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THE MEANING OF “DIET:”  
A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND ITALIAN FOOD  
CULTURES AND LINKS TO OBESITY

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the discrepancy between the rising obesity rate in America and the focus on dieting by comparing American and Italian food cultures. My hypothesis is that in State College, Pennsylvania and Lewisburg, West Virginia, Americans' perception of *diet* exemplifies the fundamental difference between American and Italian food cultures because Americans see *diet* as an action with weight loss intent, while Italians see it as a lifestyle. It is this seemingly small cultural difference that embodies the different relationships between consumer and seller, and consumer and food, in both countries. It shows the importance of past and contemporary influences in affecting the modern-day diet of a country's culture, and thus the health of the country's populace. The American and Italian food cultures are complex and intertwined with a myriad of influences which I am unable to cover within the scope of this research. This is primarily an anthropological study of both contemporary cultures, with my observations and responses guiding the similarities and differences between American and Italian food cultures and the links to rising obesity rates.

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## Chapter 1

### Obesity in America and Italy

This research compares and contrasts the food cultures of America and Italy in order to draw a conclusion about a contemporary problem: increasing rates of an overweight and obese population in America. According to The Fund for America's Health report "F as in Fat 2009: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America" (2009), 67% of Americans are obese or overweight. More Americans are obese than are overweight (32.7%). Obesity rates have grown from 15% in America in 1980, to more than double 1980's rate, with two-thirds of the states having over 25% obesity rates.

In 2007, the US had the highest percentage of obese or overweight citizens out of a list of 29 countries, while Italy's was the fifth lowest. Italy remains among the leanest of all industrialized countries, with 18% of obese or overweight adults, and 8.5% obese adults, according to World Health Reports (2008).

America's contemporary diet is shown to be maladaptive by the definition provided by Kandel, *et al.* (1980). Maladaptiveness is the failure for an individual or population to adapt to nutritional changes or deficiencies in the environment, thereby losing well-being. This can take the form of scurvy, rickets, pellagra, dental caries, hypertension, coronary heart disease, cancer, and obesity. A maladaptive diet is clearly observed in our increasing rates of an overweight and obese population.

High poverty levels correlate with increasing rates of obesity and related diseases. The National Health Statistics Reports (Schoenborn and Heyman 2009) found that poverty increases the chance of fair or poor health, including overweight and obesity rates. The states in the South have the lowest percentage of healthy BMI weight compared to states in the Northeast, Midwest,

and West. Eight of the ten states with the highest adult obesity rates are in the South, including Mississippi at the top for the past five years with 32.5%, and West Virginia in third place at 31.1%. This paradox of weight and class shows the misdistribution of dietary elements in food. Kandel, *et al.* (1980) mentions a study by Garn and Clark (1974) that shows that poor women of a different racial background than “white” are more often overweight or obese than rich women. This is the opposite case in poor countries, where rich women are often fatter than poor women. (“F as in Fat 2009” 2009)

In a report on obesity published by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, (“Obesity” 2009), Dr. David L. Katz was quoted as saying, “This report reaffirms that obesity is a danger both abundantly clear and almost universally present. It truly is a public health crisis of the first order, driving many of the trends in chronic disease, in particular the ever-rising rates of diabetes.” Because human bodies have adapted to the environment of our ancestors, we are consuming too many calories for our bodies to burn. Throughout most of human history, humans have been highly active, while consuming few calories, which were hard to procure. Society today has abundant calories, many of them in refined or highly caloric form, while little to no activity is the daily norm. (Kandel, *et al.* 1980)

The reason cited by Kandel, *et al.* (1980) for obesity thirty years ago is repeated today: overconsumption of food. The main food culprits in 1980 were also similar, if not identical, to those of today: carbohydrate-rich snacks, too much between-meal eating, and overconsumption of all foods, especially carbohydrates and sugars. The 1980s saw the rise in obesity rates and, as a result, in health food movements. It was suggested that the growing number and popularity would be enough to tip the scales to healthier national weight. This, clearly, has not happened. (Kandel, *et al.* 1980)

Obesity rates are increasing, and are not expected to decrease. According to Streib (2007), whose information is from a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), the

number of overweight and obese adults in America is expected to grow by 40% over the next decade. In the 2007 National Health Statistics Reports (Schoenborn and Heyman 2009), three different groups' weight losses or gains were recorded from 2006 to 2007. The trends showed that the health of someone already overweight or obese is more likely to stay the same or degrade. If a person's health is excellent, very good, or good, it will not decrease, and will perhaps improve.

World-wide adult obesity trends in industrialized nations seem to be, on the whole, increasing. For example, the Italian childhood obesity rate is the highest in European nations (Hale 2003), showing that perhaps new, changing diet trends are occurring fairly quickly in Italy. Childhood obesity rates of other European countries are on the rise, as well. ("OECD" 2009) (Livingstone 2001)

In conclusion, the percentages of obese adult Americans and Italians are increasing. A high poverty level is positively correlated with higher rates of overweight and obese populations; the highest percentages of obese Americans are in poorer southern states. Obesity rates among adult Italians are among the lowest of all industrialized countries, but Italian childhood obesity rates are the highest.

## Chapter 2

### Origins and Definitions of Mediterranean Diet

A diet that has gained popularity in modern America since 1975, and which is inherently connected to Italy is the Mediterranean diet. To speak broadly about a Mediterranean diet is to include every country that borders the Mediterranean Sea. The diet that became popular in America is based off of a study carried out in 1954 by Ancel Keys of Minnesota University, prompted by his observation that the well-fed businessmen of Minnesota were dying young of heart attacks, while the poor people of Naples, Italy were not dying nearly as much from heart disease. Keys and his colleagues began the Seven Countries Study, studying the diets, lifestyles, and health of men ages 40-59 in seven different countries. (Blackburn 2009)

The results in Keys and Keys 1959 concluded that saturated fats in animal meats increased the risk of heart disease, and high daily intake of fresh fruits and vegetables reduced the risk. These conclusions were written in *Eat Well and Stay Well* in 1959. When the book was translated into Italian in 1962, Italians regarded it with suspicion. Northern Italians, especially, did not take well to the recommendations, for they did not want to dine like the southerners, who they saw as poor and uneducated. Later, in 1975, Keys reworded his dietary recommendations to include the phrase “Mediterranean diet,” which was more acceptable to northerners. As a consequence, the two transformations to the Italian diet were to replace the use of lard and animal fats with extra virgin olive oil, and to implant the virtues of their traditional diet ever more firmly in the national consciousness. One thing it did not encourage was to consume less meat.

Pacanowski (2006) *Types of Food Consumed and Perception of the Mediterranean Diet in Italy* supports this. (Dickie 2007) (Pacanowski 2006)

A culture's diet does not necessarily reflect the culture's food preferences. Even though the Grecians and Italians had the longest life span in the Keys and Keys (1959) study, their environment did not adequately (to their minds) provide a highly-desired food: animal meats. This very lack was connected to a lower amount of saturated fats in their diet and was a determining factor in high average lifespan, though the countries' inhabitants did not know this at the time. Even though the Mediterranean diet is popular in its marketed form today, and heralded for its weight-maintaining powers while allowing a daily glass (or two) of wine, the original followers would have preferred something more akin to the high-protein diet of the United States. (Keys and Keys 1959) (Montanari 2006)

From 1958-1970, Ancel Keys and his colleagues carried out surveys of how heart attacks and strokes related to the lifestyles and diets of populations of men ages 40-59 in seven countries: Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Finland, Netherlands, U.S.A., and Japan. Keys and Keys (1959) found that the Grecians on the island of Crete were the healthiest of all the populations, with the adult life expectancy among the highest in the world, and the rates of diet-related chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease and certain cancers, among the lowest in the world. They concluded that the active lifestyle and diet, which was low in saturated fats and high in fruits, vegetables, and legumes, led to a long and healthy life. In 1975, Ancel Keys published the book *How to Eat Well and Stay Well the Mediterranean Way*, in which the Mediterranean diet is defined for the American public in an easily accessible way for the first time. (Blackburn 2009) (Parasecoli 2004)

The Mediterranean diet is described as rich in vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, cereal grains and other plant foods. Fresh fruit is the typical daily dessert, olive oil is the principal source of fat, and dairy products, fish and poultry are consumed a few times or less a week. Fish is consumed much more regularly than red meat, which is consumed a few times or less a month, as are eggs. Wine is consumed in low or moderate amounts almost every day. This diet has a

low amount of saturated fats, something found copiously in animals, and a high amount of monounsaturated fats, found in olive oil. (McConnell 1987)

