

## **Eating class: Domestic consumption of Italian food in British middleclass households**

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This paper seeks to understand how everyday domestic Italian food consumption is linked to class. It contributes to the current debate about middle class and food omnivorous consumption by analysing how class is communicated through social relations processes, such as identity punctualisation (Munro 2004) and inclusion and exclusion (Douglas, Isherwood 1980). Drawing from an ethnographic analysis of domestic food consumption among British middle class families living in a university campus, this paper shows how discourses about Italian food and cooking performances communicate participants' class. Discourses about Italian food reveal that people have a selected omnivorousness which is linked to two class dynamics concerning who and what is admitted at people table. What participants consume as Italian food is strongly associated with values, ideas and people that they like, and what participants do not consume is linked to values and people that they dislike.

### **Introduction**

In discussing food consumption and class, the most cited theorist is Bourdieu and his work *Distinction* (1984). Although Bourdieu is not the first theorist to discuss class and consumption (see Veblen, 1925), he is probably the first who draws a map linking together consumption preferences, everyday practices and class position. For Bourdieu what and how people consume, what future theorists have since termed 'lifestyle', is an expression of class position which results from the combination of cultural, economic and social capital. Bourdieu's idea of class is based on a complex system of judgement of people's class position through practices and the display of goods. Such judgement results from a system of preferences which is actuated by members who systematically prefer some items to others. For Bourdieu, what constitutes good taste is a dynamic process involving both a "struggle over the legitimacy of the definition" (Warde et al. 1999, 105), and a consequent agreement about its definition and its hierarchical distribution. Social distinction is marked by good taste and is expressed through the consumption of goods. It is also mutually recognisable between individuals and groups in society (Warde et al. 1999).

Bourdieu's analysis has been criticised for its structural perspective of hierarchical consumption preferences and practices, which reflects the classic division of society into high, middle and working class. One of the more acute criticisms considers the question of whether there is a cultural hierarchy which reflects class positions, and how such a hierarchy has been affected by the globalisation of cultural items and the consequent variety of items in circulation (Warde et al. 1999). In analysing music consumption amongst people with "high-brow" cultural tastes, Peterson and Kern (1996) highlight the decline of class distinction and the parallel increase of omnivorousness which is the appreciation of a wider variety of cultural genres. They interpret this trend as a "tolerant pluralism and openness to appreciate everything" (Peterson and Kern 1996 in Warde et al. 1999, 107). As they say, although omnivorousness "does not imply an indifference to distinctions", it seems to be a strategy of the new business and administrative class for dealing with "an increasing global world [...] by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others" (Peterson and Kern 1996 in Warde et al. 1999, 107-8).

Bryson's (1996) research adopts a similar perspective, but she highlights how omnivorousness is a symbol of cultural exclusion with a significant class basis. In

analysing musical taste amongst the higher class (as she defines them), Bryson (1996) shows that there is not a general tendency for higher class people to dislike lower status tastes. However such a tolerant attitude is not addressed to music associated with lower status groups, but it is addressed to higher status black and foreign music. As she synthesises: “This tolerance line recreates the patterns of high-status (cosmopolitan) culture in opposition to non-high status (group-based) culture. Thus it provides a new criterion of cultural exclusion.” (Bryson 1996,887). Similarly Erickson (1996) points out how cultural knowledge is an efficient strategy adopted by people occupying high hierarchical occupational positions in order to maintain such positions. She also points out how omnivorousness is not directed to a generic high culture *per se*, rather is addressed to cultural elements which are related to the current individual working context.

In analysing dining out practices in England, Warde (Warde et al. 1999) highlights that middle class people tend to be omnivorous in their consumption choices and to have a wide knowledge of ethnic food. He points out that “in England experience of foreign cuisines is a mark of refinement, the possession of which is class-related” (124). The study assumes that omnivorousness is a middle class strategy developed to solve the postmodern anxiety provoked by a growing variety of consumption choices. Practices addressed to omnivorousness seem to give to the middle class “opportunities of personal reassurance, for demonstrating competence and for staking claims to social exclusivity” (Warde et al. 1999, 120). In other terms, because people are surrounded by a wider variety of goods, omnivorousness seems to become synonymous of cultural sophistication and it “may come to be valued in its own right, as an end rather than a means” (120). Thus omnivorousness is a sign of distinction *per se* and also a strategic way to communicate class position to people belonging to different groups.

This paper takes inspiration from this previous work and seeks to understand how domestic Italian food consumption materialises class position among middle class people living in a small British university campus and an adjacent town. Following Warde’s analysis this paper looks at how participants adopt Italian food consumption as a strategic way to communicate their cultural knowledge and thus their class position. It also seeks to understand if such consumption expresses class dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as has been underlined by Peterson and Kern (1996), or if it is a way to materialise a new cultural tolerance and social inclusion, as has been highlighted by Bryson (1996) and Erickson (1996).

Although Erikson (1996) underlines the centrality of a specific cultural knowledge in manifesting social positions in a business context, and Warde (1999) points out how food knowledge is a strategic way of being recognised (and recognise) as middle class persons, they do not explore how these dynamics take place within social relations. Although these studies highlight that cultural knowledge and consumption reinforce class dynamics of inclusion-exclusion, they tell us very little about how such consumption practices take place in specific contexts. The main reason for this theoretical and empirical lack is that class position is analysed through individual self perception or through standardised aspects such as people’s income and level of education. Therefore class position is taken for granted and not discussed in the analysis. This paper seeks to address the question of the ways in which class position is communicated through interactions by applying the concepts of identity

punctualisation (Munro 2004) and inclusion and exclusion (Douglas, Isherwood 1980) in understanding how everyday domestic Italian food consumption is linked to class position. Drawing from an ethnographic analysis of domestic food consumption this paper shows how participants' discourses about domestic Italian food consumption and their performances in cooking an Italian dish communicate participants' class position. Participants' discourses about Italian food reveal a selected omnivorousness which is linked to two apparently different class dynamics concerning who and what is excluded/admitted at people table. What participants consume (admit at their table) is strongly associated to values and people that they like, and what participants do not consume (exclude from their table) is linked to values and people that they dislike.

