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A tavola, Glenn! Food and social relations among the Sicilians

The last few decades we have seen a rapidly growing interest in food. In Sweden most evenings we can watch one or two TV-programs about food and cooking. Very often the focus is on Italian food. With traditional Italian music in the background and views of beautiful landscapes or picturesque villages these programs invite us to take part in a tempting food experience. Moreover, cookery-books flood the market and travel agencies advertise culinary tourism offering memorable local eating and drinking experiences, hands-on cooking classes, food festivals, winery visits, and shopping for regional specialties. Yet another popular trend is the central role food and eating has in crime fiction, like Andrea Camilleri´s series about the Sicilian commissario Montalbano where food is an important leifmotif (see e.g. Michelis 2010).

Within the anthropological discipline, though, food has long been of interest and food production, preparation, distribution and consumption have been studied from various perspectives. In the following I will discuss commensality as a way of studying interactions between humans¹. As Mary Douglas (1972:61) once wrote:

“If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries”.

Commensality

Finding oneself in Sicily without a watch, there is absolute no problem in knowing when it is one o’clock, that is, lunchtime and the pivotal point of family life. Very suddenly, all activity seems to stop, work places and shops are closed, and streets are emptied. On one occasion I wondered why the streets were already so empty at noon. Then I realised that I had forgotten that summer time had begun and the clocks were advanced – it was already one o’clock. On the beach in the summer it is the same thing. From being very crowded and noisy in the morning, it suddenly turns into a very silent and deserted place when everybody leaves for lunch. For three or four hours society appears to stand still. Not until around four o’clock in the wintertime and five o’clock in the hot summertime are the shops’ iron gratings raised again with a bang, and people and cars begin to fill the streets.

The following deals with the great importance Sicilians give to food and to the sharing of meals. Data was collected during totally 18 months of anthropological fieldwork among a fishing population in western Sicily in the late 90ies. The analogy between the organisation of food and meals on the one hand and the social organisation on the other will be shown. It will be demonstrated that just as the ingredients of a dish are not exchangeable but fixed, various dishes are strictly kept apart, and the diet as such has little flexibility, so too with the make-up of social categories and social groupings (cf. Douglas 1982:82ff). The meal as a social and cultural institution marks who are the persons one is closest to, and the sharing of food ensures the survival of this group of persons both socially and materially, according to Counihan (1999:13). To this I would like to add culturally as well, as the sharing supports the idea of the Sicilian family as the cultural norm.

¹ This contribution is a revised version of part of my doctoral thesis La Famiglia – The Ideology of Sicilian Family Networks (2005).
There is a saying according to which Italians do not eat to live but live to eat. However, not only do people often gather to share a meal, but they also enjoy talking about food and sharing recipes. Many times I have listened to friends’ endless talk about what they have eaten lately or intend to eat. They usually have very firm opinions about how various dishes should be prepared, and they like to tell about it and to compare their way of cooking with how others prepare the same dishes, though the differences are generally minimal. (The notebook I always kept within easy reach could then be lent to whoever needed to write down a recipe.) This goes for men as well as women, in spite of most men laughingly boasting about only having the theoretical, not the practical, knowledge. I have also seen small children in restaurants having enough knowledge to tell the waiters how they wanted their food to be prepared. The same genuine and detailed interest is found in the Montalbano novels, where “the ingredients are minutely itemised and sometimes even the process of cooking is accurately described” (Mäntymäki 2004:250).

Young people of both sexes take very little part in common household chores in their parental homes. This applies to cooking, too, meaning that newly married women have to take on this responsibility with very little or no training beforehand. The theoretical knowledge, shared by so many, will of course be of great help then. This theoretical training is quite different from many other cultures, where cooking is learned through playing and doing from an early age.

Though there is high priority on food, new food, like foreign food, does not seem to be tempting. I once participated in a meeting with a teacher who was to take a group of teenagers on a language course to Ireland and who encouraged her young charges to take some food with them on their journey. Later she explained to me that, according to her experience, the youngsters would not be very happy with the food abroad. This accords with people’s
generally being very passionate about Sicilian cooking and expressing in various ways their conviction that it is the very best, and that even for a foreigner it must be preferable compared to any other food (cf. Counihan 1999:166). In fact, food was one of the few things people expressed pride in when discussing with me what was good about Sicily, and when they are forced to leave Sicily due to unemployment, the things people miss, apart from their families, are the sun, the sea, and not the least the food.