The original and often-named “traditional” Mediterranean diet was formed by the active lifestyle of the Crete inhabitants and by the Mediterranean environment. The Grecians did physical work for many hours in the fields every day, which lowered the rates of overweight and obesity, and the lands of Crete, southern Italy, and surrounding regions are characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, rainy winters. Vegetables like spinach, cabbage, and broccoli withstood the seasonal temperature changes and summer droughts. Garlic, onions, peppers, lentils, and broad beans ripened fast in the wet spring and then dried well in the hot summer. Red meat was rare because year-round pastureland in such hilly areas and fodder for large herds was difficult to come by, and so, being situated on the Mediterranean Sea, fish was more abundant and eaten more often. (McConnell 1987)

What is known as the “Mediterranean triad” provided about 80% of the daily calories in the traditional Mediterranean diet. The triad is composed of olive oil, grains, and grapes (or, more specifically, wine). The complex sugars from starches like cereal grains, legumes, and unrefined carbohydrates raise the levels of good high-density lipoprotein, or HDL, cholesterol, and lower the levels of bad low-density lipoprotein, or LDL, cholesterol. The source of fats for the Grecians and southern Italians was almost entirely the monounsaturated source from olives and olive oil, which lowers blood cholesterol levels and helps to protect against heart disease. Finally, grapes are a good source of natural sugars, and do not lose nutritional value when dried as raisins or manufactured into wine. (McConnell 1987) (The American Heart Association Online 2009)

## Chapter 3

### Overarching Differences between American and Italian Food Cultures

Through observation and daily interaction with Italians, I found that the word *diet* signifies eating habits characterized by genuine pleasure, respect, quality, and pride in Italy. In America, by contrast, *diet* is often synonymous to losing weight. Even when my American respondents associated it with lifestyle, the act of dieting was still an assumed attribute of American food culture. Two-thirds of Americans are obese or overweight, and dieting to lose weight is common in America. In Italy, less than one-fifth of the population is obese or overweight, and dieting to lose weight is rare. In examining differences between America's and Italy's food cultures, one point that is considered is how closely modern Italians follow the once-traditional Mediterranean diet. In America, the Mediterranean diet can often be found advertised as a way to lose weight – whether by following it as a lifestyle, or by following specific meal guidelines that incorporate the foods postulated by Ancel Keys (Keys and Keys 1959).

Major differences between Italy's and America's food cultures can be seen in different characteristics of Industrial Ages, past food influences that have shaped the modern cuisine, a difference in focus on quantity versus quality, and the contemporary food systems of each country. "Food quality" is a broad and objective term. In this study, it connotes wholesomeness, nutritional density to kcal, pleasing sensory attributes, mindful preparation, freshness, and inherent food safety (such as the absence of pesticides or antibiotics). *Quality* also assumes an environmental stewardship in how the food is procured or produced, and connotes a cultural and historical connection between food and the people. While these influences have been important in shaping food culture, and in some ways contribute to America's modern obesity problem, they are not comprehensive. Each country has a complex history, and everything from political to

religious and social to industrial reasons determine where the populations of each country stand today in terms of health and obesity rates. The trends and events that are mentioned in this research have nuances that I was unable to consider within the scope of this study. The trends that are discussed are included because they relate to the observations in Italy, and to the interviews and observations in America.

My conclusions of the eating habits and perceptions of the Mediterranean diet of Italians in Florence and Milan are based on experience and seven months' observation in Florence and Milan, Italy, Pacanowski's (2006) thesis on Mediterranean dietary perceptions of Italians, and background research. A general trend is that Italian food culture includes specific guidelines about times to eat certain meals, and how to eat specific foods. The Mediterranean diet of Ancel Keys is often followed in modern times, with the exception of higher consumption of protein and refined grains. Overall, I observed that Italians in Florence and Milan show respect and place importance in their food culture by the division of meals, a lack of individualized snacking or eating, and traditions such as mealtimes and *caffè* as moments to gather with friends or family for company and conversation.

In America, my interviews included questions related to how respondents perceived the American diet and their personal insights into obesity, while reflecting on the differences between American and Italian diets. I also observed and conducted background research. My interview style was casual, so tangents and other related opinions were considered equally. This is a sample of convenience, chosen because I have access to the above cities. They represent two different environments and possibly different mindsets, and cannot be said to represent nation-wide trends. All personal names used are changed from the original.

Roughly half of the respondents understood *diet* as a lifestyle, which differs from my hypothesis. On the other hand, everyone assumed that the average American diet requires dieting. The top two mentioned factors were that Americans eat too many processed foods *or*

Italians ate natural foods, and that Italians' lifestyles are less stressful than Americans' or the American culture is built around being as efficient and fast as possible, including eating. In general, many answers seemed to touch upon the differences between Italian and American relationships to food. No one mentioned anything about the American diet being healthy or good in any general way, which is a direct contrast compared to Italians. Some Americans I interviewed could be said to portray a sort of shame regarding the American diet; no one voiced pride. In contrast to Italy, foods that were mentioned as part of the American diet were never regional specialties, as seen in Italy, but hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, or fast food. Often, people mentioned what is *in* the foods, or the bad quality of them.

Other trends mentioned were that people do not have time to cook, and that present, unhealthy eating habits are a change from the healthy ones of the past. The latter opinion was only mentioned by adults. Time and convenience were often cited as the reasons why people eat prepackaged, processed, or fast food. These food types were almost always mentioned, and were considered to be unhealthy foods and to constitute a large part in the American diet. Responses confirmed that eating out at a sit-down or fast food restaurant is common where it used to be a luxury.

The majority of both undergraduates and adults have a personal eating pattern, but every response was different. This is another opposing factor when comparing Italian and American food cultures. The Italian food culture can be generalized by typical food types and even times to eat. In contrast, American food culture can be generalized and loosely defined, in terms of eating patterns, through a lack of a nationally-common structure and individualized eating preferences and patterns.

My original hypothesis is that the concept of *diet* epitomizes the differences between Italian and American food cultures. Even though American respondents (especially adults'), tended to view the Mediterranean diet as a lifestyle, all but one person believed that the average

American will diet at least once a year. This shows that *diet* exemplifies a crucial difference between food cultures.

Finally, when asked to extrapolate upon the final question, I found trends in the diverse answers that I received. These include: the lack of Americans' exercise as opposed to Italians' frequent walking, mentioned by slightly more adults than undergraduates; a factor within what is defined as the "market-defined food sphere;" and that Italians eat natural and healthy foods compared to Americans who eat processed and unhealthy foods. Overall, when comparing adults and undergraduates, the biggest differences are in multiple categories. More undergraduates than adults think that Italians eat less processed and more natural foods, and that the main difference is in the lack of an American food culture tradition, while Italians have a strong one. More adults than undergraduates believe that the role of exercise and transportation (by bike and foot) is an important difference between cultures.

## Chapter 4

### **Research and Observations in Florence and Milan, Italy**

My conclusions of the eating habits and perceptions of the Mediterranean diet of Italians in Florence and Milan are based on my immersion in Italian culture, seven months' observation in Florence and Milan, Italy, Pacanowski's (2006) thesis on Mediterranean dietary perceptions of Italians, and background research.

I found that the unwritten tenets of Italian food culture included specific guidelines about times to eat certain meals, and what and how to eat specific foods. The Mediterranean diet of Ancel Keys is often followed in modern times, with the exception of higher consumption of protein and refined grains (Pacanowski 2006). I also observed the Italian pride and food-knowledge that comes with a food culture that has a historical narrative behind it.

I was always told by Italians that the Mediterranean diet was not a way of eating in a certain manner in order to lose weight. In general, it seemed that following a diet to lose weight was uncommon in Italy, though not unheard of. I saw few advertisements or newspaper articles about weight-loss diets. None of my Italian coworkers or friends went on a diet while I was in Italy, and food was not commonly advertised in the Italian equivalent of "Lite," "Lo-fat," "High in fiber!" "Low-calorie," or any number of claims seen on American food. Kostioukovitch (2009: 242) wrote, "The majority of Italians are only halfheartedly interested in dietetics and alimentary chemistry," and have two basic rules that help a person maintain a healthy weight: avoid junk food (including snacks), and show no mercy for pasta that has been cooked for even one minute too long. "Pasta al dente is never fattening," (Kostioukovitch 2009:243).

Of course, Italians are as concerned as Americans are about personal appearances; in my experience, they are more concerned. Anyone who has been to Italy has noticed that Italians are

concerned with a fit, slim appearance. The common phrase *fare una bella figura* signifies the art of making a positive and attractive first impression with outward appearance. On the other hand, an overly serious attitude and attention to healthy eating “has always evoked laughter and ironic detachment,” because Italians believe “experimental trends [like diets] aren’t terribly authoritative,” (Kostioukovitch 2009: 243-244).

In restaurants and cafeterias, the two most common dishes were pasta and meat. I observed and read that Italians eat at specific times of the day, with certain dishes gracing the table for each meal. Snacking, I was told more than once, is an American thing. Not only is it individual, but American snacks are often eaten on-the-go. I observed that breakfast was a small affair, if eaten at all; lunch was never before noon, and more often around 1:00pm to 2:00pm; and dinner was around 9:00pm. 7:00pm or even 8:00pm was considered early, and I witnessed many people dining past 10:00pm on any given night.

