

“Chili Queens” and Checkered Tablecloths

Public Dining Cultures of Italians in New York City
and Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas, 1870s–1940s

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Public and private are distinguished analytically not just by imaginary lines drawn through space but also by the exchange of cash and by the rhythms of familial, religious, and civic ritual. Restaurateurs and street hawkers of ready-to-be-eaten food vend their culinary wares in public and by selling to “the public” regardless of where they are located spatially. Nevertheless, a restaurant’s location as internal urban space marks it as a modern and well-regulated commercial environment, the counterpart of the Western, bourgeois familial dining table, while the sale and consumption of street foods appear as threatening remnants of a more primitive and anarchic commercial world destined to disappear with the modernization of production and distribution. Rebecca Spang has discussed the complex interplay of public and private characterizing the commercial space of the modern restaurant.¹ Street foods have no such ambiguity, offered as they are in commercial, outside market spaces that typically mix men and women and transform domestic, familial, and supposedly private bodily functions into commercialized public performance, thus constituting a threat to order and civility.² They can on occasion acquire nostalgic value, not because they are more homelike but because they are temporal remnants of a world we have lost. But even in such cases, vendors must adapt new trappings in order to survive the general currents of modernization that seek to render all foods more uniform, hygienic, and controlled.

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To analyze the complexities attending the modernization of food retailing and the governance of urban space, we compare the experiences of southern Italian migrants to New York City and Mexicans living in San Antonio, Texas. We want to explore how traditions of preparing food for sale and of consuming food “in public” changed as people became residents of a country that had both a radically different culinary culture and an expansive and “modernizing” system of food distribution and retailing. Street foods were common and restaurants scarce in the regions of Mexico and of southern Italy that either sent large numbers of migrants to the United States or were incorporated into its national territory. We ask why street foods became iconic symbols of ethnic Mexican food in the United States when ethnic Italian food became associated with restaurants, albeit ones that varied in price and sophistication. Admittedly, migrants from Italy persisted in selling and eating foods on the streets of New York, but pizza and spaghetti moved inside, while Anglos long regarded Mexican restaurants with skepticism and preferred to eat tamales in the street.

Our examination of street food and restaurants among Mexicans and southern Italians reveals the linked histories of two regions—one in the Mediterranean and the other in Mesoamerica—that are rarely understood as connected.³ Much of southern Italy came under the crown of Aragón in the 1440s and 1450s, less than a century before the conquest of Mexico. Patterns of land tenure (*latifundias* or *latifondi*) and settlement (grid streets around central plazas or piazzas), and the Columbian exchange of Mediterranean and American foodstuffs also remind us of this linkage. Our exploration of the material and visual culture of street foods provides graphic evidence of this historical interaction. Chronology also facilitates our comparison; mass migrations from southern Italy to New York City began in the late 1870s, just as the railroad allowed Anglos to extend cultural hegemony to Mexican South Texas. Our endpoint of World War II brought urban transformations that nevertheless confirmed earlier patterns of food retailing. Upwardly mobile Italians were already abandoning Manhattan tenements for Brooklyn and New Jersey, leaving “Little Italy” as a “theme park” of checkered-tablecloth restaurants without an accompanying ethnic population. Meanwhile, middle-class Mexicans, having begun to reclaim political power in San Antonio, sought to restrict coethnic street vendors who seemed to perpetuate unfavorable stereotypes.⁴

A number of analytical themes compete to explain these divergent histories of street foods. Climate may be the most obvious factor in comparisons of New York and San Antonio, but environmental explanations hold less appeal in contemporary food studies. Instead, scholars have recently shown the value of racial and gender analysis in examining agency in the public sale of food by minority women.⁵ Meanwhile, a rich literature in ethnic studies has pointed to differing shades of “whiteness” among Italian Americans and Mexican Americans. Much of this work on racialization focuses on interethnic relations, which were crucial for the accep-

tance of unfamiliar foods.⁶ Sociologist Krishnendu Ray has argued that an inverse relationship exists between population numbers and the acceptance of immigrants in fine dining in the United States.⁷ Although informed by these works, we conclude that histories of municipal governance, created through empire building and migration, had a determinant role in situating culinary niches within urban landscapes. As newcomers in a vast metropolis, southern Italians were readily confined to existing restaurant structures, whereas Mexicans in nineteenth-century San Antonio, despite their dwindling numbers and political influence, successfully preserved and expanded traditional patterns of street food retailing.

Italian Food on the Street and in the Taverna

What we know about street foods and restaurants in southern Italy and Mexico rests disproportionately on the well-documented cases of a few exceptional cities, notably Naples and Mexico City. Despite the imbalance in documentation, it is clear that in small towns of Mexico and Italy, the marketing of street foods was a cyclical occurrence based on markets and festivals. Urbanization, the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movement of hundreds of thousands of rural Italians and Mexicans toward larger cities, made street foods ubiquitous in everyday life. And countless Italian migrants to the United States carried memories of eating pizza and pasta in the streets, whether on an everyday basis in Naples or as a special treat in the countryside.