Like other scholars Donna Gabaccia has pointed to the deeply rooted interest in food as living on also among Italian immigrants in America, and she writes that they are described by themselves as well as by others, as saving on clothing, housing, recreation, and entertainment rather than on food (2000:102). In the above mentioned TV programmes about Italian food the great regional variety is often pointed at and I found a general pride in the local food, which finds expression in daily talk as well as in connection with for example local markets and festivities of different kinds (Carlestål 2006). A special dish, a kind of cheese, and so forth, may be discussed in terms of how it is prepared and how it tastes in various regions/villages. These efforts made to stick to traditional dishes even when living far away from home and the pride in their local food, I found to be comparable with Ruth Bär Mätzener’s argument that ‘[l]oyalty to certain dishes can almost be compared with patriotism’ (1999:56). In a similar vein Michelis writes that in the *commissario Montalbano* series food and eating are used to explore identity (2010:150).

According to Douglas, the meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it, ‘[h]ence the strong arousal power of a threat to weaken or confuse that category’ (1972:80). In Sicily traditional patterns are stuck to, and just like novelties, fast food is avoided. The same goes for canned and frozen foodstuffs. Fresh food is always preferred, making the seasonal cycle of the cooking very clear. Further, food is always served as a distinct dish with a distinct name, and the basic structure of various recipes is shared. Each *pasta* recipe, for example, not only has specified ingredients and a distinct name, but it also specifies which form of *pasta* to use (there is a great number of different forms of *pasta* to be found even in the smallest provision shop). Indeed, the strong regularities in the consumption of food give the impression that not only do people eat at the same time, but they also eat the same kind of food.

Eating is definitely a social, not an individual, practice and people pity the person who has to eat alone. The norm everyone seems to subscribe to is that the family should share a well-composed meal twice a day, making snacks and sweets between these two meals infrequent. On weekdays it is the nuclear family that eats together, and on Sundays and holidays a larger group of kin members gathers to share the most elaborate meal of the week. The difference is less the kind of food that is offered than the number of dishes. For the woman, another difference is logically the time required for preparing these lavish holiday meals. She may have attended an early mass in her parish church and after that quickly returned home to start the long preparations for the luncheon in order to have everything ready at one o’clock. The custom is that young families visit the older generation on these occasions (cf. Minicuci 1989:299), very often alternating between visiting her family and his. ‘I get lazy on Sundays, I do not want to cook, but to relax,’ a young female informant told me. Only when the older generation gets too old to organise these meals does the younger generation take over the responsibility. This system is yet another support for the newly married woman, who has yet to become a fully trained cook.

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2 *Campanilismo* is the Italian term for local patriotism which according to E.N. Cohen “is one of the defining characteristics of Mediterranean and Italian society” (1977).
The meal *par excellence* is the wedding meal which reflects the fact that marriage is without comparison the most important of all life-cycle rituals. As my informants used to say, to see one’s children getting married is *lo scopo della vita* (the purpose of life). These are big celebrations often with one, two or more hundred relatives and friends coming together and sharing an overwhelming meal.

Thus, people follow the same pattern with regard to the structure of the meals as such, and to eating with the people they are closest to, meaning that who one shares a meal at home with and who one does not is to a large extent a matter of relatedness. When friends arrange to meet for a meal on a Saturday evening, for example, it is usually to have supper out, more rarely in their homes. In summertime they may gather for an outdoor picnic, which in Sicily means a full meal with several courses. Eating out seems to constitute a bridge between those with whom one shares a meal in private and those with whom one never eats (cf. Douglas 1972:66). When my neighbours once realised that I was all on my own on a Sunday due to the fact that my daughter was in Naples on a school trip, I was invited to share not just any meal but the week’s most important meal with them. My dear neighbours who said that I should not eat on my own on a Sunday thereby transgressed the norm that in private it is the family that gathers. So there I was, a foreigner whom they had met for the first time only half a year ago, sitting together at the table with the family who had come together in three generations. This is certainly not a matter of course in a society where the family is a much closed unit as it is in Sicily, reflecting the general and very distinct dichotomy of the private and the public.

It goes without saying that food has a prominent place in the life of the Sicilians, and being a good cook is definitely a way of gaining prestige. It is in this context that we find the real locus of family life. Here, at the dining table and as provider of the important food, the
mother, who generally takes great pride in her cooking, achieves her supreme role as she turns her husband’s income into food. Despite the fact that single family members have the accepted possibility of objecting to her cooking and making demands on her to prepare special courses for them, she is the one who controls and distributes the life-giving substance. The meal becomes the most important symbol of the mother, and it shows very concretely her centrality within her family. In fact, on the level of the nuclear family this is a strongly mother-focused society.

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The visual aspect of the meal is not important. It is not the total setting but the food that gets everyone’s attention. Thus, not much effort is given to setting the table. Before eating, though, the dining table is always covered by a large tablecloth, regardless of whether or not it is clean and ironed, which is then removed immediately after the meal. Disposable plates and glasses are often used. Cutlery and paper napkins are placed in the middle of the table, and everyone helps themselves. There are no table decorations, and likewise the dishes are usually not much garnished or in any other way given careful touches as regards decoration. There is no general fixed seating order.