Pasta was a lunch dish; meat was a dinner dish. Breakfast was small: a *cornetto* (a sweet danish or croissant) and a cappuccino, with friends or colleagues whenever possible. According to my observations and to Coons (2001), lunch was often *primo piatto* and *secondo piatto*, or first dish and second dish, which were pasta and fish, respectively. More often than not, I observed Italians eating only the *primo piatto* during lunch hours. The dinner, usually the *secondo piatto* of meat, was the same size or smaller in proportion to the lunch depending on what the person ate for lunch. This demonstrates the practice of balance and moderation. When eating dinner out at a restaurant, I often observed Italians eating both *primo* and *secondo piatto*. This could be because they were eating out, and so it was a special occasion (Coons 2001: 84).

Food is a serious thing to the Italians. It is a time to sit down and socialize, to linger over a lovingly-prepared meal with good friends. “The essential thing in these encounters is not the goal of satisfying one’s stomach, what in ancient times was called ‘the sin of gluttony,’ but something completely different: the act of getting together, the conversations had around the

table,” (Kostioukovitch 2009: 214). A few times when I mentioned that I had eaten a lunch or dinner alone, a fairly normal circumstance with the individualized meals of America, the Italians I spoke with expressed sadness and said, “*Che peccato*,” or, “What a pity.” Eating on-the-go was also utterly unthinkable. Gelato was the one exception, and only to be eaten at a slow, ambling pace (often, though not always, with a friend). Even at a street stand, I witnessed large groups of friends gathered around the smallest vendor, talking and eating before moving on. I found this in Florence at a stand selling *lampredotto* (a bread roll filled with cow stomach and topped with sauce), and at another lunch spot that had no seating or indoors area. An open window and counter looked out onto the street, where a person ordered a *panino* (sandwich) and drink, which was then placed on the small shelves fixed to the street walls just surrounding the window. At lunch time, this street was crowded not only because of the high quality and word-of-mouth, but because once people bought a *panino*, they sat with their friends on the curbside to eat. I even observed this one day during a light rain. Drinking the Italian *caffè*, a small espresso, was also a social affair. It was a quick period of relaxation during the day and an important moment to offer someone a *caffè* and thus show respect or friendship.

Dividing dishes, such as giving each entrée a separate plate, was important because the taste and texture of each dish must be separated from the others in order to be enjoyed to the fullest. Italians expressed their dislike of mixing food together on one plate, American or British style. Food was always served in this manner. Not once while eating in an Italian restaurant was a main entrée served like it would be in America, with the meat, potato, and vegetable served on the same plate. Even french fries, which were served nearly anywhere, were given a separate platter.

For Italians, I observed that food was serious in other ways besides eating habits. In Italy, it has always been commonly known that regions pride themselves on their respective specialties, protecting their cheeses, meats and olive oils with DOP or IGP certifications and

delivering a unique history for the origins of each typicality. Individuals prided themselves on their knowledge of what food to buy where. This regional quality and pride is one aspect that drives Italian food culture today and in the past. I experienced this more than once when, while shopping with Italian friends in Milan, they did not allow me to buy the *mortadella* meat unless it came from Bologna, or *prosciutto* meat unless it was from Parma. The products cost significantly more, and tasted significantly better. Regional specialties were found anywhere. The aforementioned *lampredotto*, sold on the street, was touted to be Florence's finest.

Overall, I observed that the Italians in Florence and Milan showed respect towards the ritual of eating that surrounds Italian food culture tradition. This was shown by the division of meals, a lack of snacking, and traditions such as mealtimes and *caffè* as times to gather with friends or family for company and conversation. Up until the present-day Italian and European childhood obesity, these habits have served the Italians well, keeping them trim, healthy, and undoubtedly happy. Hale (2003) suggested that the onset of childhood obesity was from the new popularity of fast food restaurants. There is currently not enough comprehensive or in-depth research to determine what, exactly, are driving figures of these high obesity rates (Livingstone 2001).

According to Pacanowski (2006), my observations in Italy, and Parasecoli (2004), animal meat consumption has risen in the past fifty years. Italians now regularly eat meat for dinner, and Pacanowski (2006) recorded that Italians ate more red meat when she carried out interviews in 2006 than they ate in the past. In her study, Italians also thought that meat was consumed more and vegetables and fruits consumed less in the traditional Mediterranean diet than was actually recorded by Keys and Keys (1975).

Pacanowski (2006) discovered that Roman Italians consumed refined grains more than cereal grains, and most Italians overlooked the major role that vegetables and fruits play in the traditional Mediterranean diet. I did observe, however, that fresh fruit and vegetables were

readily available, and were eaten at all meals. Additionally, according to the study, fruits and vegetables are eaten daily. In fact, a larger consumption of fruits and vegetables was reported in Pacanowski (2006) than in 1961. The study hypothesized that perhaps this higher intake is due to a higher availability of vegetables in modern times than in 1961.

In conclusion, contemporary eating habits of Italians in Florence and Milan include structure, pride, sociability, and regional knowledge. According to Pacanowski (2006), Roman Italians think that they follow Ancel Keys' Mediterranean diet. In reality, important differences differentiate their perceptions of the diet and of what Ancel Keys postulated in 1975. Italians ate more meat and refined grains today than in the original Mediterranean diet, and believed that more red meat was consumed in a traditional Mediterranean diet. Italians in Florence and Milan consumed moderate to high amounts of fruits and especially vegetables, but believed that the traditional Mediterranean diet consisted of less amounts. Overall, they understood that the Mediterranean diet is not a plan to follow in order to lose weight but instead that it is a way of living.

## Chapter 5

### **Research, Observations, and Responses to Interviews in America**

My research in America examined perceptions of the American diet and respondents' personal insights into America's obesity problem. It reflected on the differences between Italian and American diets using informants' responses as a guide. I observed Americans, did background research, and conducted interviews. My interview style was casual, so tangents and related opinions were considered equally. I compared and contrasted the responses to my questions, identifying major trends and interesting observations of respondents. This sample is a sample of convenience, chosen because I have access to both cities from which I collected data. They represent two very different environments and possibly different mindsets. State College, PA is a community born from an academic institution with a population of about 39,000, not including the undergraduates and graduates of the University, which total to about 45,000 ("State College" 2010) ("Penn" 2009). Pennsylvania's obesity rate is average compared to the rest of the nation, while State College's county, Centre, is lower than Pennsylvania's average obesity rates ("CDC" 2009 rates) ("Trust" 2009). The state of West Virginia, on the other hand, has the third highest obesity rates in America. It is a town of just under 4,000 inhabitants with a culture different than that of State College ("Lewisburg" 2010). The town of Lewisburg has not formed from an academic institution.

The data includes four separate groups: Undergraduates from Lewisburg, West Virginia and State College, Pennsylvania of the ages 18 to 22 constitute two separate groups; and adults born on or before the year 1975 from Lewisburg, WV and State College, PA are the last two groups. I have 9 WV undergraduates, 10 WV adults, 12 PA undergraduates, and 9 PA adults for

a total of 40 respondents. Names used are not participants' real names. A copy of the questions I asked in interviews follows:

### **Questions Asked:**

- 1) What does the word *diet* mean to you?
- 2) How often do you think the average American goes on some sort of a diet?
- 3) Does the concept of diet as a daily eating pattern, or eating habits, make sense to you?  
I will be asking questions based on that meaning, unless I specifically say otherwise.
- 4) Do you agree that there can be a national diet, such as a Mexican or Italian diet, or even geographical or regional, such as a Southern diet?
- 5) What is your opinion of the American diet?  
If very unresponsive, help by asking some of these but do not "force" the question:
  - a) How often do you think (the average) American eats at fast food restaurants?
  - b) How often do you think Americans eat at restaurants?
  - c) How often do you think Americans buy premade, prepackaged, or processed food?
  - d) How often do you think Americans eat "on-the-go"?
  - e) How often do you think Americans prepare a meal at home from, for the most part, scratch (raw ingredients)?
  - f) How often do you think the average American family sits down for a traditional family dinner?
- 6) Do you personally have a food pattern that you could call a diet? What kinds of food do you typically eat for breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? Snack(s)?
- 7) Could you tell you anything you know about the Mediterranean diet?

[If respond] Do you think it should be called a diet in the sense of a weight-loss plan or in the sense of daily eating habits?

[If no] That information is still useful. I want information for the next question, so I will briefly explain the Mediterranean diet before asking question number eight.

8) Do you agree or disagree that Italians follow a Mediterranean diet? Why is that?

I don't know if you already knew this, but Italians are among the leanest people out of all industrialized countries, and Americans, you probably know, are the fattest. Also, there is generally no dieting industry in Italy.