Both foreign travelers and local journalists and folklorists left rich portraits of Neapolitan culinary culture.⁸ By the second half of the nineteenth century, visitors could count on finding hotels, although restaurants were still few in number. Until the late eighteenth century, the court cuisine of Naples had reflected Spanish influences (including *pignata* or *minestra maritata*, a “marriage of meat and greens” that resembled the Spanish *olla podrida* and provided the roots for the dish later called in the United States “wedding soup”). The modern cooking traditions of Naples arose from a rapprochement of plebeian and aristocratic tastes in the nineteenth century, as peasants moving to the city added tomatoes and greens (but not their cornbreads) to the tables of wealthier urbanites. After Italy’s unification in 1861, according to students of Naples’s gastronomic history, three local restaurant “dynasties” (Pallino, Trattoria della Rotonda, and Lo Scoglio di Frisio) were poised to send Neapolitan cooking abroad with the region’s emigrants.⁹ Yet few potential emigrants, whether from Naples or the surrounding countryside, had ever eaten in a formal restaurant.

The plebeian side of southern Italy’s urban culinary culture developed in the streets, where diners could find “fast foods” at very low prices and in very small quantities. Visitors observed that rich and poor, locals and tourists, all purchased from street vendors. The poorest consumers — called *lazzaroni* — had few other choices. Unable to afford fuel or stoves in these densely crowded cities, they bought,

found, or begged foods in and around the huge daily markets. Consumers generally ate what they had purchased as they moved about the streets and piazzas of the city. Even in residential neighborhoods, “private” family life spilled into the street and piazzas, which served as communal living rooms.¹⁰

Purveyors of ready-to-eat foods occupied a wide variety of locations throughout the city. Tavernas were modest eating and drinking establishments with an indoor kitchen serving food through a window or doorway to customers who ate outside on benches or stones of the street or piazza. The most prosperous tavernas offered small tables and rickety chairs inside or just outside.¹¹ Similar open-air kitchens, with permanently fixed stoves or tripods for pots, were located in or around public marketplaces near the harbor or closer to the center of the city. Tourists in early nineteenth-century Naples sought out tavernas and open-air kitchens to observe the highly performative and ritualized consumption of macaroni (usually what we now call spaghetti) with grated cheese by the male *lazzaroni*: they “inhaled” the pasta after dangling it by hand above their noses (see fig. 1).¹² Known earlier as “leaf-eaters” (*mangiafoglie*), because of the large quantities of green vegetables they consumed, Neapolitans became famous as macaroni eaters with the mechanization of pasta production between 1780 and 1840.¹³

Markets and ambulatory vendors were also important providers of street food. Men generally operated formal stands with shaded covers, while women vendors tended to sit on the ground to display their wares. Both groups worked with simple braziers or metal pot stands. In seaside markets such as Santa Lucia, fishermen would shuck oysters for immediate consumption. Vendors of sulfur waters or lemon water

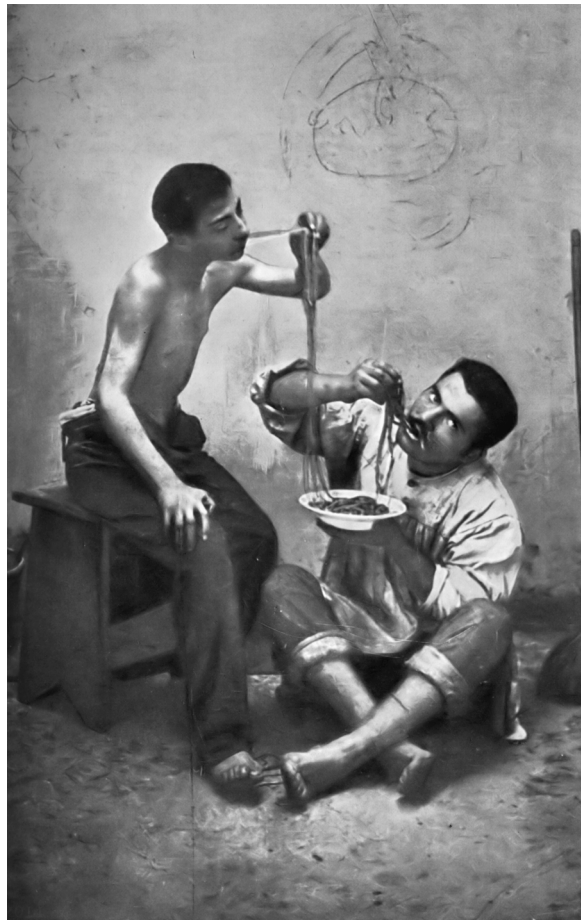


Figure 1. Eating Macaroni—Naples. Luigi Villari, *Italian Life in Town and Country* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), 55

often decorated their stands into works of art with small fountains, strings of fruit, and distinctively shaped glasses or urns.¹⁴ Ambulatory vendors emanated outward from markets or set up on street corners with portable equipment and loud hawkers' cries.¹⁵ Sellers of ice cream and ices, for example, carried with them a cylinder for the ice and a small basket with the spoons and small serving dishes.¹⁶ Pizza was another prominent street food; in the early nineteenth century, it still resembled what we know today as focaccia or pita, sometimes made of cornmeal instead of wheat flour, flavored with garlic, oil, and salt, and sold by male vendors.¹⁷ Pizza, like macaroni, gradually moved upscale and inside when purveyors began to sauce them with tomatoes—the famous, lightly cooked *pumarola* sauce of Naples—in the decades after 1830.¹⁸