### **1. Punctualizing class position and the admission at the table**

Understanding class belonging as a matter of interaction is not simply a methodological question, rather it is an epistemological one. In this study class belonging is not understood as a permanent mark impressed at birth, but is mostly a question of interactions and mutual recognition in specific contexts. As the anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) underlines, it is more appropriate for ethnographic studies to understand class as a state rather than a status. State is in fact a "condition in which a person or a group may be found in a particular time" (Turner 1967:94). This definition implies that class belonging can be a temporary condition and is recognised by others. Class position is something that needs to be established or confirmed during interactions, linked to a specific context, an "here and now", and as such it is not simply a question of self-identity, "who am I?", rather a question of mutual recognition, "Who I am to you? And "Who are you to me?" (Munro 2009, forthcoming).

This paper adopts the concept of *punctualizing identity* by Munro (2004) and assumes that identity manifestation does not depend only on an individual's self definition, but it emerges from social relations wherein such an identity is revealed to others. Despite the current underlining of identity as a fluid concept wherein the individual is "free" from any social relations, Munro assumes that "subjects are regular and sharply defined only when viewed at a specific time and in a specific manner" (294). Identity is in fact related to a "*positioning* effect which requires the viewer to be in position to make a specific reading of identity" and to a "*timing* effect, in which the 'call' for a specific identity demands a display that annuls other 'calls' – principally by overtaking these within the here and now" (294). This does not imply that identity is a fluid concept and as such people constantly oscillate and are continuously under judgement. Instead it implies that identity is "revealed" through relations which are characterised by a specific context (here and now) and other people (viewers) demanding of identity. Munro (296) describes relations as "demanding relations" wherein "someone insists on the production of a precise identity". Therefore identity is not fluid rather is punctualised, "arriving on demand –and perhaps only for as long as the 'call' lasts". In other terms, people have aspects of their identity which are "on standby" and as such they become visible and recognisable as a result of specific demands.

Following this perspective this paper understands class as an element of identity emerging from demanding relations. Class position emerges from a viewer's specific

call for class, and his/her interpretation of the revealed aspects. Such an interpretation implies a judgement wherein the viewer decides to “pass or not” the revealed aspects. Operating this judgment is an admission or exclusion to something. In fact being recognised as similar to the viewer means being accepted to his/her world, rather being evaluated as different (inferior or superior) implies being kept away, separated from such a world. As Douglas and Isherwood (1980:88) point out:

*Sharing goods and being made welcome to the hospitable table and to the marriage bed are the first, closest fields of inclusion, where exclusion operates spontaneously long before political boundaries are at stake.*

This sentence highlights how exclusion and inclusion operates in two different perspectives. Who is admitted at the table and what is admitted at the table are in fact both aspects of the same dynamic of inclusion/exclusion. Being passed as similar consists of being admitted to the viewer’s world, and as such implies being admitted to the “hospitable table” wherein food is shared. Therefore we share our intimate practices (table) and our goods (food) with those who are judged as being similar to us. Consuming the same food can in fact be read as an act of admission wherein people reaffirm their affiliation and their re-connection to their world (Munro 1995). As Douglas and Isherwood point out:

*instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture (1979:59).*

Therefore the food admitted at the table is that which makes and re-makes visible our culture, and people admitted to share our food at our table are the ones similar to our culture, to our world.

## **2. Research methods: Getting into participants’ kitchens**

This article has emerged from a larger study which explores the practices surrounding Italian domestic food consumption. The study follows an interpretive strategy and adopts a multi-method approach which combines a series of in-depth interviews with observations of participants during dinner time. Interview topics included general questions about household food practices (from the shopping to the washing up) and more specific questions about the reconstruction of an Italian meal at home. The interviews helped to familiarise the researcher both with the people’s ideas, understandings and meanings of Italian food and with the food practices which take place in the house.

Interviews were followed by the observation of the entire dinner time: from the cooking to the washing up. Combining interviews with observations helped the researcher to understand how people materialise their ideas, know-how and emotions and how they describe and perform their everyday practices. The analysis of the data has followed the interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) and Spiggle (1994). A continuing interaction between the different sources of data, such as visual data and verbal transcription, has been privileged. Similar to Coupland (2005), the researcher tacks back and forth between the theoretical framework and data analysis

### 3. Who is admitted at the table: the campus is up the hill

There appears to be only little social contact between people living on campus and the local population. While people from the local towns do work on the university campus they seem to largely occupy the lower paid (and often less visible) jobs, such as cleaning and security, the clerical jobs and some technical and managerial positions. Very few of the academic jobs and postgraduates posts are occupied by local people. Excluded from the higher paid jobs their presence is limited to normal working hours. After 5 o'clock they disappear and come back the following morning, without taking part in any after work activities, usually at the campus bar or in private houses. Given this unbalanced presence of local people in terms of job positions and accommodation, locals seem "nonpersons, spectres, invisible men" (Geertz 1973, 412).