9) So why do you think Italians, overall, have a much lower obesity rate than Americans and are generally thinner? Do you think it has something to do with a difference in national diets and food cultures?

### **Summary and Interpretation of Responses**

First, the data from all four samples is analyzed. Next, I compared significant trends between undergraduate and adult samples. I declined to quantify percentages, because my samples are unrepresentative of America, or even of the cities. For simple "yes" or "no" answers, I did consider percentages. I interviewed roughly equal amounts of overweight and healthy respondents, with probably one obese person, and a few less overweight people than those of a healthy weight. The total ratio of male:female respondents is 16:24. For undergraduates, it is 8:13, and for adults it is 8:11. For Lewisburg responses, the ratio is 6:13 and for State College, it is 10:11. The age range of undergraduates is 18-22, average of 20. The age range of adults is 41-67, average of about 56 (three adults said "50s" or "40s," which I calculated as 55 or 45). All of these questions could be re-administered using a comprehensive survey before-hand that assesses the person's weight and other statistical details. When analyzing answers that are unquantifiable

or that have multiple, opened-ended responses, I tallied certain repeated subjects. If an individual mentioned the same subject more than once, I counted it only once.

I observed that my respondents believed American lifestyles are too busy to include time for preparing food, and thus many Americans buy prepackaged or processed foods. In turn, everyone who mentioned processed or prepackaged foods confirmed the opinion that these foods are unhealthy. Most believed that industrialized or processed foods play a large part in the American diet, and that the American diet is unhealthy. Compared to Italians, these responses are a stark contrast. The Americans I interviewed portrayed a sort of shame regarding the American diet; no one showed pride. Finally, in response to the final question, I found trends in the diverse answers that I received, including exercise, transportation, or a factor within the “market-defined food sphere” (defined later).

The majority of undergraduates and adults, 52.5%, understood *diet* with a weight-loss connotation first. 40% understood it as a lifestyle or eating habits, and 7.5% understood it as both. 60% of undergraduates understood *diet* as weight-loss, while 42% of adults did. 35% undergraduates understood it as eating habits, and 47% of adults did. 5% of undergraduates understood it as both, while 11% of adults did.

The general trend about the very first word on which my interview hinges provides interesting perceptions of the American diet. I hypothesized that the majority would understand *diet* as a weight-loss plan instead of daily eating patterns. Instead, roughly half understood it as lifestyle choices. A slightly greater amount of undergraduates than adults thought of *diet* first as a weight-loss plan, pointing to a personal bias: because I identify with this group, I hypothesized according to my experience. Overall, the results point to a deeper understanding of American food culture than I had previously thought. It shows that Americans are not radically different from Italians, at least on this level. To discover the differences in diets and eating habits that have caused two-thirds of Americans to be obese and overweight, one must look deeper.

The next question, “How often do you think the average American goes on a diet each year?” sheds more light on the way *diet* is viewed as a key difference between cultures. Out of 40 respondents, one person believed that Americans diet zero times a year. This shows an immediate contrast with Italian culture and their small to nil amount of dieting. This one person later changed his opinion. Most people said between 1 and 5 times a year was the norm. One adult respondent from Lewisburg said, “52 times a year.” These responses show not simply a belief, but an unquestioned assumption that the average American eats in a way that requires dieting.

The responses for my next question (#5) answered *why* the average American diet requires dieting, though I did not directly ask that question. When asked what respondents’ opinions were of the American diet, over half of them initially expressed negativity. Mary, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said, “Honestly, it’s a travesty. We think we’re eating healthy but we’re not. Corn is in everything we eat.” No one mentioned anything about the American diet being healthy or good in any general way, unless he or she said something along the lines of, “It’s crap, and I love it!” (John, State College adult) or “Disgusting, but I like it,” (Erika, Lewisburg undergraduate). Roger, an adult from Lewisburg, said, “It’s a ‘no-diet.’ Most people eat for immediate satisfaction of their taste buds, and are not too concerned about what they’re eating. In general, the diet is very minimal in terms of what they’re consciously eating in terms of their bodies.”

Foods that were mentioned as part of the American diet were never regional specialties, but were instead hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, and fast food. Often, people mentioned what was *in* the foods, or the bad quality of them. For example, Carrie, an adult Lewisburg respondent, said, “I went on Weight Watchers ten years ago and lost 50 pounds. Most people eat high fat, high sodium, fast food...people go to a fast food or a regular restaurant regularly,” and Ellen, a State College undergraduate said, “Fatty, greasy, fast, fried.” Will, a State College

undergraduate, said that the American diet is “horrible” and describes it as, “cheap, quick, fatty, and fast food.” Jen, a Lewisburg undergraduate, described the American diet as, “Big Macs, greasy, fatty.” Stacy, an undergraduate of Lewisburg, said, “Processed food, mostly fast food, gross trans fat stuff.”

Other trends that were mentioned initially were the fact that people do not have time to cook, and that present habits are a change from those of the past. Time and convenience were cited quite often as being the reasons that the American diet is unhealthy, in addition to why people eat fast food. Linda, a State College adult, said the American diet is “Horrible. First of all, people work too much and work too hard, so there’s not enough time to cook properly and get the right foods. Most fast foods are high in fat, and [have] no nutrition, and people turn to those.” Anne, a Lewisburg adult, said that the diet is, “awful, majorly bad,” because, “even with the intent of eating well, people aren’t taking the time to make good food.” She described jobs and different schedules for each family member as being time-limiting factors. On the other hand, Abby, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said, “Americans think they’re busier than they really are. Marketing and ads influence eating, especially to cook quickly.”

Adults tended to say that, as children, their diets were healthier than today. For example, Tracy, a State College adult, said, “It’s gotten much worse. We ate much better when we were kids than when people eat now. There were no processed or fast foods, and food was cooked at home.” An adult from Lewisburg, Gary, said, “The quality of food supply is worse than what our grandparents had. They had fresh food, milk that came from the barn yesterday evening, with no hormones added. Today [the food] is of worse quality.”

The next question, “How many times do you think an average American eats out during the week – fast food, sit-down, or otherwise?” shows the belief that the average American eats out as a large part of the diet. Not a single person said simply, “One time a week.” The lowest figures I received were a few answers of, “One to two times a week.” A little more than half said

two to four, while a little less than half said five or more times a week. The distributions of responses are similar for undergraduates and adults. These results highlight the fact that eating out is considered common where it used to be a luxury or special treat. Carla, a State College adult, said, “It plays a big part in our diet. Back then, it was not so common for both parents to work. Now it’s the norm.” Erika, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said, “It’s part of our culture. We do it a lot.” A State College adult, John, said, “Eating out used to be a luxury. Now, it’s the norm for a lot of people.” Eating out becomes a problem to a person’s health for many reasons cited by Kessler (2006), with possibly the most harmful consequence being overeating. Because one does not know how the food is prepared, hundreds of hidden calories can be consumed without the customer realizing it. Also, people may purposefully buy heartier dishes when eating out, instead of choosing a healthier option. Sheila, an adult respondent from State College, said, “At sit-down places, people don’t get [purchase] healthy choices, even if they’re available.”

I asked the number of times the respondent believes the average American family sits down to dinner per week, because eating at a family dinner table not only provides bonding time for members of the family, but is the basis for creating healthy eating habits. As surveys have shown (Pollan 2006), families are veering away from family dinners during the week, creating children who rely on prepackaged TV dinners, other prepackaged snacks, and otherwise individualized meals. The responses I received may point to of a lack of healthy eating patterns in the modern American food culture, or at least among my samples and their respective cities. I expected answers of a few times a week, which is what I heard from respondents. Most answers were one to two times a week. The responses from adults and undergraduates were similar, except for two Lewisburg undergraduates: Greg said, “Twice a year,” because family tensions were too tight, and Josh said, “Most people don’t.” Adults often considered family situations as a determining factor in the frequency of family dinners, such as the age of children in a household or work schedules. Roger, a Lewisburg adult, said, “That’s highly dependent. Some do rarely,

and some frequently. For a family of four, with children in elementary or high school, it's several times a week, maybe four to five times a week."

After respondents mentioned the recurring theme that processed or prepackaged foods are a large part of the American diet (without me prompting them), I later added a specific question (part of # 5) to my survey. I asked how big, medium, or little of a part in the American diet do processed or prepackaged foods play. No one said anything less than a big or huge part. Respondents voiced that time and ease of cooking were the top reasons for pre-prepared food use. As Tammy, an adult from State College, said, "No one wants to be stuck in the kitchen all day." Another State College adult, John, said, "We know people who buy tons of packaged foods, even if they grow and make their own food." Among most of my respondents, cooking was not seen as a joyful, fun, or rewarding act. Generally, it was too time-consuming to be considered valuable; the less effort and time, and the more efficient and convenient, the better. This is supported by Kessler (2009). Around this point in the survey, only one person specifically mentioned that cooking could be valuable: Carla, a State College adult. She said, "Cooking is an event, though, we like it. It's an entire experience." She continued, "The time that people spend preparing food from whole ingredients is time they don't spend on something else. We don't do as much Little League as others, but it's a tradeoff, and food is more important."