With very few exceptions, everything eaten is transformed from its natural state. When raw vegetables are served, for example, they are covered with olive oil or dressing; raw meat or fish is never served; and the fresh fruit, which is served after the main course, is peeled, cut by a knife and eaten one piece at a time – one does not, for example, bite into an apple (fresh grapes and cherries are the exceptions, they are eaten as they are).

Cheese, olives, ham, salame, and other small dishes like various pickled vegetables may be put on the table as antipasti or extras. It is not passed around – no food is – but is just there for anyone to serve him- or herself while awaiting the pasta. The pasta, the first course and the heavier part of the meal, without which a real meal would be incomplete, must be eaten immediately when it is ready in order to be good. It is the mother who puts the big pasta bowl on the table and who, without any strict order, distributes the contents to each and every one.

In spite of receiving huge amounts of pasta, everyone has soon finished their portions. Even if the Sicilians really enjoy good food, they do not seem to find it necessary to enjoy it slowly. Since everyone starts eating as soon as they have been served, the mother may hardly have time to sit down and eat her own pasta before it is time to serve the main course. Especially when there are guests, and thus much serving to do, it may be that the mother/wife does not have time to sit down at the table at all.

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3 I define matrifocality, as found among my informants, as a very strong cultural, affective, and structural primacy of the mother and the mother-child bond on the nuclear family level, while on the level of the larger kin group it is the men who have a well-defined and culturally significant role.

4 There is a general preference among Sicilians for ‘culture’ compared to ‘nature’. Just as raw food is always transformed from its natural state before it is eaten, the same preference is expressed e.g. in the urban ethos, which ever since the Greek period has given Sicily a strong urban character. According to this often-described ethos, cultura e civilta (culture and civilization) are to be found only in towns and cities, while nature/countryside is regarded as their distinct antithesis – it is an uncivilized world, where disdained physical work is carried out, and where nobody wants to live.
Different courses are not served simultaneously, but in strict order. Nor are they served on the same plate; a clean plate accompanies each course. Even just a taste of a minor dish requires another plate. On Sundays, for example, when there are several dishes on the table, including sweet baked goods for dessert, the amount of dirty dishes or disposable plates therefore gets very large. The pattern is the same when a picnic replaces the usual Sunday lunch. I have partaken in very lavish picnics where several courses have been served including big cakes and where at the end of the day the amount of disposables was really huge.

Beverages are not central to the meal and thus not much commented on, though attention may be paid to a homemade or especially good wine. Water is the daily beverage. For Sunday lunch, besides water, soft drinks and a bottle of wine will be on the table, too. The people at the table help themselves.

Each family member expects the mother to cook for him or her according to his or her liking. Eavesdropping while buying my own food, I would often hear women buying various products for various family members, because ‘my son prefers this and my daughter that’, and so forth. When I ran into an acquaintance one day, she told me that she had prepared the pasta in three different ways on that very day: one way for her daughter, another way for her son, and a third way for her husband. She did not say anything about herself. Thus, it is common that the mother, who knows so well the preferences of each and every person, may end up preparing alternative dishes for the very same meal for various family members. Constance Cronin once saw a son refuse three successive courses prepared by his mother. Each time, the mother would return to the kitchen and prepare something else according to the preference of her son (1970:91, 111). One of my informants said:

‘Sometimes when I have already prepared the supper, my husband comes and he says that he does not want this, he wants, let’s say, poached eggs. Then I have to
make poached eggs. Because he does not want what I have already prepared, he wants eggs. Or maybe he prefers two fried fishes, or a fish soup. In order not to quarrel, I will make it. I always do.’

Nor is refusing or not finishing a dish regarded as bad table manners, but individuality is accepted when it comes to choices within the frames of the fixed system, that is, as long as it does not threaten the system as such. While eating, anyone may also rise without excusing him- or herself. Everyone is allowed to talk and the voices are often loud, as they have to make themselves heard in spite of the television set which seems always to be turned on. As soon as anyone has finished the meal, she or he may leave the table. It may be a rather noisy and very familiar atmosphere, far from formal.

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Even if food is always and everywhere necessary for the survival of the human species, the cultural value put on food and meals varies. Here I have tried to show the great significance given by my informants to the food, the meal, and the eating together but also the analogy between food patterns and patterns of social relations: as there is little flexibility when it comes to food habits but loyalty to tradition is strong, so too when it comes to the social organisation. Without any comparison whatsoever in Sicily it is the family which is the most important social unit and it is the mother who is the hub of this unit. At the kitchen table, as the controller and distributor of the important food, she gets her esteemed position when calling her family A tavola!

Reference list


Bildtexter

Bild I – Women are responsible for the cooking except when it comes to outdoor grilling, which, as in most parts of the world, is the responsibility of men.

Bild II – Sunday outdoor lunch somewhere in the Italian countryside.

Bild III – Distribution of the pasta on a pilgrimage.