My arrival at the university testifies such a gap between locals and "campus people". My first contacts with people on campus were with senior postgraduates and young lecturers who typically described the local area as "crap". Such descriptions were usually in the context of friendly conversations at the pub or during parties, where jokes about the local people, the local accent, local towns and their shops were not uncommon. These general complaints about the area, from the weather to the shops are common among international students and staff as well as British students and staff. Expressions such as "I do not have anything to do with this town", "Oh no! God! I am not from here" were used to emphasise a cultural distance from the local environment. Remarkably, comments which serve to reinforce this cultural distance as well as an indifference to local activities are welcomed in certain social circles as a sign of campus membership. I quickly learnt how to answer one of the typical conversation openers of "What do you think about this town? It is crap, isn't it?" This moment of the conversation was usually liberating and people used to share with me their personal anecdotes about the area. Such moments of sharing personal anecdotes appear to serve to reinforce a collective campus identity of 'us' against the 'them' of the local population. This was usually a class based division wherein "us" was symbolising a middle class community and "them" an indeterminate working class local population.

Participants' self definition as middle class was initially considered a peculiarity in relation to the heterogeneity of their economic conditions. Some participants live in spacious and elegant villas adorned with antique furniture and collectable potteries, while others live in rented flats on campus or in terraces in town with second hand furniture. Although there are many economic differences between my participants, their self definition refers mostly to their cultural capital and in particular to their education. In fact despite the differences in terms of economic capital, all of my participants have a university education, and most of them have a masters degree or a PhD. Thus in defining their class position, the younger ones, with less stable economic conditions, mentioned exclusively their education and their future career perspectives and aspirations, rather the older ones, with a more stable working position, emphasise their cultural capital in terms of consumption practices such as going to the theatre, listening to classical music and travelling.

Although the self-definition of being a middle class person refers to different aspects of cultural capital, participants use such a statement mostly to describe their everyday

practices. For instance, in referring to her family dinner time one of my participants, a single mother with two children says:

*As middle class we tend to eat at 7.30 or 8 [...] working class people eat at 5 or 6.*

As this quotation underlines, participants refer to their practices both as an admission to something and a distinction from something else. Sharing the same dinner time is in fact considered a confirmation of the middle class positioning and as such “a return” to a community of people with similar values and practices. Such a community is both imagined and locally observable. As imagined community participants refer to a community without any geographical connotations and characterised by stressing similar lifestyle values. In asking participants about what it means to be middle class they have very little to say in terms of values and life goals, rather they refer to their lifestyle. This includes a range of consumption practices such as going on holiday, living in spacious houses, going often to restaurants, preferring some supermarkets to others, buying some products rather than others (such as organic vegetables and meat from farms). As one participant points out:

*I don't live in a council house, I do certain holidays, [...] it is a certain way to do things*

The community which this participant describes has undetermined characteristics which are also drawn in opposition to what “the others”, the excluded, do. What she implicitly says in affirming that she does “certain holidays” is that she does things in a different way. Eating at a certain time during the day and not considering Blackpool as a half term holiday destination imply that of course she eats and she goes on holiday (as working class people do), but she does it in a “certain” way. Such a certain way is a return to an imagined community of people sharing the same holiday and dinner time “styles”.

This imagined community also has a local manifestation on campus. In describing the campus, people often refer to it as a manifestation of such community. This is partly due to the composition of campus inhabitants (which share the same working environment) and the differences with other local areas, defined as working class areas. Therefore eating at 7 or 8 every night in a campus house is both an act of return to an imagined community and an act of admission to the local manifestation of such a community. It is also to mark a distance from local people outside the campus which (it is supposed that) had already their dinner almost one or two hours before.

#### **4. What is admitted at the table: a selected Omnivorosity**

A first point to underline is that people on campus are interested in food, here food is a frequent topic of conversation. Food knowledge, and exotic food competence in particular, seems to be a relevant cultural knowledge on campus and hence people need to demonstrate they possess an adequate level of it. As Erickson (1996) shows in her study of business work environments, people tend to possess the cultural capital relevant to their work environment. Discourses about food both as domestic consumption and as dining out practices are very relevant in the campus context.

People randomly met, from the department secretaries to parents at the school gate; and their conversations typically demonstrate a considerable interest in food both in terms of eating out and of domestic consumption. Conversations about a new local restaurant or a chain restaurant tried in Manchester at the weekend are frequent. Less frequent, but not unusual between friends, are conversations about new products discovered in the supermarkets. Food, with all its surrounding discourses and practices, goes in and out the front doors of each of the campus houses, and as such it is one of the community's links. From their self declaration participants seem to spend a considerable amount of time in shopping, cooking but also in eating out, reading about food, watching TV cookery programs and talking about their food consumption experiences. The circulation of recipes, kitchen appliances, cookbooks and ideas has been also observed. Maggie, one of my participants, could not show me her pasta machine because she lent it to Gabriella, her friend who lives in the same street. As Maggie told me she mentioned to Gabriella her pasta machine when they were walking to pick up their children from school, and "Gabriella wanted to have a go with that".