I asked respondents if they had a personal, day-to-day eating pattern, because the presence of one helps to monitor food intake. Italians have strong eating patterns, as already seen. I also wanted to garner useful information about what sorts of food people habitually eat. I included people who mentioned unchanging eating habits for at least two meals a day. While the majority of undergraduates and adults have a personal eating pattern, every answer was different. This is another opposing factor when comparing Italian and American food cultures.

Carrie, an adult Lewisburg respondent, said, "For breakfast, [I like] to go to Illinois to buy Quaker oat bran. For lunch, something easy, like soup. Dinner, we have meat, potato,

vegetable, salad, though not always potato.” Chris, a State College undergraduate, said, “I usually stick with fruits in the morning and lunch, vegetables throughout the day, and meat at every meal. I have fruit in the morning for its sugars.” Among those who did not have a daily eating pattern, the lack of time was often a factor. Jen, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said she eats, “whatever’s available to get to class on time.” Amy, a State College undergraduate, said, “I’m trying really hard to eat breakfast every day. Other than that, I go to the Commons or eat on-the-go. My dinners are not consistent at all, I have lots of events and classes. A schedule is supposed to help you process the food, but I have a lot of trouble doing that. It’s hard when you’re busy.”

The Italian food culture can be generalized in such a way that defines typical food types and times for breakfast, lunch, *caffè*, and dinner. The same cannot be said about American food culture. Instead, American food patterns can be generalized and loosely defined through, among other things, a lack of a nationally-common structure and individualized eating preferences. Also, many said that they have to fit their eating patterns around work life; Italians, on the other hand, tend to fit their work lives around eating patterns. Some Americans had food patterns, down to the same breakfast every day – “Illinois oat bran” – while others had broader eating habits – “I try not to skip meals. I eat two ‘snacky’ foods a day,” said Stacy, an undergraduate from Lewisburg. As was expected, more adults than undergraduates had a daily eating pattern, probably attributed to a more stable lifestyle and more life experience to establish habits compared to undergraduates.

I asked about people’s impressions or knowledge of the Mediterranean diet, because my preconceived notion was that many people would know what the diet was and understand it as a weight-loss plan. Dieting is popular in the United States, so I assumed that most respondents would have an opinion about the Mediterranean diet. Overall, I found this to be untrue. Less undergraduates and adults had impressions or knowledge of the diet than those who had “no idea,” a common answer. Adults knew about it more often than undergraduates, and their

impressions were more often correct. There was a trend for people to speak about the health benefits of the diet. Stacy, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said that the diet is “more organic, nutritional and accessible,” than the American diet. Katherine, a Lewisburg adult, said that it is “healthy because it’s fresh.” A Lewisburg adult, Roger, said, “I don’t have anything I know, but I have impressions of it. Fish, pasta dishes, low on red meats, I don’t know about salads. It’s something that has more pasta and carbs, and less protein. Of course, the Mediterranean diet has a lot of dishes with olive oil, and cheese being a fairly significant part.”

Life experience for adults has probably given them greater knowledge of the Mediterranean diet. They grew up in a time when the Mediterranean diet was more advertised than it is today. Additionally, after I explained the Ancel Keys version of the Mediterranean diet, most people thought of it as a lifestyle and not a weight-loss diet. Leah, a Lewisburg adult, said, “It’s more of a lifestyle than a diet to lose weight. People need to cut quantity as opposed to quality. If they switched to the Mediterranean diet, they’d probably eat too much.” Also, some respondents felt that the Mediterranean diet could be called either a lifestyle or a weight-loss diet, depending on its context. For example, Chris said, “It’s a lifestyle. Here in America, it could be marketed as a diet.”

Most undergraduates and adults believed that Italians follow the Mediterranean diet today, or were unsure at first and then responded affirmatively. More adults than undergraduates believed Italians still follow the Mediterranean diet. I asked this question in order to lead into the next one, and to encourage respondents to think about overall lifestyles and diets in the role of obesity.

The useful information found was often in the continued answers of the respondents, especially in those who disagreed that modern Italians follow a Mediterranean diet. For example, some believed that Italians, like Americans, are beginning to import too many foods and adopt too much of a Western diet in order for it to still be called “Italian.” Two adult Lewisburg

respondents demonstrated opposite viewpoints. Debra said, “You can’t help but agree because it’s their cultural food,” while Gary said, “My guess is that they don’t follow it. Whatever they’re eating would be Mediterranean because that’s where they are, but I think the same thing has happened there as here. There’s no tradition here...[and over there] they do not eat the traditional Mediterranean diet.” Two undergraduates who disagreed said (Jake, State College), “To a point. Italian food seems heavier. Things are still cooked in cream sauces [in Italy], though not as much. It’s a happy medium,” and Alyssa from Lewisburg said, “Probably in some places, but they’re still eating more imported food.”

Finally, I asked why respondents thought Italians were so much leaner than Americans. I told them that Italians are among the leanest people in the industrialized world, and do not have a dieting industry compared to America, which has the highest obesity rates of industrialized nations. I tallied recurring themes. The top two mentioned factors were that Americans eat too many processed foods *or* Italians ate natural foods; and that the Italian lifestyle is less stressful than Americans’ *or* the American culture is built around being as efficient and fast as possible, including eating. In general, many answers seemed to touch upon the differences between Italian and American relationships to food.

Becky, a State College undergraduate, said, “I actually studied abroad in Italy. In Italy, I don’t know how they do it because I gained weight...They eat cheeses and bread, but no processed stuff like we do. It’s all a lot more natural. They take a lot of time preparing it. It’s about the taste and not about eating.” Another State College undergraduate, Heather, said, “They don’t feel the need to cook quickly. Perhaps it’s because we have a quicker lifestyle.” Katie, a State College undergraduate, said, “Italians are more connected to local foods. Their food culture is more of an understanding and celebration of food, rather than scientists trying to pick apart the foods and find the best.” Will, a State College undergraduate, said, “Here, everyone eats as much as they want of processed crap, then jump on the advertising campaigns to solve their problems.”

Harry, a Lewisburg adult, said, “The American approach to food is to eat for enough energy to do what you want to do. The Italian culture is to sit down, eat slowly, and stop when you feel full, don’t shovel in the calories and move on to the next thing.” Katherine, a Lewisburg adult, said, “Part of our problem is that we live at a fast pace and want everything right now. It’s more convenient to have food fast and prepackaged. We don’t want to take the time, but they do, and they like to...They take their eating seriously. They really care about what they put into their food...[and have] a slower paced lifestyle, they’re more relaxed. We’re too uptight, and we just want everything done in a hurry.”

Next, the lack of Americans’ exercise as opposed to Italians’ frequent walking was mentioned by almost as many undergraduates as adults. Harry, a Lewisburg adult, said, “There is a difference in movement.” Josh, a Lewisburg undergraduate, said, “They’re not as lazy as we are, but actually do stuff, and we don’t.” Debra, a Lewisburg adult, said, “American cities are so big and so sprawled that Americans shop for the week and they do it in their car. They do not walk to the store. Europeans go every day to the store...and they live in areas where everything is available by foot, while we are more car-orientated.” A State College adult, John, said, “There are lots of places in the world that aren’t as lazy as we are.”

Finally, another significant amount of people mentioned American food in what I have defined as the “market-defined food sphere.” This distinction gathers every comment that centers on some social or institutionalized aspect that Americans, as individuals, cannot easily change or escape the influence of. These responses included the excessive marketing of unhealthy foods; the fact that most healthy, fresh foods are more costly than unhealthy, packaged foods; and even the fact that hormones, antibiotics, and other unknown additives are inherent in nearly everything we eat. Gerald, a Lewisburg adult, said, “Americans are bombarded by fast food commercials. There’s lots of availability. In Europe, I didn’t see lots and lots of fast food places and commercials on TV bombarding you with, ‘Eat at McDonalds and triple-size.’” Alyssa, a

Lewisburg undergraduate, said, “[Our diet] has perpetuated all these processed things because of industrialization... We are such a capitalist society, striving for the money, so the food is low quality and low price.” Another Lewisburg undergraduate, Erika, said, “Service industries. In America, when you dine out they bring the check out when they see you’re done. We’re programmed to get in, get out, eat as much as possible. The portion sizes are ridiculous. In Italy, they wait because they expect you to sit later.” Tim, a State College undergraduate, said, “The snack food industry doesn’t exist there as much. People here eat all the time during the day. There, they have two to three meals during the day.” Will said, “The root of things is that people eat cheap food here because it’s the most available and reasonably priced food. There, the available good food is healthy, and so they won’t need to go on a diet.”