Under first Spanish and then Bourbon rule, governance of the markets of Naples focused mainly on regulating fairness in weighing and measuring the sales of foodstuffs and the guarantee of bread at a price affordable by the poor. Although in theory, the marketing of foods was assigned to specific sites within the city, in practice, the sale of both foodstuffs and prepared foods was almost ubiquitous and practically ungovernable. Like all markets, those of southern Italy also had their own daily and annual rhythms. Female vendors offered boiled *pollanche* in the morning but lighted small fires in braziers to roast corn later in the day. Seasonal dishes such as cactus fruits (“prickly pears” or *fichi d'india*) came and went.¹⁹ Those operating market stands often decorated them with greens for Easter and Christmas and offered special treats—cakes, egg or fried pastries, raw or cooked eels—for these holidays.²⁰ Overall, what most distinguished street foods in the cities of southern Italy was their ubiquity. Unlike restaurants that served only at fixed meal times, street foods could be had almost anywhere, in any street or piazza, and at almost any time of the day or evening.

Outside the cities, visitors had a hard time finding prepared foods on a daily basis, although regular markets and annual festivals introduced street food traditions even to the smallest towns. Foreign travelers in the Italian countryside complained almost ceaselessly about the poor food they encountered and the difficulties they had in obtaining it.²¹ Many smaller towns had no hotels and no restaurants whatsoever. So firm was the rural expectation that only family members shared the foods they brought to the table through collective labor (as expressed in the proverb, “when you eat shut the door, and when you talk, look behind you”) that travelers struggled even to identify local women willing to offer a meal for pay.²² Nor was the traveler likely to encounter any roving vender; for markets were not daily but cyclical events in rural areas. Once a week, once a month, or even yearly (at the time of a livestock market or the *festa* celebrating the local patron saint) vendors arrived, bringing with them not only the products but also some of the tastes of the city.²³ Moreover, since many rural emigrants traveled through Naples or similar large cities, such as Palermo, they might experience these foods before boarding ship to “Lamerica.”²⁴

The distinction between urban and rural culinary cultures in southern Italy was sharp, even though internal migrations increasingly linked the two. There were no restaurants in the countryside, only a few inns or taverns; street foods were occasional but memorable treats. In cities, by contrast, the wealthy had restaurants while poorer folk patronized simple tavernas and open-air kitchens. Indeed, plebeians often found it impossible to maintain their culinary privacy at home and sought sustenance in street markets. Although shaped by a very different history of conquest and rural-urban relations, similar distinctions emerged on the other side of the Atlantic.

Street Foods and *Fondas* in Mexico

Whereas the public dining cultures of southern Italy were essentially urban in origin, Mexican street foods resulted from the meeting of two separate culinary traditions, one centered on Hispanic cities, the other associated with an indigenous countryside. Although the conquistadors described with amazement the vast markets of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, where whole streets were devoted to the sale of prepared foods, the native metropolis was razed in 1521 and a new Iberian city rose on its foundations, albeit with native suburbs to provide manual labor. Staple foods as well as geography marked the division between elite Spanish settlers, who consumed wheat bread, and the indigenous lower classes subsisting on cheaper maize tortillas. As with most attempts at segregation, a blending of races and tastes occurred regularly, whether formalized through the sacrament of marriage or taken as a fleeting snack in the streets. Although racial castes were abolished with independence in 1821, social distinctions persisted between European and indigenous foods, the latter firmly associated with street life.

Material culture and ingrained tastes contributed to social and culinary divisions. Maize was a sturdy, productive crop in comparison with wheat, which yielded poorly and failed often. Wheat bread also required expensive capital at all stages of production: plows, mills, and ovens. Native households supported themselves with hard labor but simple technologies: digging stick, basalt grinding stone, and earthenware griddle. Condiments reinforced economic distinctions; Europeans consumed imported wine, olive oil, and livestock, while indigenous farmers ate tortillas with beans and chiles from their cornfields and greens and insects gathered from fallow land. The simple, everyday meals of the countryside were taken at home, although women might carry a lunch of tortillas and beans to male relatives working in the fields. Public and communal dining was limited primarily to irregular markets and to religious festivals. The more elaborate foods consumed at these events, like tamales (corn dumplings steamed in the husk) and mole (chile pepper stew), required even greater labor but scarcely more material inputs—with enough chile sauce and tortillas, a single turkey could feed an entire village.²⁵