Although people are interested in food, their consumption cannot be described as omnivorousness *per se*. Omnivorousness in the university campus is a selected one. It highlights both a return to an imagined, as well as locally manifested community, and an exclusion from what symbolically and physically is outside the campus. Participants seem to emphasise a general attitude to openness to the global aspects of consumption and a reluctance to accept the local manifestation of such global aspects. Although participants have a surprising knowledge of foreign cuisines, such as Italian, Greek, Spanish, French, Chinese and Indian, in terms of ingredients, products and dishes, they know very little about restaurants in the area. Even if they profess their interest in food, and they described themselves as people "who like trying new stuff" they rarely mention local pubs or restaurants in the area. When they mention them they often refer to them in very negative terms. They usually compare their experience of various cuisines experienced on holiday or in London restaurants, with the "disappointing" local manifestations. As Tina, a married woman in her fifties says:

*Tina: I don't go out for meal very often, mainly because around here food is so bad. When I go to London I go out with my daughter and niece and nephew, and the same when I go to Manchester...but not here. There are not many good restaurants, there is no point really!*

*We used to go to Roberto's in town quite often*

*I: Was it good?*

*Tina: Not really! We didn't like it very much. We used to go to Italy quite often so we know what Italian food is like in Italy*

The diffidence expressed in relation to local restaurants is also extended in judging local food shops. Although a few participants consume meat from local farms (but not local butchers) and organic vegetables from an organic seller who comes to the campus once a week, they do all their food shopping in supermarkets. As Christina comments about her shopping choices:

*There are no decent shops around and there is not a delicatessen. You are forced to go to the supermarkets... [...] I go to Sainsbury's and when I am in a rush I go to the campus shop.*

Participants' negative judgement about local shops and restaurants seem in fact more a result of a wider negative idea about the area *per se* rather than a result of their actual shopping experiences. Participants are very reluctant to explore what the local area has to offer them in terms of food opportunities. Such an attitude is also evident in their reluctance to try local products. Only two of my participants mentioned Oatcakes, a local pancake, as a product that they regularly use, rather, most of the participants ignore its existence. This is particularly apposite when we consider that participants describe themselves as "interested in food" and "happy to try new stuff". Why do my participants, who are very competent in making pesto sauce, ignore the existence of Oatcakes?

This judgement about local food is indicative of participants' reluctance to explore the local area and to have contact with local people. Their tendency to avoid contact with the local area and with local people is thus manifested by their judgement about local food shops, markets and restaurants. In other terms local restaurants and shop are "not decent", as Christina says, because they are associated with local people from whom the university community wants to be distant. Tina's attitude about local restaurants, Christina's limited knowledge of local shops and the diffused ignorance about local products (such as the oatcakes) can be interpreted using Bryson's (1996) idea of omnivorousness. Far from being a synonym of tolerance, omnivorousness is another way to mark class inclusion and exclusion. Participants are more selective than inclusive in their food consumption and their interest in food is in fact not a manifestation of tolerance rather of selection thus confirming their belonging to something. They tend to consume what is associated with people they like, and to avoid what is connected to people they dislike. Preferring London restaurants is thus also a question of preferring people associated with such consumption practices and a remarkable distance from people met in local restaurants. Oatcakes are not admitted at the table because they associated with people "outside" campus who have their dinner at 5pm.

## **5. Italian food for dinner: what is not admitted**

In the context of my fieldwork it has not been problematic to recruit people on the basis of their interest in Italian food and their domestic consumption of Italian dishes. In fact Italian food is a welcome topic of conversation. People randomly met on campus, in the GP waiting room as well as in the department corridors, were comfortable in talking about their holiday in Tuscany or their last weekend in Sicily. They were also very talkative about their Italian food experiences such as the old trattoria in Florence recommended by their Time Out guide or the small shop in Amalfi where they found a delicious sauce with an unpronounceable name. Although participants are very talkative in describing their extraordinary consumption experiences, such as the "amazing tagliatelle in Rome" or the "excellent risotto in the Lake of Garda", it has been more problematic to understand how Italian food is admitted to participants' tables.

However people do indeed admit certain “Italian” foods to their table and not others. Although people declare that they consume “the classic Italian dishes”, (which in most cases are pasta or rice based dishes) it has been easier to understand what people do not consume as Italian food. For example participants rarely admit pizza to their table. Although people recognise pizza as Italian food they describe it as “junk food”, “cheap”, “frozen food”, “take away food” and as such does not have the characteristics to be admitted to their table. Described as an “American food, full of cheap cheese” the recurrent image of pizza seems far away from the old trattoria in Florence and the Amalfi’s sauce. Christina, a young mother with two children, is embarrassed in admitting her consumption of frozen pizza, which she justifies as food for her children (and not for herself) and food for emergencies. An interruption from her routine and a treat for her children, pizza is considered an exception to normality, a deviation from the normal family diet.

*We have pizza very very occasionally...maybe once every two months. It is for the boys, they like it.*

*[...] No, I don’t make it. I usually have a couple in the freezer... for emergencies, when I do not have time for cooking. When I am busy, I am working and they pop in the kitchen “Lunch time!” and you want something quick...or when they have their friends around for lunch time so ...*

*Sainsbury’s does a nice pizza that they like so I tend to buy that...*

***Do you buy pizza from the take away?***

*No! That’s horrible! It’s junk food*

Like pizza there are other foods (considered as Italian), which are not admitted to the table, such as tinned pasta and most of the ready sauces, which most participants indicate as Dolmio sauces. Tinned pasta is probably one of the foods that participants not only do not consider as a dinner option (even for emergencies), but it is described with disgusted face expressions and with sentence like “Oh no! Gauche! I am not such a bad cook” or like “never!!” As in the case of the pizza, this food is considered “cheap” and “junk” food, and thus excluded from their conversations as well as their tables.