Finally, some respondents mentioned that culture in the sense of tradition had something to do with obesity rates. I broadly distinguished between cultural tradition, which denotes history and legacy, and cultural lifestyle, which addresses contemporary issues (this is the category of people who think Italians are less stressed, and thus are healthier and leaner). These categories tend to overlap. George, a State College adult, said, “For Italians, it’s part of their tradition that they don’t think of it as a diet, but it’s a way of life. For Americans, there are so many prepackaged diets. People bounce around from this to that. It’s typical American habits to not stick to one diet.” Two State College adults thought that the homogeneity of Italy versus the mixed culture of America plays a large part in determining healthy or non-healthy eating. Tracy said, “It’s a cultural thing. In Italy, you don’t have a variety. Once you have a lot of different people, you get lots of different kinds of foods and you incorporate those into your diet.” Dave said, “The cultural makeup of Italy is very homogenous. Americans include many cultures that have their own way of cooking and eating, all over the place. In Italy, they have formed a culture of eating that goes back centuries and centuries and centuries.” One State College undergraduate, Eric, said, “It has a lot to do with their lifestyle and culture. What’s acceptable or standard for

them is completely different from what we do. They're more active, generally, and they don't eat certain foods that we do that are bad for us."

Overall, comparing adults and undergraduates, the biggest differences are seen in multiple categories. More undergraduates than adults thought Italians eat less processed and more natural foods, and that the main difference was in cultural tradition. More adults than undergraduates believed that the role of exercise and transportation (namely not by car, but by bike and foot) was an important difference between cultures.

## Chapter 6

### Food Culture Trends that Contribute to Obesity

Through my own observations and daily interactions with Italians, I found that Italy does not have a dieting industry as prominent as America's, or indeed, any such industry at all. This observation prompted my research and anthropological study. To an Italian, the word *diet* signifies eating habits characterized by genuine pleasure, respect, quality, heritage, tradition, and pride. In America, by contrast, the term *diet* is often synonymous with losing weight. I observed that the deliberate restriction of food is not a native concept to Italians, who employ the less intense act of balance, or moderation, rather than the step-by-step diet plan seen in America. Around the world, forms of dieting are often associated with deeper religious or spiritual beliefs, such as fasting for penance, but American dieting carries a unique definition that is a distinctive feature of the food culture: following a specific food regime in order to lose weight.

(Kostioukovitch 2009) (Parasecoli 2008)

Italians generally view *diet* in a lifestyle sense, meaning that the daily eating patterns and activities contribute to each person's diet. While the concept of dieting has been exported to a small extent to other countries, the attitude towards it is different, and is not further promoted by a well-known dieting industry like it is in America. For Americans, hundreds of diets can be found on the internet, in magazines and newspapers, broadcasted on television, and advertised on cereal boxes, drink mixes, and many other products. Generally, these different forms of dieting all have something in common: where one type of food or activity is restricted, another is substituted, and a desired outcome is perceived. It is towards that which the dieter strives.

(Parasecoli 2008)

The way Americans view *diet* points to a relationship towards food and between consumer and seller that is different than for Italians. These relationships come from innumerable and complex influences within each culture. Some of these were mentioned in one way or another by respondents, and it is on these that this part of the study focuses. These differences include characteristics of Industrial Ages, past food influences that have shaped the traditions of modern cuisine, relationships of consumers towards food, and the contemporary food systems of each country.

Almost every respondent mentioned the detrimental quality and super-abundance of processed foods in the American diet. Alyssa, undergraduate of Lewisburg, said the American diet is, “high calorie and processed,” and Sue, an adult of Lewisburg, said, “I see those that stay in for lunch, [processed food] is what they eat, every lunch-time.” Italian food was often said by respondents to be fresher, less processed, and thus healthier. Katherine, an adult of Lewisburg, was correct when she described it as “healthy because it’s fresh.” Freshness of food is something that is of utmost concern to Italians, something I observed in the products my Italian roommates bought and the warnings they gave me regarding frozen foods. “As soon as the tiny image of the snowflake [designating frozen food] is spotted on the menu of a restaurant (indicating that the dish was prepared with frozen fish or meat), the immediate tendency is not to order that dish,” (Kostiukovitch 2009: 376-377); the author emphasizes the almost obsessive attention to freshness when she wrote, “[I]n Italy, thank heavens, a kilo of cherries, in season, costs four euros, and those cherries may even be worm-eaten—hurray!”

In respondents’ comments, processed food compared to Italian food was connected to a dichotomy of quantity versus quality. It was said that either Americans prefer high quantity, or that Italians prefer high quality, or both. Characteristics of Industrial Ages and past culinary influences of each country contribute, in part, to these two opposing mindsets of today. In

addition, the history of Italy has not always exclusively preferred quality, but at times prized high quantity, and the American mindset is that food *should* be cheap.

In general, America's Industrial Age began in the early 1800s and had more time to evolve and shape America's food culture, while Italy's movement began in the 1950s. Furthermore, America's traditional food culture, which began with the colonists in the early 1700s, did not begin as early as Italy's, which traces back to the Ancient Greco-Roman influences of the B.C. era. Thus, in addition to having a longer industrial period to shape it, initial American food traditions had less time to evolve than Italy's. (Dickie 2007) (McIntosh 1995)

The large amounts of processed foods that grace so many tables in America today began with the rise of giant food processors in America between 1860 and World War I, when agriculture became focused on bigger farms and complex financial organizations. Manufacturing huge amounts of food involves many production steps between the farm and the table. "The effects of the revolution in technology and organization were even more striking after the food left the farm, for large new organizations now transported, processed, and marketed the farmer's products," (Levenstein 1998: 42). In contrast to the technological advances in the field of industrialization occurring in America, at this time in Italy's history, the Risorgimento (Unification) was occupying the time, effort, and attention of its country. The systems of industrialization that are now in operation in America have had more time to influence the contemporary diet than Italy's industrialization has had. Currently, however, trends in Italian childhood obesity rates are rising, suggesting that their food system is "catching up" to America's. Hale (2003) cited leading government nutritionist of Italy, Amleto D'Amicis, "'American fashions always arrive here ten years later, and now this fashion is arriving.'" (Dickie 2007) (Hale 2003)

The difference in available human workers between countries during Industrialization Ages (or the Economic Miracle, as it is called in Italy) also helped to define how contemporary

food cultures were shaped by industrialization and how they continue to grow. “In food, . . . quests for technological innovations to reduce costs and eliminate dependence on skilled, artisanal labor went hand in hand with drives to merge and consolidate businesses in order to gain control of market forces,” (Levenstein 1988: 32). In America, laborers were in short supply, so the more efficient a system was and the fewer humans it needed to run smoothly, the better. When Italy’s Industrial Age arrived in the 1950s, there was a large, lower-class peasant society full of willing people eager to move to the cities and work. There was no shortage of able hands (Dickie 2007), and thus no strong impetus to find ways to replace human labor. Therefore, efficiency was not as prized. Some of the major consequences of industrialized food and how it affects food quality (as many respondents suggested) are looked at in more detail in the next chapter.

In response to the last question in my survey (why oft-dieting Americans are obese or overweight, while Italians are not and yet do not diet) many respondents said the quality of food is better in Italy than in America, and that this is because Americans prefer high quantity while Italians prefer high quality. This view speaks about general consumer trends as opposed to individual preferences of each country’s citizens. However, these different focuses have derived, in part, from the abundance of food in America versus a peasant society and famine in Italy, and as a negative response to the globalization of industrialized food.

For most of Italy’s history, the majority of Italians would not have been able to imagine the abundant American meals that have always been a part of American food culture. In Italian culture, restriction within daily eating habits does not play a large role or, actually, any role at all. In the past, restriction was associated with famine, Fascism and poverty. From the 1600s until the mid-twentieth century, areas of Italy suffered from scarcity and famine, mostly experienced by the peasants in the countryside. This peasant culture existed in Italy up until the 1950s and 1960s, when the Italian “economic miracle” (Dickie 2007: 293) dispatched over nine million people from the countryside to the city. There, Italians of all classes could partake in the

industrial growth and eat well. Once those peasants moved to the cities in the 1950s to work in the factories, they gladly relinquished their “bad” quality peasant food in favor of the city cuisine and the upper echelon’s preferences (Dickie 2007); although, seen later in this study, the food of the city’s upper classes partly derived from the peasant cultures themselves. Famine was, in fact, the reason that Italians emigrated to America in the late 1800s to early 1900s for the first time, launching Italian food culture and its subsequent derivations, such as spaghetti and meatballs, into America. During Fascism, the general Italian populace grew even hungrier. “When Fascism was at its height, the mass of Italians ate worse than they had done before. Estimates of the average calories consumed daily by workers in the cities show a decline from 2,954 in 1926, to 2,476 in 1936,” (Dickie 2007: 267).

