the OSI.

The serving of food within “Familia, Fishing and Family History” always marks a social climax. The baby-shower party for Buddy’s cousin-in-law centers on the serving of traditional meats and pastas. When Buddy visits his late father’s hometown of Lipari, serving a traditional pasta meal made with local fish for his relatives becomes prioritized. The completion of the wedding cake at the episode’s end defines the entire after party. Ultimately, the cooking and

consumption of food unifies native Italian Valastros and Italian American Valastros. It bridges the two different yet related cultures, implying to the audience that food itself is a universal component of all Italian identities.

Buddy uses cooking to express heritage and memorialize his father, Bartolo “Buddy” Valastro Sr. While creating his second-cousin’s wedding cake, Buddy specifically chose to decorate it using “old-fashioned” piping methods passed down by his father. Before cooking his fish-pasta meal in Lipari, Buddy caught his ingredients with his son Buddy III to the same cove he fished at with his father eighteen year ago. Food “honors” his father’s memory. Buddy’s use of food to express social meaning strongly resembles Hauck-Lawson’s “food voice” concept coined in her 1998 study *When Food is the Voice: A Case Study of a Polish-American Woman*. She defines food voice as “the social, symbolic dimension to food” that “serves as a voice—a powerful expression of social meaning” (21). Here, Buddy’s food voice concerns the memorialization of his father, family, and heritage. Within the show, Buddy’s food voice also expresses the Valastro viewpoint of Italian American identity—one more positive than the gangsters traditionally explored by media.

Emphasis on male relationships in “Fishing, Familia and Family History” highlights the nature of Italian American masculinity. Since immigration, Italian American men have held strong social bonds exclusive to their gender. Diner notes that during their early days in America, Italian men outnumbered women (74). Without their female counterparts, men assumed roles such as cooking that were traditionally assigned to women. They formed social clubs and guilds to support each other through this experience. The gender exclusivity of these groups remained once women arrived, establishing a masculine social world separate from females and family life. According to Diner, “Beginning in adolescence, men spent much, and

indeed most of their non-work time away from home in all-male places of recreation and sociability, the café, club, saloon, and street corner. Eating and sleeping brought them home” (79). While Buddy actively involves himself with his wife, daughter, and other female relatives, his relationships with son Buddy III, his father, and his male family are portrayed as separate from all Valastro women. Only his close male relatives and friends assist in Buddy’s culinary creations. Scenes depict fishing with Buddy III as an entirely male activity. Buddy’s baking recalls the men-only clubs discussed by Diner. The Italian American masculinities of “Fishing, Familia and Family History” are more positively conveyed than those of gangster movies. Instead of featuring an Italian American masculinity driven by jealousy and vengeance like in *The Godfather* trilogy, *Cake Boss* characterizes male relationships as bonds formed through honest work, shared heritage and experience, and commitment towards the family, further defying common negative views towards the Italian American identity. Buddy and Buddy III’s fishing trip displays these traits strongly; Buddy constantly refers to Buddy III as “son”, swims in the same lagoon with Buddy III as he did years before with his father, and catches fish using historical methods.

The episode ends in celebration. Buddy’s cousin has been wed and is led through town in a traditional wedding procession—a fitting conclusion that symbolizes the importance of family. The cake embodying Buddy’s love for his father and family is served. Heritage is exposed, relatives are reconnected, and “Italianicity” is cherished. “Familia, Fishing and Family History” presented Italian Americans as family-oriented, food-loving people, something the OSI has for years campaigned for in mass media.

Conclusions

Cake Boss presents a positive image of Italian Americans. While not all episodes are as expressive of Italian American identity as “Familia, Fishing and Family History”, the themes of heritage, family, and the importance of food are present throughout the show. *Cake Boss* avoids references to gangsters, fessos, and tricksters, instead focusing on positive aspects. The themes, characterizations and settings of *Cake Boss* present a clear counterexample to the OSI’s highly unfavorable opinions of mass media development. Cavellaro’s arguments concerning “stereotype anxiety” of Italian American activist organizations appear increasingly accurate in light of this analysis. Italian Americans like the Valastros occupy positive media positions, where Italian American identity is enjoyed rather than despised.

Within Reiss’s 16 motives model, audiences perhaps feel desires of family (living through *Cake Boss* for feelings of family connectivity) and curiosity (for the Italian American identity). These are greatly more productive for understanding of Italian Americans than those associated with Mafia movies; the negative desire of vengeance, which coincides with most gangster films’ revenge-based plots, could possibly motivate gangster film audiences. Furthermore, positive desires like family and curiosity contrast to those identified by Reiss and Wiltz. Both observations underscore the change *Cake Boss* represents. The OSI fails to recognize all this, however, instead dedicating resources to complaint.

Of course, *Cake Boss* is only one example, with Soprano-like media depictions vastly outnumbering it. Future research could expand beyond *Cake Boss*, conducting a more widespread analysis of current media portrayals of Italian Americans. Yet regardless of the myriad gangsters roaming about the media, *Cake Boss*’s popularity represents a transformation in

attitude among American consumers. The OSI, CSJ, and all other Italian American activist organizations would benefit both themselves and their communities by recognizing this.

Works cited

- Annie Hauck-Lawson. "When Food is the Voice: A Case Study of a Polish-American Woman." *Journal for the Study of Food and Society* 2.1 (Spring 1998): 21-28. Web.
- "Familia, Fishing and Family History." *Cake Boss*. TLC. 11 October 2010. Television.
- Carnevale, Nancy C. "No Italian Spoken for the Duration of the War: Language, Italian-American Identity, and Cultural Pluralism in the World War II Years." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 22.3 (2003): 3-33. *EBSCOhost*. Web.
- Cavallero, Jonathan J. "Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety." *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32.2 (2004): 50-63. *EBSCOhost*. Web.
- Cortes, Carols E. "Italian Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." *MELUS* 14.3/4 (1987): 107-126. *JSTOR*. Web.
- De Fina, Anna. "Family Heritage and Engagement with the Heritage Language: A Case Study" *Multilingua* 31.4 (2012): 349-379. *EBSCOhost*. Web.
- Diner, Hasia R. *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. Print
- Girardelli, Davide. "Commodified Identities: The Myth of Italian Food in the United States". *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28.4 (2004): 307-324. *SAGE journals*. Web
- McGoldrick, Monica, Joe Giordano, and Nydia Garcia-Preto. *Ethnicity & Family Therapy, Third Edition*. New York: Guilford Press, 2005. Print
- National Committee for Social Justice & Order Sons of Italy in America. (2010). *Plenary Session Report: February 25th-28th 2010*. Washington D.C. Web.

Reiss, Steven and James Wiltz. "Why People Watch Reality TV." *Media Psychology* 6.4 (2004): 363-378. *EBSCOhost*. Web.