Although participants are reluctant to describe their consumption of pizza and ready sauces, they do consume them. What they consume is a “certain” version of pizza and ready sauces. In fact it is not the actual dish, ingredients or products, per se that are excluded, rather certain representations of them. Christina admits that she consumes pizza, which is not “a junk” pizza from the local take away, but a “nice pizza” from Sainsbury’s. In the same way other participants admit their consumption of “certain” ready sauces and tinned ingredients. This is the way in which Tim describes his selection of prepared sauces:

*I cook things from scratch, I do not like sauces like Dolmio as most people do...I don’t like tins I like fresh ingredients[...] [In looking at his cupboard] I have tomatoes in tins like Napolina and some Jamie Oliver sauces because they are really good, and if you are in a hurry...*

*[...] there are same sauces that I don’t have a clue...I don’t know how to make them, in this case I go for the best option, a very good one.*

***Is it Dolmio a good option?***

*Not really!! (Laughing) It is very...full of salt and sugar...[...]it is students food!*

Although Tim prefers cooking from scratch he uses sauces that he evaluates as “the best option”. For Tim, as well as for other participants, the best option is often linked to a question of brand, and as such Dolmio is excluded and Jamie Oliver and Napoleon are admitted. Tim, as well as Christina and most of the participants, are not very clear in expressing why some brands or versions of the dish are good options and others are simply “crap”. Although Tim justifies his rejection of Dolmio in judging its material quality (it is “full of salt and sugar”) he also rejects it because it is associated with “students’ food”. This association is in fact not related to any quality of the products, rather to the people consuming it. In a more explicit way Mark comments how his selection of sauces is different from “theirs”.

*The problem is that people prefer their food to be cheap and they do not care about the quality of what they eat. [...] People are happy to spend money for crap pub food but they do not want to spend money when they cook! It’s crazy! They don’t care...they eat whatever is cheap...*

What emerges from this everyday cooking description is that participants define their meal as “better” than others’ meals (students, local people...) not for their cooking practices (cooking known-how and skills) rather for their shopping competences (i.e. choosing a Jamie Oliver ready sauce rather than a Dolmio). It is then not surprising that participants judge local Italian restaurants as “very bad”. My conversation with Mark about Italian restaurants illustrates this point:

**I: Did you go to any Italian restaurants around here?**

*M: I don’t know any genuine Italian restaurants around here. It is not the same as...there are two places where I have been recently that are Italian and I am not sure how Italian they are...there is one in town ...*

**I: Pinocchio?**

*M: No, that’s new!<sup>1</sup>...Azzurri...but they well...do you know when you go to the restaurant on the door there is the name of who’s got the licence and I think one of them has got an Italian name, but maybe it is just the name of an English-Italian that’s mean anything...various generations...*

*I don’t know...you never know...and there is a place in town which proposes to be quite good and quite expensive Italian*

**I: Have you been there?**

*M: I have been there...it was ok, but I didn’t... The thing is that we lived in London, Finsbury Park, do you know the area?*

**I: Yes**

*M: And around there are many quite basic pizza places that serve very good food very good prices and it is very much family atmosphere and when the world cup was on they had like a street party people on the street...general sort of chaos...you get spoilt if you have got places like that...I mean when... it was there that Rose [Mark’s daughter] had her first solid food...it was a smoked salmon tagliatelle and it was a really nice place to go...I don’t get so much around here so...*

This conversation with Mark highlights a shared idea about local restaurants. Although his knowledge of local restaurants is more accurate than other participants,

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<sup>1</sup> Pinocchio is not a new restaurant in town.

his judgement represents a more general negative attitude. Compared with London the local offer is described as a poor manifestation of global cuisines. His judgments manifest a different attitude toward local restaurants wherein he checks the licence's name at the door, whereas he demonstrates an unconditional trust in London restaurants wherein his daughter had her first solid food.

## **6. Italian food admitted at the table: three invitations for dinner**

In this section the individual appropriation of discourses about who and “what”, as Italian food, is admitted to participants' table will be presented by illustrating three different dinner observations. These three different “class punctualisations” will be presented as they have emerged through the interactions between the researcher and the participants during the interviews and observations.

### **The display of middleclassness: Tina and her frittata**

Tina is a middle aged senior academic who lives outside the campus in a small village. She invites me for dinner at 8, 30. Tina is married to a professor who works in another local university. She has two daughters who live in London and a son who lives in Manchester. She also has two grandchildren from her elder daughter. Her house is an isolated detached house with a big garden at the front. Her kitchen is very spacious. It is a combination of different styles: there is antique furniture and very modern electric appliances like a dishwasher and microwave. On the table, a long and rectangular wooden table, there were many objects: a wooden chopping board, many vegetables and herbs, a vase with fresh flowers, glasses (clean and not), a picture of a young woman with a baby and a Jamie Oliver cookbook about Italy. On the shelf there are numerous cookbooks dealing with various cuisines by Elisabeth David, Delia Smith, Nigella Lawson, and also a green folder with pages cut from magazines and newspapers.

We conducted our interview at the kitchen table. Tina offered me a glass of wine and some olives from a Selfridges container. Although she was very welcoming in offering me drinks and little snacks, I felt very uncomfortable. Our conversation was comfortable but I felt I was unable to fully understand her life. In analysing the transcripts of our conversation I noticed gaps in my questions and partial misunderstanding of what she was explaining to me. I was not in full control of the interview, and on some occasions I had the impression that she was interviewing me. As Marjorie De Vault highlights (1991), this uncomfortable feeling can be experienced by the researcher when he/she deals with setting different from her own background or present state. In her research on women and the organisation of caring in the household she describes the same uncomfortable feeling in interviewing poor women in social help. My positioning reveals Tina as a woman perfectly comfortable with the university campus's discourses about whom and what is admitted to the table. Her class punctualisation revealed to me was influenced not only by her house and clothes but mostly by her confidence in describing her household organisation and in cooking a dish that she never tried before.