In stark contrast to Italy, there has been an abundance of food in America from the time Native Americans were the only inhabitants until present day. “We were never more merry nor fed on more plenty of good oysters, fish, flesh, wild fowle and good bread, nor had better fires in England,” wrote John Smith (Root and de Rochemont 1976:54). By the mid-1700s, European visitors to America reported that Americans ate very well. Meat three times a day was normal, and there was always an abundance of food mentioned by foreign observers and critics. “Land was cheap and meat abundant in the America of 1789. In Europe land was dear and meat a luxury,” (Cummings 1970: 15). Generally, when speaking about the quality, American food was seen as unrefined, ruinous to one’s health, and unpalatable. The Count of Volney, in the late-1800s, wrote, “Americans deserved first prize for a diet sure to destroy teeth, stomach, and health, and advised the government, for the good of the country, to undertake an educational program to teach Americans how to eat,” (Root and de Rochemont 1976:125). Indeed, the excess quantity and lack of consideration to quality seemed to have arrived hand-in-hand: “Critics of American cooking often blamed abundance for encouraging poor preparation,” (Levenstein 1988: 8).

Furthermore, even one and a half centuries ago, a frequent criticism was that Americans ate too much and threw too much away. (Levenstein 1988) (Root and de Rochemont 1976)

Foreign perspectives and reports show that American food was viewed in a negative to neutral light in regards to quality, and a positive light in regards to quantity. Writes Levenstein (1988: 7), “Virtually every foreign visitor who wrote about American eating habits expressed amazement, shock, and even disgust at the quantity of food consumed...Long before Americans’ overflowing self-serve ‘salad bars,’ ‘all-you-can-eat buffets,’ and ‘smorgs’ came to symbolize to overseas visitors an obsession with quantity, the groaning boards of America’s hotels struck Europeans the same way.” American food patterns in the past, besides being blessed with abundant food, favored “the major characteristic [of] an overwhelming heaviness” and a “light hand with spices” (Levenstein 1998: 5) in preparation methods, vegetables treated as sides or sauces and eaten sparingly, and the method of frying food (Levenstein 1988). This preference for quantity has continued to present day, as voiced by Leah, an adult of Lewisburg. “We just want more food and can’t be satisfied with the amount that will sustain us. I think the American culture, in general, always wants something bigger and better.”

However, quality has not always been the primary focus of Italian food. On the contrary, during famine, the preference for quantity was more significant than the preference for quality. Those who could afford large quantities of food were high class, and were seen as healthy besides. For most of Italian history, however, abundance did not mean that one *should* consume the food, merely that one *could*. The access and display of quantity was more important than the consumption of it, which was to be in moderation. Over time, the preference for quality, in addition to quantity, became more defined and important, because that, too, was associated with health and high social status. (Montanari 1994)

The ancient Graeco-Romans helped to define the virtues of moderation in its importance in health and refinement. The merit of moderation has persisted until modern times, with a few

“upsets,” usually from other cultures. For example, in AD 888, the German ruler Charlemagne, when occupying Italy, valued a voracious appetite. He equated it to wealth and “a physical and muscular concept of power,” (Montanari 1994: 116). The Germanic and Celtic cultures “viewed the ‘great eater’ in a positive light,” (Montanari 2006: 22).

The preference for quantity arose from the fear of starvation, its presence either acutely felt or always just outside the door, waiting for the next famine. The abundance of industrialized food has caused the opposite reaction of fear of obesity. Even though Italy’s obesity rates are much less than America’s, a rising overweight and obese population has begun to equate quantity with *unhealthiness*. This, in turn, emphasizes quality even more. In addition, quality is re-emphasized together with regionality today because of a strong reaction against globalization of industrial food. “The beginning of the process of standardization and, potentially, of the globalization of markets and of food models has prompted in reaction a new attention to local cultures,” (Montanari 2006: 80). Quantity had, for most all cultures, been the most important marker of social status, “[b]ut at the moment when food became a widespread commodity, this food law weakened. In its stead there arose the valorization of ‘region’ as receptacle for a new variation: ‘geographic food,’” (Montanari 2006: 81).

America has the absolute highest obesity rates of industrialized nations, and a food culture mostly dominated by abundant, low-quality, industrialized food. However, the movement towards localized food and a preference for higher quality did not occur until the 1980s (Kandel, *et al.*, 1980). This is partly because industrialization has persisted for a longer time in America, and the food culture before that for a shorter time. Also, virtues of moderation were generally not seen in the American masses, like they had been in Italy; and the fact that a food culture was never widely significant in, for example, unifying the nation or defining regional allegiance (as it has been in Italy’s past), did not lead to resurgence for protecting one. (Montanari 1994)

(Montanari 2006)

America's cornucopia of food was often defined in terms of quantity of meat eaten. American cookbooks in the nineteenth century include recipes that call for dozens of ingredients. One recipe for soup includes copious amounts of meat – three pounds of beef, three pounds of veal, half a pound of ham – only to be thrown out once the flavors boiled into the water. In another cookbook, a wedding cake calls for ninety eggs, plus 19 more for frosting. This cookbook, published during the Civil War when food was actually in shorter supply, has a recipe for an everyday cake that calls for 32 egg yolks (Root and de Rochemont 1976). In contrast, meat was especially scarce in Italy's past. Dickie (2007: 6-7) provided an illustrative Italian proverb: "*When the peasant eats a chicken, either the peasant is ill, or the chicken is.*" Chicken was expensive in the countryside, and so was reserved for the sick. In any case, affordable animals were often ones that had died of disease.

Another factor that was often mentioned by respondents was that Italians exercise more than Americans. According to Landsburg (2006), "The average American works 25 hours a week;...the average Italian a bit more than 16 and a half," showing that the contemporary American work culture includes long work days with many sedentary hours. The United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) wrote, "Workers in the United States are putting in more hours than anyone else in the industrialized world." Not only are more hours put into work days on average, but Americans have fewer vacation days than Italians, who get up to four to six weeks a year (Anderson 2001). Long work hours and more work days lead to a higher percentage of time spent being sedentary. Italians are not as active as they were in the past, but are still more active than Americans. As Sue, an adult from Lewisburg, said, "We probably, as a nation, don't get enough exercise. In Europe, places are closer, and people don't drive as much...It's difficult here [in West Virginia] because it's hilly, not predominantly flat. Or in D.C., for example, you'd get killed if you tried to ride a bicycle to work." While in Italy, I observed shorter work days, and free time was often actively spent, such as socializing or enjoying the

evening *passeggiata*, a stroll through the streets of one's hometown with friends or family. This particular tradition was even mentioned by one of my adult State College respondents, who said, "Everywhere we went in the Mediterranean, everyone went for the *passeggiata*, all generations in the evening, not just fitness addicts, but everyone, a mix. They spend less time in front of a TV."

Other respondents mentioned that Americans are "lazy," like John, an adult from State College. Laziness is an individual attribute and so cannot be applied to any general population; also, the fact that Americans work long hours shows that they are not lazy, at least not in that sense. Perhaps John's statement points to an underlying difference in American attitudes and how mindsets have been shaped. For example, Sue continued to say that, "The whole structure is different in Europe. They walk to friends' houses. I see it here, we have a get-together, and people drive three houses down. That's a mindset, and it's a different mindset." Or even, because Americans work long hours, free time is not spent actively.

Compared to the past, Americans consume less calories than did the average farmer or housewife; but so few calories are burned from activity today that this contributes to the problem of an overweight and obese population (Bix 2007) (Konner 2001). As shown, American history has always had a cornucopia of food. The switch from an active to sedentary lifestyle with large platters of food available in both instances has, perhaps, caused the U.S. population to gain more than a few extra pounds. Compared to America, the Italian population of the past has included a large percentage of the lower peasant class, which, until the 1950s, suffered periods of famine. The instant and abundant availability of food for the laborer that an American farmer could readily tuck into was rarely at the hard-working peasant's table (Dickie 2007).

Another difference that was often mentioned by my respondents was something in the market-driven food sphere. This category includes factors that push or encourage Americans to eat in certain ways and to consume particular foods. It also includes industrialization and its consequences (Chapter 6). Some mentioned that hormones in meat were a cause for the

difference in diets, while others mentioned the fact that organic was “fake,” (Abby, undergraduate from Lewisburg). While no one explained in great detail why they had voiced these things, their responses clearly showed the belief that possibly uncontrollable factors dictate the way Americans eat. My respondents were correct; what influences the food on an individual’s plate is what types of food are actually available and how they can be obtained. This is influenced by heavy advertising, mentioned by respondents, as well as the larger forces of power behind how and what types of food are sold, namely huge food industries and the role that the government plays in assisting them.

The advertising industry took off when cross-country transportation began to be used to distribute food throughout America. Transportation and storage technology received its first boost in efficiency when food was needed to be distributed by railway to the soldiers of the Civil War in the 1860s. Food had the tendency to rot *en route*, and canning became the saving technology that prevented that. After the success of mass distribution, new technologies began to take form, such as cold storage, which helped to keep foods in their natural form year-round. One obstacle that prevented instant success by food businesses was that sellers found they could no longer convince consumers to buy their brand by way of word-of-mouth alone, because people in new cities had not heard about it. Thus, food advertising was born (Cummings 1970).