This frugal country cuisine was readily, and of necessity, imported to the city

by economic growth and rural-urban migration. Mexico City reached a population of 120,000 about 1800, and with little space for domestic cookery in overcrowded tenements, the poor took their meals in the streets, as did many who were not.²⁶ The most respectable establishments, known as *fondas*, were small enclosed spaces offering Spanish-style meals, perhaps an olla podrida and bread, for travelers and businesspeople.²⁷ The distinction between European and indigenous foods was not always clear to foreign travelers such as Brantz Mayer, who complained of native influences on fonda cooking in the 1840s: “The meats had been good, but were perfectly bedeviled by the culinary imps. Garlic, onions, grease, chilé [*sic*], and God knows what of other nasty compounds, had flavored the food like nothing else in the world.”²⁸ Mexicans, however, had no trouble distinguishing between respectable *fondas* and plebeian *pulquerías*, which often had resident enchilada makers to prepare snacks for customers drinking the native beer, *pulque*. A third space for public eating, somewhere between the fonda and the pulquería, was the *almuercería* serving a substantial brunch (*almuerzo*) mixing Spanish and indigenous foods, perhaps a chicken stew with *envueltos* (chile-flavored wraps). The open-air tables along the banks of the Viga Canal afforded diners a colorful vista of canoes bringing flowers and produce from the gardens of Xochimilco.²⁹

Market places and public plazas were always crowded with food vendors, who composed a colorful array remarkably similar to those of southern Italy. Seated women operated elaborate open-air kitchens, complete with multiple small fires for heating mole, beans, and tortillas, plus earthenware cups for coffee or pulque. Customers squatted nearby, perhaps eating from a plate, but wielding tortillas as fork and spoon, a skill that foreign travelers found to be as remarkable as Neapolitan macaroni eaters.³⁰ Vendors toasted pumpkin seeds on small braziers, or sold tropical fruits and candied sweets from baskets.³¹ The religious calendar further mixed rural and urban dining traditions. On December 12, for example, pilgrims to the Virgin of Guadalupe’s basilica supported a cottage industry of goat herders who fried up great caldrons of *chito* (organ meats) to be eaten with a pulque-laced *salsa borracha* (drunken sauce). During Holy Week, rural folk descended on Mexico City from San Angel, Milpa Alta, and other pueblos to sell *aguas frescas*, water mixed with *chia* seeds, *flor de jamaica* (hibiscus), and *horchata* (ground nuts, melon seeds, or rice), like the sulfur water sellers of Italy. Easter also heralded the start of the ice cream season, and ambulant vendors ascended the volcanic slopes of Popocatepetl to pack insulated cylinders with ice, which they served to festivalgoers in cups with lime and rose water.³²

Colonial Mexico inherited Hispanic municipal traditions of strictly governing food markets but allowing free use of public space. Town officials kept careful watch over the quality and fair prices for food sales. Nevertheless, urban life revolved around public plazas, which served multiple civic, economic, and social uses as military drilling grounds, public markets, and *paseos*, or promenades, open

to all. Enlightened thought of the eighteenth century prompted growing restrictions on public spaces, particularly on the consumption of alcohol, but the popular sectors fiercely resisted attempts to limit their customary privileges.³³

In 1895, folklorist John Gregory Bourke described a grand tour of Mexican popular cuisine, which he compared explicitly to Venetian trattoria. “The farther to the south one went, the more elaborate was the spread to be noted on these street tables, until at or near San Luis Potosi it might be called a banquet for the poor.”³⁴ Mexican public dining comprised a veritable microcosm of the Columbian exchange, blending ingredients and eating habits from the Mediterranean and the Americas. And as Bourke observed, these patterns of cultural mixing and social distinction persisted in northern Mexican communities even after a new international boundary was created in 1848.

The “Chili Queens” of San Antonio

The Mexican culture of public space, including the predilection for street foods, had been established in Texas for more than a century when Anglos first arrived. The mission and presidio of San Antonio de Béxar, founded in 1718, had grown into a self-governing city of two thousand residents by the time of Mexican independence.³⁵ Although Mexicans lost political power soon after the revolt of 1836, they retained a plurality as late as 1870, with about four thousand out of a population of twelve thousand, ahead of Anglos, Central Europeans, and African Americans. The arrival of passenger trains in 1877 upset this demographic balance, and Mexican elites, who had owned mansions and commercial sites around the main plazas, soon retreated to a segregated enclave on the city’s west side.³⁶ But the influx of Anglo tourists and settlers provided a regular source of income for working-class vendors, who struggled for the next half-century to retain their civic rights to the plazas of San Antonio.