Tina describes the organisation of the household as very casual. She shares the shopping and the cooking with her husband who is “the main shopper and the main cook”. He does all shopping at the supermarket (she ignores which one it is) but she rather buys meat from a local farm. Stocking up is done only with special food such as meat, eggs and cheese from the farm and from a London delicatessen, thus this practice is concerned with sourcing special food, “nice food”, rather than saving money. There is no planning of meals on weekly basis and Tina appears to ignore what she might eat the next day or at the weekend. As she explains to me “food is a pleasure” and it is “comfortable” thus all the practices surrounding it are described in terms of “quality” and “entertainment”.

Although food is a pleasure, Tina describes her ordinary cooking as convenient, an adjective used in terms of saving time and effort rather than money. Describing herself and her husband as “very busy” she often refers to saving time dishes, which as she says do not require “too much time and effort”. Pasta is one of these dishes, which permits her to save time without sacrificing a “decent meal”. Thus pasta dishes are a good compromise for her and her husband’s taste. As she says:

*It is easy, a quick meal. We do not eat that often, I have to say, we don’t eat lots and lots of pasta. It is just so quick and easy...potatoes you have to peel them as well as boil...but pasta absorbs all kind of taste into it... and it is fast food, isn’t it? Even if you make your own sauce, it hardly takes you...that’s the reason I got into it so much...I can make a mince meat, garlic and tomatoes... so fast and I don’t even look at the recipe for...but it is very rare that I don’t use a recipe book...*

Although she cooks spaghetti bolognese she considers it only as a convenient food and not as Italian food. Considering herself a skilled cook, a competent shopper and a knowledgeable and sophisticated eater, Tina underlines that she distinguishes her practice of cooking spaghetti bolognese from the cooking of Italian dishes. As she explains:

*I think of spag bol as spag bol I don’t think at it as Italian I know that is a derivative of that but on that occasion I don’t think at myself cooking Italian, but I think of myself as cooking Mediterranean or Italian when I cook with the recipe books. The aubergine with tomatoes and parmesan dish ...we used to do it quite a lot...I think that is Italian but not the spag bol ...because it is far removed from what you will actually get in Italy that ... it has been so anglicised...it is not Italian*

Because Tina is confident in her culinary knowledge and know-how, she underlines that her ability to cook Italian food is limited to the availability of products. A key aspect of Italian food, she explains, is the quality of ingredients which are not available in the area.

*I cook Italian when I manage to get like really nice mozzarella, which normally I don’t, I have got one the other day from Selfridges and I had it with tomatoes and basil...I think this is pretty Italian. It is so reliant on the really good ingredients that ...really good tomatoes, really good basil, really good mozzarella...find them in Stoke is not very easy...ingredients matter a lot in Italian food*

*For instance courgettes flowers that you fry very very quickly is not very easy to reproduce here...cooking spaghetti is easier...well making them is not easier but you can find them*

Tina was one of the few participants that did not show me how she cooks a pasta dish.

*Well, we have Italian friends, so we know that our pasta is horrible...so I would never give you pasta tonight! (Laughing)*

This is possibly due to the fact that, as she admits, she is not confident in her pasta dishes, but it is also probably due to the fact she does not want to be associated with spag bol. Although she is not very confident in her pasta dish she prefers to cook a new and never tried before recipe instead.

*Tina: Tonight I am going to cook from this Jamie Oliver book because I had it recently and I saw lots of things I like... Sometimes there are not things very distinctive about Italian food...this (indicating the cookbook) is very intriguing because they propose something... quite distinctive*

**I: What did you decide to cook?**

*Tina: A frittata with gamberetti*

*Janet: What is it?*

*Tina: An omelette with prawns*

Because spag bol is convenient food, Tina prefers the option of a “distinctive” dish from her new Jamie Oliver cookbook. In terms of saving time, and probably money as well, frittata is a convenience food. But she defines it as “distinctive”, and in fact “distinctive” is the way Tina’s performance was revealed to me. Tina’s choice to cook frittata has been revealed to me not as a way to punctualise her class position. Avoiding spag bol signifies a distance from what and who they can represent. Selecting a more “distinctive” recipe testifies her desire both to punctualise herself as “distinctive” person and to distinguish herself from “those” (including herself) who cook spag bol on regular basis. Finally her frittata testifies her reconnection to a whole wherein a frittata means cultural mobility, entertainment and distinction.

### **Dreaming about tomorrow: Janna’s pasta and Mark’s pizza**

Turner’s (1967) description of the neophyte is crucial to understanding two of my participants: Janna and Mark. Although both of them introduce themselves as middle class people, I perceived them not as such, rather as neophytes, “not admitted yet” but neither excluded from such a state. As Turner (1967) underlines, the neophytes are “neither one thing nor another” (97), but occupy a transitional phase between one state and another. Because they are in a liminal stage they are ambiguous and they need to be instructed by others, who already belong to the state that neophytes want to achieve, and they need to learn about their new state.

Mark and Janna’s ideas about their food consumption revealed to me are not as defined as Tina’s, rather such ideas are “still in progress”, adapted and reshaped to a new approaching state. Their ideas about Italian food, the story of their recipes represent both a desire to maintain a distance from their past and a desire to be admitted to a new stage. Therefore for Mark and Jenna class is not simply a question

of belonging, as it is for Tina, rather a matter of “belonging but also of longing” (Munro 2009, forthcoming).

My position during the interviews and observations has been very different from the one that I experienced with Tina. I felt very comfortable with Janna and Mark. I introduced myself as a postgraduate students, a state that both of them occupied. Our conversation was comfortable and I felt that I understood what they were trying to explain, because it was in many ways similar to what I would have said. This comfortable state make me more “receptive” and at the same time less “indulgent” in punctualizing both their class identity aspects.

Janna is 26 years old, she is doing an MPhil in politics at Keele University and next year she will do a PhD at Oxford University. She lives in a brand new semidetached house, close to the campus, which she shares with Matt, a 23 years old undergraduate student. She invites me for a dinner at 6, 30. Although Janna and Matt are young students their house does not look like a student house. The kitchen is small but very lively: the surfaces are full of glass jars of pasta, spices, cookbooks, and various electric appliances such as bread machine, microwave, kettle, and toaster. This “grown up” style of her house, as she commented, reveals a desire to maintain a distance from what Jenna called “the student life style”. In describing her aspirations for the future, she often refers to what “a real family should have” and she did not experience in her childhood. Her aspirations for the future are characterised by a big family, wherein her role is very traditionally conceptualised focussed on providing food for her family and organising social events for guests. Although she describes her current life as not socially active, one of her favourite hobby is planning meals for parties.

*I don't do parties as often as I would like. We don't really have many friends... I am 26 and he is 23 and we don't really have friends like my age who are couples, we don't have a circle of friends like that. My friends are still very studenty...different style. I would love to have guests all the time, because I love this...I would like to plan, to prepare...and shop and entertain and... I really love it! I often think about having a big family, with many children and lot of people for dinner. I told you I like the idea of entertaining guests.*

The present organisation of the household reflects her idea of family. She is responsible for all the cleaning and the washing and she is also responsible for cooking and other practices that makes cooking possible such as shopping, storing, planning, serving and washing up.

Mark is a PhD student who lives on campus with his wife, a lecturer at the university. He invited me for dinner at 5, time that he justifies because of Rose, his young daughter who needs to eat “very early”. He lives on campus in one of the staff accommodation houses. His house is “quite messy” as he comments in looking at his daughter’s toys on the sofa, at his wife bags on the living room floor and at his papers and laptop on the table. There is IKEA furniture from their previous house in London, and second hand furniture. On the wall there are some posters, his daughter drawings and family pictures. His kitchen is quite small, but as he comments “is functional for us”. It is a modern style kitchen with electric appliances such as bread maker and dish washing machine.

In describing his current food consumption, Mark starts, almost immediately, talking about his family background. He grew up in a council flat in the local town. He obtained a studentship for a private high school and then he was accepted to Cambridge where he graduated in sociology. He describes the arrival at Cambridge as a final physical and symbolic distancing from his background.

*I became vegetarian when I was 10... I really don't remember it clearly, but at school, when I was 10 probably, I decided to do the cookery class at school. It was quite unusual...probably less unusual now, maybe it is still unusual... and I started learning to cook...*

*I was brought up in a really working class culture that means meat and two veg every evening it is a really standard English...meat and two veg is obviously rubbish for vegetarians. I didn't really get on with the food that was served, in the long term what happened was I went to University...and...and you have to cook for yourself anyway unless you eat the rubbish that they serve.*

Both Janna and Mark were dissatisfied with their family food and they started to develop distance from “the food that was served” at a very young age: 10 years old for Mark and 16 years old for Janna. For Mark taking a distance from “meat and two veg” was also taking a distance from the class culture surrounding that menu and consuming “something else” in terms of schools as well as dinner. Janna’s dissatisfaction about her family food is more related to the lack of sociality related to food as an entertainment practice. She describes herself as a self-taught cook and she indicates various media resources which supported, and still support, her in her cooking learning. She started cooking for herself when she moved from home, and because she did not like her aunt’s style of cooking, she decided to learn how to cook through cookbooks, recipes from newspapers and cookery TV programs. Today she is confident in her culinary repertoire, and as such she is more selective in following sources of information and cooking advice.

*I do not watch cookery programs anymore... I think I pick up quite a lot from them...when I was younger I used to watch a lot... I still use the BBC food website. I used to watch things like Gordon Ramsey. I don't really watch these anymore; I used to watch them when I was quite thirsty for knowledge about food.*

Mark’s learning process is very different from Janna’s one and reflects his idea of food. He does not present food in terms of family relations, care and entertainment, rather as something to achieve with the knowledge of ingredients. He describes his current style of cooking as “in development”, a learning process which focuses on “learning about new products” rather than new techniques. He owns few cookbooks, which he rarely uses, because his way to cook is “what I think it may particularly work for ingredients”. His defines his cooking as not based on a specific cuisine (“I don’t cook Italian or French...I cook with the ingredients that we’ve got”) and “he learns” to cook the ingredients he finds in the organic box that he weekly receives.

*When you get the boxes you can learn new things ...recently there was...oh coralberry I never had until ... one of the last things that I learnt is artichoke, I like artichoke.*

In this continuous learning process, wherein the centre is not a dish *per se* rather an ingredient, Mark has acquired knowledge of ingredients like pasta. He does not remember how he learnt to cook pasta based dishes, “*it was probably at the university, but I don’t remember exactly*” but he mentions that he didn’t learn it from his mother.

*My mum would not eat pasta because it is a foreign food.*

***I: Doesn’t she cook?***

*She does cook, but just English food, well I guess it is a culture issue; my mum would go out to eat Italian food*

Mark decides to cook a pizza for dinner. He describes his dinner as “a last minute dinner” and as such pizza was an appropriate decision because “it is easy” and “you can use whatever you have”. During all his cooking Mark underlines how “his” pizza was not a “Domino pizza” or a pizza from one of the local take away. As he underlines in describing his recipe, he made the dough “from scratch” and he uses organic vegetables for the topping, therefore his pizza is a “good one” and not “a cheap one that you find in town”. What makes Mark’s pizza different from the take away is not a cooking practice, rather his competence in selecting and using ingredients.