These vendors soon became a major tourist attraction, popularly known as “chili queens,” although men as well as women worked the stands. One of the first journalistic accounts, from 1882, described “a great many plazas, and in the evening you see rows of old Spanish women sitting on their ‘bancos’ and baskets of tamales [*sic*], carne con Chili, tortillas, etc., by their side.”³⁷ But a decade later, city boosters had transformed these anonymous vendors into mythological sirens, “bright, bewitching creatures [who] put themselves to much trouble to please their too often rowdy customers.”³⁸ Thus, the chili queens formed part of what journalist Carey McWilliams called a “fantasy heritage,” intended to situate the Spanish Southwest within the national history.³⁹ Much of the allure of the vendors lay in their transgression of the boundaries of race and hygiene. “Ignorance in the details of their manufacture is necessary to the complete enjoyment of tamales,” wrote one journalist, who went on to explain that those who have seen Mexican food being prepared in west-side jacales “have been known to swear off on the seductive viands with surprising emphasis. The abstinence seldom lasts long, however, for tamales



Figure 2. Chili stands on Alamo Plaza, San Antonio, Texas, ca. 1905. University of Texas at San Antonio's Institute of Texas Cultures, No. 082–0643. Courtesy of Pioneer Flour Mills

have too rare a deliciousness to be renounced on account of a trifle of dirt." His conclusion might have referred equally to the hygienic character of the tamales or the supposed racial quality of the women who made them: "Since they can't be washed or disinfected it is well to take them as they are and thank heaven that they were ever made at all."⁴⁰

Even as journalists conjured romantic images of chili queens, progressive reformers attacked the vendors as a threat to urban hygiene. The environmentalist perspective of urban renewal sought to restrict commercial activity to private storefronts while creating neoclassical monuments and green spaces to uplift the masses.⁴¹ In 1889, a new city hall covered over Military Plaza and a few years later, Alamo Plaza was landscaped with trees and a gazebo, driving the vendors from their two most profitable venues. The council allowed the stands to operate only in Milam Plaza, on the west side, adjacent to the "Reservation," the city's zone of tolerance for prostitution. Yet the vendors openly defied these restrictions, emboldened by Anglo support and patronage. While city archives offer few details about their work, a photo taken about 1905 clearly testifies to their presence on Alamo Plaza (see fig. 2). The lackadaisical enforcement reflected interelite conflicts between tourist pro-

motors eager for picturesque attractions and health officials concerned about racial contagion.⁴²

Although demographic and economic patterns of the late nineteenth century seemed to promise the eventual assimilation of the Southwest into Anglo society, new waves of migration in the first three decades of the twentieth century redoubled the efforts of urban reformers. Between the pull of jobs in southwestern agriculture and industry and with the push of revolutionary fighting, more than a million people born in Mexico were living north of the border by 1930. As a result, the need to assimilate Mexicans into U.S. society gained new urgency among settlement house workers and academics such as University of Texas home economics professor Jet Winters. The new emphasis reflected changing notions of urban hygiene, focused on specific diseases rather than a vague sense of environmental and moral order, as well as a desire to mobilize the Mexican population for the goal of modernization. While attempting to indoctrinate ethnic women to the delights of New England cooking—baked beans instead of frijoles—they also sought to improve the conditions of home kitchens, the better to recruit domestic workers.⁴³

Restricting Mexican food within the well-defined urban boundaries of a restaurant also promoted the ideal of assimilation. Of course, formal restaurants had long served the ethnic community. In 1877, San Antonio's first city directory referred visitors to an upscale Mexican restaurant on the main plaza called *El Globo Potosino* (The Balloon of San Luis Potosí, a fabled silver mine), but it was soon replaced by French establishments. At the time, Anglos preferred to sample Mexican food in the streets, as a picturesque form of culinary tourism. Mexican restaurants gained a crossover clientele only when they were marketed by Anglos. Otis Farnsworth's Original Mexican Restaurant, founded in San Antonio about 1900, employed tuxedoed waiters who presented each enchilada and tamale individually on fine china over a pristine tablecloth. Meanwhile, D. C. Pendery and William Gebhardt sold proprietary brands of chili powder and canned chili con carne, using marketing techniques of the nascent food-processing industry to cleanse the image of contamination. These entrepreneurs set patterns for Tex-Mex food that were later accepted by many ethnic restaurateurs and that remain popular to this day.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the fate of the chili vendors was decided in large part by middle-class Mexican Americans. As San Antonio grew from 50,000 to 250,000 between 1900 and 1940, the Mexican population increased more than proportionately, from 25 percent to 40 percent. Despite these growing numbers, Depression-era politicians did little to address health problems and living conditions within the ethnic community. In 1936, west side community leaders nonplussed the Alamo centennial organizers by demanding that the city close down the chili queens. In essence, they boycotted the fantasy heritage by refusing to allow a feminized and hygienically suspect Mexican presence within the pageant's tableau of Texas history. In 1939, Maury Maverick won the mayoral election by courting the Mexican vote, yet his

nostalgic attempts to become a patron of the chili vendors won him few supporters within the ethnic community, and he lost his seat at the next election. The chili stands finally disappeared from the streets of San Antonio during World War II, as Mexican women found new jobs in the expanding garment industry that were more appealing than street vending.⁴⁵

In the Southwest, ethnic food thus provided a primitive foil for Anglo health officials and food processors to establish a particular construction of industrial sanitation as a civilized norm. Even after the chili stands had disappeared, images of gastrointestinal danger and outright criminality remained latent, waiting to be applied to subsequent generations of Latin American immigrants, including contemporary taco truck operators. A very different trajectory emerged among immigrants on the East Coast.