Mark’s pizza materialises his “moving up” from a local council flat to a campus staff house via Cambridge. It is an “in progress” conquest that Mark perpetuates in his learning new products from the organic box as well as in criticizing local restaurants and pubs and comparing them to the “very good options” in London. In this learning process Mark looks at food as a conquest in terms of knowledge rather than family relations or entertainment or simply eating pleasure. The dinner starts and finishes on the kitchen work surfaces: there was little investment in setting the table, in presenting and serving the pizza and in having a dinner conversation. Our eating up, which takes not more than 10 minutes, was a rapid end of a dish that Mark took a long time to learn.

Janna is less confident than Mark in her cooking style and she is constantly looking for new ideas and new recipes. In her kitchen she shows me a folder where she keeps the recipes that she selects from internet web sites, cookery programs and newspapers.

*Hem...it is interesting because I have a folder with many recipes that are from scratch. The folder has lot of sections, there is one for Christmas, recipes for cooking for Christmas, I have a meat section and vegetable sections, dessert sections...I have a section of Italian food, then you go through regions and each region is so different that you can’t talk about Italian food it is not one thing...I like the differences, the peculiarities between different regions it is so tempting to me, so appealing... just the actual ingredient is the main flavour that they produce. Like in one region is lemon, in another region is cheese.*

The folder is not only a collection of recipes; it is a collection of aspirations. Janna has never cooked a Christmas dinner but she has already planned a Christmas menu from the starter to the dessert. In her folder Italian food has got a special place. Janna has never been to Italy but it is a place that she would like to visit in her immediate future. Her knowledge about Italian food is not, as the case of Monica, a result of

travels and Italian friends; rather it is a result of various sources such as TV cookery programs, cookbooks and websites. Because Janna has not had much direct contact with Italian culinary culture, she uses dreaming tones in describing Italian food, which she defines as “romantic” and she is not critical in judging the quality of ingredients in local shops and restaurants. Her adoption of Italian dishes in her everyday life is not motivated in terms of saving time rather in terms of “cooking from scratch”. For Janna Italian food is “intuitive” and as such she can cook without using ready sauces and she can improve the combination of ingredients.

*I cook it [an Italian dish] because it is easy to do from scratch and I think is quite intuitive what ingredients go together in Italian food, but when it comes to Oriental or Indian it is not intuitive I don't have a clue and I have to learn, because it is such a separate culture[...] I like to do things from scratch...Let's say with spaghetti Bolognese I make it with tomatoes, tomatoes puree, garlic, and I do everything by myself I don't buy Dolmio which I think most people do*

Janna decides to cook for dinner one of her favourite pasta dishes, “a classic” as she defines it: pasta with a cream and salmon sauce. This dish seems to synthesise all the characteristics that Janna attributes to Italian food and family food in particular. It is in fact an entertainment dish, to “use for a party”, a “creative and sophisticated food” but also a “caring” and “healthy” food.

*I quite consider it (the dish she decides to cook) a classic... it [Italian food] is a sophisticated form of eating and a good choice of things and arty and at the same time fresh and healthy [...]*

Food and Italian food in particular, represents for Jenna what a family and her future life should have: party, people, children and comfortable food.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the current debate about class and domestic food consumption in three different ways. Firstly it shows that despite participants define themselves as “foody”, they seem to be selective rather than omnivorous in their everyday domestic consumption. They admit and exclude food from their tables in order to reconnect themselves to a “middle class” community. They understand such a community as both imagined (without any geographical connotations) and local (the university campus and its inhabitants). Because participants consider the adjacent town as a working class area they tend to exclude “town food” from their tables.

Secondly this paper illustrates that Italian food consumption follows this more general food dynamic of inclusion/exclusion. Participants tend to criticise the local manifestation of Italian food (i.e. local restaurants) and tend to prefer its manifestation in cities such as London or Manchester. In terms of domestic consumption some representations of Italian food are not admitted to participants' table. Dishes, brands and products associated with ideas, values and people that participants dislike are described as “junk food” and “cheap brands” and are not admitted to participants' tables. Rather dishes, products and brands associated with values and people that participants like, are welcomed at the table.

Finally this paper illustrates that the university campus discourses about class and Italian food consumption are very recurrent among participants but they are materialised in a very individual way. Interactions between researcher and participants reveal how class positioning is not simply a matter of self-definition. Interactions with participants reveal how class positioning in relation to food consumption emerges as a mutual recognition between researcher and participants. Tina's materialisation of ordinary Italian consumption is in tone with the most recurrent Keele narrative, and her dish is distinctive, because distinctive is the way the researcher punctualises her.

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Age and class differentiation of the readerships are shown in Table A.2. In each issue all articles and columns relating to food were examined. The number of recipes included, the amount of space devoted to food articles and to food advertisements were calculated (see Table A.3). Table A.2 Readership profiles of magazines, by age and social grade, included in the sample, 1968 and 1991. Sugar, Norms of Consumption and the Labouring Classes in Nineteenth-Century France 99 Martin Bruegel 7 Old People, Alcohol and Identity in Europe, 1300â€“1700 119 A. Lynn Martin â€“vâ€“ Contents Part III: National Identities 8 The National Nutrition Exhibition: A New Nutritional Narrative in Norway in the 1930s 141 Inger Johanne LyngÃ, 9 Wine, Champagne and the Making of French Identity.Â One of his recent publications includes â€œLong-Term Trends in Food Consumption: a French Portraitâ€, Food and Foodways, 8, 1999: 3, pp.151â€“74 (with Christiane Grignon). Kolleen M. Guy is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at San Antonio, USA.