Italian Restaurants in New York

Unlike the “wild west” image of San Antonio’s chili queens, middle-class New Yorkers went looking for continental sophistication in visits to Italian restaurants. Of course, the urban landscape could scarcely have been more different. By the time the southern Italians began to arrive—slowly in the 1880s and 1890s, and then very rapidly after the brief depression of the 1890s—huge populations of migrants from Ireland, Germany, and the Jewish peripheries of central and eastern Europe were already present, along with smaller numbers of central and northern Italians. Moreover, New York’s political elite had considerable experience in regulating urban practices, including street food. But at the same time, demand for public dining by migrants actually declined with the resurgence of “family” dining in boarding-houses, a new institution among Italians. As Peggy Glowacki has suggested, based on her study of Chicago, “the food business most associated with Italians may well have been the least patronized by them.”⁴⁶

Unlike Mexican restaurateurs, who struggled to gain acceptance, migrants from central and northern Italy and from the Italian-speaking portions of Switzerland had long catered to middle- and upper-class New Yorkers seeking elegant “French” cuisine. The most successful of these was an Italian-speaking seaman and pastry maker, Giovanni Del-Monico, who opened a simple coffee house in 1828 and eventually transformed it into the city’s most fashionable French restaurant.⁴⁷ Only the rich and famous could secure a table at Delmonico’s, but by the 1870s, tourists and locals could find inexpensive “French and Italian” restaurants.⁴⁸ Some of these simple establishments earned fame by attracting a “bohemian” clientele of adventuresome diners, often artists and intellectuals. Maria Sermolino remembered her family table d’hôte in a Greenwich Village hotel as a place where New Yorkers, including John Barrymore and the Provincetown Playhouse actors, learned about good living from her affable father and the Italian immigrants he employed as cooks, waiters, barmen, and performers.⁴⁹

Of the 757 restaurants owned and operated by Italians in 1930s New York, few were elegant banquet halls or bohemian hangouts.⁵⁰ Most offered simple home cooking (*cucina casareccia*) to poorer immigrants in humble settings with sawdust-covered floors. Their patrons were the many migratory “men without women” who came and went with the seasonal demand for labor, often in construction.⁵¹ Some of these restaurants may have been pizzerias, although these seem to have appeared rather late, and U.S. citizens began eating in them even later. Today, the pizzeria claiming to be New York’s first and oldest proudly asserts its founding in 1905—about thirty years after Neapolitans began arriving in the city.⁵² Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, a settlement house worker in Greenwich Village, recalled the day in 1917 when voters decided the suffrage question in New York: “Someone brought in an enormous *pizza*, an Italian open pie made with anchovies and tomato paste, to cheer on the count when the polls were closed.”⁵³

For every simple restaurant, there were hundreds of cheaper dinner options. In tenement apartments immigrant women made cooking and washing for male boarders into an effective way to earn money, while still allowing them to look after children. During the early years, gender ratios among migrants were three or four men to every woman, and unlike in southern Italy, both fuel and stoves were relatively inexpensive, compared to wages, in the United States. The powerful southern Italian culture of dining in family groups thus persisted in new form.⁵⁴ Unknown in southern Italy, boarding was ubiquitous in New York. In 1905, 20 percent of all households in the Fourteenth Ward, “Little Italy,” had at least one boarder.⁵⁵ The relative decline of Neapolitan street foods thus resulted at least in part from a loss of demand to boarding.

Meanwhile, city officials worked diligently to restrict the supply. It may seem odd to speak of the waning of street foods given the pervasive image of peddlers and pushcarts in New York. Yet the carts were mobile grocery and produce stores—not mobile restaurants. Well before Italians began to arrive, Jewish and other immigrants had begun to transform food retailing in New York by decentralizing older market areas through spatially fixed (but initially illegal) pushcarts on the streets and sidewalks of residential neighborhoods.⁵⁶ By 1906, Italian immigrants constituted somewhat less than one-fourth of the pushcart operators surveyed in Manhattan. No more than 10 percent of New York pushcarts surveyed that year offered ready-to-eat comestibles such as bread, cakes, candies, ice cream, lemonade, peanuts and other nuts, pickles, sandwiches, seltzer water, and tea.⁵⁷ On most days of the year, saloon “free lunches” and indoor groceries and bakeries offering various grinders, hoagies, submarines, heroes, and *muffaletti* “to go” sold more prepared food than pushcarts and restaurants combined.⁵⁸ In 1930, restaurants were dwarfed by Italian-owned or -operated grocery stores—over ten thousand of them—and another two thousand bakeries.

The foods that appeared on New York streets point to the continued influ-

ence of seasonality for rural southerners. Although locals had been eating ice cream for well over a century, Italian immigrants soon dominated the street vending of ice creams and ices, as they did in Paris and London.⁵⁹ Although there is little evidence in Italian sources for *spumonio* and (tri-color) Neapolitan ice cream, what later came to be known as “Italian ices” almost certainly had their origins with the *sorbetti* vendors of Naples. Ice consumption there, and in the United States, was still largely seasonal and it—along with many other street snacks—were especially associated with summertime religious holidays, such as the Feast of Mount Carmel.⁶⁰ Snacks sold at religious festas in the United States included fruits, lemonade, and roasted nuts and grains (ceci, lupine, pumpkin seeds, other roasted beans).⁶¹ In New York, prohibitions against unlicensed vending were suspended annually for major Jewish and Catholic holidays.

The campaign against pushcart markets in New York closely resembled campaigns against the chili queens in San Antonio. Still, it is worth noting that, in New York, small-scale vendors attracted early hostility based on the location of their production in tenement house kitchens and basements, where ethnic cooks baked goods, shaved ice, packed nuts, roasted grains, and hung pasta to dry. Before 1910, documentary photographers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hines had revealed how foods were often prepared in unregulated domestic spaces. The 1906 Mayor’s Pushcart Commission recommended the prohibition of all basket peddling. Gradually, the employment of sons and other small boys to deliver bread daily to groceries and tenement consumers ceased, to be replaced by modern “bakery delivery” carts and trucks. Housing reformers also contributed to the disappearance from the tenement houses of the seated women vendors who had been so characteristic of Italian markets.⁶² Children filled this niche but only through the sale of chewing gum and small candy from baskets outside elevated railroad stations. Thus, while chili stands and grocery pushcarts remained common until the 1930s, in New York and Chicago, a collapse of demand and official harassment pushed the sale of prepared foods into enclosed and occasional spaces.

Conclusions

The consumption of food in public was a common urban phenomenon in the pre-modern world, including both Anglo and Hispanic societies. Although reformers in Europe and the Americas had begun to restrict such alfresco dining in the nineteenth century, plebeian street foods remained widespread in the former Spanish colonies of Mexico and southern Italy. New migrants to Mexico City or Naples quickly learned the financial and physical advantages of purchasing street foods rather than eating exclusively among loved ones in cramped, dark hovels without stoves or ventilation. Our goal in this article has been to explain why chili stands continued to be prominent among Mexicans in the United States while pizza and spaghetti, the quintessential street foods of southern Italy, moved indoors when

migrants crossed the Atlantic. We do not argue that Mexicans never opened formal restaurants, or that Italians did not sell prepared food in the streets. Still, it is striking that Mexican foods came to be associated so powerfully with street vendors in the United States, whereas the only Italian food commonly available in the streets was ice cream.

The most obvious explanation for the different outcomes is climate, since it is far more pleasant to eat outdoors in sunny San Antonio than in a New York winter. Yet environmental determinism does not take us far enough. Italian consumers did shiver in the snow going from pushcart to pushcart to purchase groceries, but they rarely found prepared foods for sale on the streets. The street foods that did spread in the United States were ice cream and the treats associated with festivals, which had been summertime specialties even in sunny Italy. Seasonality may be a more useful point of analysis here than climate, for even in the Mediterranean, harvest feasts were celebrated largely in the warm summer months.

Just as important as climate was the agency of ethnic cooks, especially women, in taking advantage of their circumstances. Such a conclusion will come as no surprise to those familiar with Hasia Diner's excellent study of food and ethnicity, which gives careful attention to the actions of Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants.⁶³ With plenty of unattached male boarders available, Italian women did not need to walk the streets or sit in the markets all day to earn money for themselves and their families. Women were in scarce supply, and the value of their domestic labor increased with migration. Street work may also not have been particularly appealing for those women who had to care for young children. By contrast, Mexican chili vendors found a lucrative market among tourists in the plazas of San Antonio. Boosters tacitly encouraged such commerce to emphasize their connections to exotic Mexico. In New York, by contrast, the "basket vendors" and the home producers of foods marketed on the streets faced relentless harassment from reformers and policemen. Thus, consumer demand favored family dining among Italian immigrants but outdoor vendors in Mexican cities.

Yet the most fundamental result of this study emerges in the differences of governance and racialization between European immigrant and colonized Mexican minorities. Thus, we must balance our focus on agency by giving due attention to the importance of historical contingency and structural constraints in culinary encounters. Under conditions of conquest, the foods of the powerful do not always prevail, or tamales might have been forgotten already after the Spanish conquest. In fact, sales of tamales and other street foods was a thoroughly multiethnic occupation in San Antonio. But in part as a result of these persistent urban patterns, Mexicans continued to be perceived as a danger that had to be subjugated, long after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. By contrast, Neapolitans arrived in cities with structures of marketing already well established by earlier immigrants. Moreover, Italians sparked the interest of middle- and upper-class consumers who were more

familiar with tourism in Italy than they were with the immigrants arriving on their shores. The differing images of checkered tablecloths and chili queens reflect the divergent culinary outcomes of people moving across borders and borders moving across people.

Notes

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3. For social science comparisons of recent migrations, see Joel Perlman, *Italians Then, Mexicans Now: Immigrant Origins and Second-Generation Progress, 1890 to 2000* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007). For deeper historical connections, see Donna Gabaccia, “Making Foods Italian in the Hispanic Atlantic” (unpublished manuscript).
4. Donna R. Gabaccia, “Inventing Little Italy,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6 (2007): 7–42; Richard A. García, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929–1941* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991).
5. Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Meredith Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views on Food and the World by Working-Class Mexican and Mexican-American Women* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006).
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8. We have depended heavily on “local color” descriptions and illustrations in Francesco De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi di Napoli e contorno (Customs and Usages in Naples and Surroundings)* (1853–1858; repr., Milan: Longanesi, 1977) and photographs selected from *Sull'alimentazione del popolo minuto in Napoli (On the Foods of the Lower Classes of Naples)* (Naples: Stamperia dell a R. Università, 1869), in Germana Militerni Nardone, *L'ultima cucina napoletana (The Latest Neapolitan Cuisine)* (Naples: Guida, 2003).
9. Egano Lambertini, Enrico Volpe, and Antonio Guizzaro, *La cucina nella storia di Napoli: Venticinque secoli di gastronomia nella storia e nel costume di una città (The Cuisine and the History of Naples: Twenty-Five Centuries of Gastronomy in the History and the Customs of a City)* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Cuzzolin, 1996).
10. Carol Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 16.
11. Alberto Consiglio, “Maccaronaro, acquerello anonimo della fine del secolo scorso—Napoli” (“A Macaroni Maker, an Anonymous Watercolor from the End of the Last Century in Naples”), in *La storia dei maccheroni (The History of Macaroni)* (Naples: Ed. Moderne, 1959); De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 545–55.

12. Luigi Villari, *Italian Life in Town and Country* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), 55. See also images in Consiglio, *La storia dei maccheroni*.
13. Lambertini, Volpe, and Guizzaro, *La cucina nella storia di Napoli*, 92–102; Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Spaghetti Dinner: A History of Spaghetti Eating and Cooking* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 195), 17–24.
14. De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 341.
15. Francis E. Clark, *Our Italian Fellow Citizens: In Their Old Homes and Their New* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1919), 200–201; De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 42.
16. De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 336.
17. “Vi Che Pizza no tornese, Magnatella a sto paese,” Pelliccia, Scena di vita napoletana Napoli, Muse di San Martino (Scene of Neapolitan Life, Naples, Museum of San Martino), in De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 192.
18. Much of the literature on the histories of pasta and pizza are based on mythology more than solid historical evidence. But see Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban, *Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Franco La Cecla, *La pasta e la pizza (Pasta and Pizza)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).
19. De Bourcard, *Usi e costumi*, 493.
20. *Ibid.*, 341, 795.
21. For a critical look at travelers in Italy, see Ottavio Cavalcanti, *Il materiale, il corporeo, il simbolico: Cultura alimentare ed Eros nel Sud (The Material, the Corporeal, the Symbolic: Alimentary Culture and Eros in the South)* (Roma: Gangemi Editore, n.d., ca. 1988), 32, 46–47.
22. George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea: Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy* (1901; repr., Evanston, IL: Marlboro Press/Northwestern, 1991), 62; Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria* (New York: Modern Library, n.d., ca. 1915), 73–75.
23. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Feste patronali in Sicilia (Patron Saint Festivals in Sicily)* (Turin: Clausen, 1900).
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25. Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 25–43.
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28. Brantz Mayer, *Mexico As It Was and As It Is* (New York: J. Winchester, 1844), 21.
29. José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, *Obras IX—Novelas (Works IX—Novels)*, ed. Felipe Reyes Palacios (México, DF: UNAM, 1982), 226, 308.
30. Mayer, *Mexico As It Was*, 16.
31. Antonio García Cubas, *El libro de mis recuerdos (The Book of My Memories)* (México, DF: Arturo García Cubas, 1905), 170, 205, 239, 286.
32. Martín González de la Vara, *La historia del helado en México (The History of Ice Cream in Mexico)* (México, DF: Maas y Asociados, 1989), 41.
33. John C. Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization in Sixteenth Century Spanish America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Daniel Arreola, *Tejano South Texas:*

- A Mexican American Cultural Province* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Anne Staples, “Orden y Buen Policia: Nineteenth-Century Efforts to Regulate Public Behavior (Tlaxotlalpan, Veracruz, and Mexico City at Mid-Century),” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance*, ed. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 115–26.
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 35. Jesús F. de la Teja, *San Antonio de Béxar: A Community on New Spain’s Northern Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).
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 42. Jeffrey M. Pilcher, “Who Chased Out the ‘Chili Queens’? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943,” *Food and Foodways* 16 (July 2008): 173–200.
 43. Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33–39.
 44. Robb Walsh, *The Tex-Mex Cookbook: A History in Recipes and Photos* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 64–74.
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