In America, large food industries and government subsidies, combined with advertising, help (or require) companies to decide what to sell consumers and how to sell it. Italians are susceptible to all sorts of advertising, but their food remains “recognizably itself,” (Dickie 2007: 297). Italians’ strong attachment to their food may be explained by the unifying effects food has had in the past and today, giving it greater, more tangible importance. In addition, when it comes to food, the Italian government supports the needs and desires of its people, rather than of large industries, by laws that protect regional variety. And, the expansion of industrialized food world-wide incited a backlash in Italy that took the form of greater regional pride in the attempt to save

unique local foods. In contrast, the American government subsidizes corn and soy and the use of those ingredients in as many products as possible because there are large surpluses (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6), while the Italian government encourages the quality and uniqueness of “typicalities” by way of laws like DOP and IGP (Dickie 2007) (Pollan 2006).

Well-known by any American who has traveled to Italy, Italians are fiercely proud of their birth cities. The beginning of Italian food culture was in the Italian cities, and can be seen in the names attached to them: *bistecca alla fiorentina*, *prosciutto di Parma*, *pizza napoletana*, *risotto alla Milanese*, and *pesto Genovese* are only a few examples. Dishes and foods that are locally derived have a strong tradition behind them, are sought after in contemporary times, and are known for their high quality. They are known as *tipicità*, or “typicalities,” in Italy. One of the first widely-recognized foods of high quality is *parmigiano* cheese from Parma, first mentioned in the 1350s, the procurement of which was (and still is) desired to be from a specific city and made in a specific manner. Today, such high-quality foods are protected by law: the European Union DOP, Denomination of Protected Origin (*Denominazione di Origine Protetta*), has strict guidelines dictating its mode, manner, and place of manufacture. Another, less strict law is the Protected Geographic Indication (*Indicazione Geografica Protetta*), or IGP. (Dickie 2007)

Because Italian preferences are for higher quality foods, food is sold to Italians with that ideal. In America, on the other hand, past attitudes towards food were different than Italians’, and reflect modern focus on quantity and cheap price. “Abundance also seemed to breed a vague indifference to food, manifested in a tendency to eat and run, rather than to dine and savor....Foreigners often remarked on the eerie silence that reigned at American dinner tables, as diners seemed to concentrate on getting the tiresome burden of stuffing themselves out of the way in as short a time as possible,” (Levenstein 1998: 8). In contemporary America, the relationship to food and between seller and consumer has been defined through industrialization, and has

morphed into a purely profit-driven mentality. This connection is seen in links between business, decreasing diversity in food types, decreasing health of crops, animals and humans, and outcomes of these connections (again, looked at in more detail in Chapter 6). This profit-driven mentality is not only the attitude of food companies and industries, but also of the American consumer.

Consumers demand low prices, and “[t]he American food system has for more than a century devoted its energies to quantity and price rather than to quality,” (Pollan 2008:183). Americans currently spend less than 10% of their income on food, a mentality ushered in by former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. Butz graduated from college during the Great Depression, and the menace of hunger and high prices caused him to promote fence-to-fence, 1,000 acre cornfield policies, beginning the contemporary age of super-abundance and cheap food. In King Corn (2006), Butz calls cheap food prices the “root of our affluence.” Americans demand that food be sold at low prices. In 1970, for example, when food prices skyrocketed, housewives protested until the Nixon administration adopted cheap food policies, which have governed the food system until present-day. (Pollan 2008)

It is from the city of Bologna, nicknamed *La Grassa*, “The Fat,” that one of the best examples of typicality arises. From this city heralds the meat that Americans call boloney (also written as *bologna* or *baloney*). In Bologna, it is called *mortadella* and is manufactured differently from American boloney according to a recipe from 1644 and a law enacted in 1661. The earliest copy of the recipe is nearly indistinguishable from the official recipe used today, from which Bologna’s Guild of Sausage-Makers asked their cardinal to issue a law outlining strict controls of how to manufacture this sausage. Copies of the law still hang in shopkeepers’ windows selling *mortadella* today. While typicalities were sought after for centuries before, *mortadella* represents one of the first laws to protect a specially-processed food from being duplicated using lesser-quality ingredients. (Dickie 2007)

Not only do Italians focus on uniqueness and high quality of the ingredients that go into their dishes, but the manner in which food is eaten in Italy shows an overall greater respect and seriousness concerning food. Italians are more conscious of what and how they eat, which are things that help to regulate a person's diet. This can be seen in the almost national structure of eating habits; if I asked an individual Italian what he or she ate on a daily basis, I found that he or she generalized the average Italian's diet. As seen in my interview responses, on the other hand, Americans generalized the unhealthy aspects of the American diet, and then their own responses for personal dietary habits were all very different.

As Chris, an undergraduate from State College, stated, "The American diet is affected by the high pace of life," and because of this eat quick and on-the-go meals. Unlike modern American culture, in Italy nothing should be eaten on-the-go except for gelato, which is to be eaten at an ambling walking pace. Many regional specialties are found on the side of streets, but these, too, are to be enjoyed slowly and perhaps standing around the area where one bought them. It is also important to have separate plates for different dishes so that flavors do not mingle, ruining the authenticity of each dish. It is distasteful to fail to give each element of a meal its proper respect, time and place. As Dickie (2007: 198) wrote, "On special occasions, Italians like to savour the way *antipasto*, *primo*, *secondo*, *contorno*, and *dolce* make an evolving pattern of distinct tastes and textures. In order to cram a whole meal into ten minutes of guzzling, the British invented Sunday lunch; and in order to nullify its different tastes, they invented gravy." His particular enmity is reserved for the British, but nearly the same thing might be said about the American Sunday brunch and maple syrup. And, as the American food culture history will show, the majority of American cuisine is Anglo-Saxon in origin.

The relationship between Italians and food is, while not as simple as it was in the past, still fairly simple today. Local foods are eaten more often in Italy than they are in America, and multiple, open-air markets filled with fresh foods are a daily affair. Italian cooking itself is

characterized by simplicity – the flavors often come from fresh and high-quality ingredients. While in Florence, I observed daily, open air markets with fresh food. Even in the winter, Florence had open markets, in addition to the larger *Mercato centrale* (Central Market) in a two-story building.

The way in which Italians consume food is described by Facaros and Pauls (1994: 84) as such:

*“There are those who eat to live and those who live to eat, and then there are the Italians, for whom food has an almost religious significance, unfathomably linked with love, la Mamma, and tradition. In this singular country...standards both at home and in the restaurants are understandably high. Few Italians are gluttons, but all are experts on what is what in the kitchen; to serve a meal that is not properly prepared and more than a little complex is tantamount to an insult.”*

The way in which Americans consume food is very much like the way Americans consume other material items, becoming merely a cog in the industrial and business wheels. Americans think of themselves as “consumers” of food in an abstract sense. In other words, people are “passive, uncritical, and dependent” (Berry 1990: 146) when it comes to what is on the table in front of them. This is not to say that it is the individual’s fault; what the food industries put there will be consumed, and this is absolutely imperative for the industries’ survival. In fact, as Berry (1990) so adeptly articulates, the ideal industrial food consumer would be attached to a tube that feeds him directly from the factory to the stomach. No matter what the consequences of industrial food are, the goals are the same as of any business: to sell as much as possible in order to make the most money. (Berry 1990)

Berry (1990:146) defines the “industrial eater” as “one...who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical.” As Roger, a Lewisburg adult, said, “Most people...are not too concerned with what they’re eating.” The modern, average American eating lifestyle has created the market for, is dependent on, and has been pushed by industries to be a breath-stoppingly quick, day-to-day affair. Industrial food is encouraged by industries, because the system benefits them. Americans rush through the work-hours so that they can go home or on vacation for relaxation, and then hurry through recreation time for the next best thing. Eating is simply another necessary step to get through the day, and easy-to-prepare foods provide for this step. This has rendered the mode in which Americans consume food to be centered on the transaction between consumer and supplier, becoming a “purely appetitive transaction” between a person and his food (Berry 1990: 148). (Berry 1990)

Given that food is a direct contributor to a person’s wellbeing, consumers should, and once were, attentive to what they eat. However, the complex food industry is too large to care about its consumers in such an intimate way, because that costs money and time. Most consumers will never see the person (or machine) that prepared their food in the first place, breaking an important bond between seller and consumer that is still seen in the common, fresh-air markets of Italy today. Because manufacturers distribute food to millions of people in hundreds of unseen towns, this creates a solely profit-driven situation, while the food culture and health impacts are ignored. Kessler questions the new health image presented by McDonalds or Chili’s (salads and Guitless Grill menu). “But are those products selling?” One food industry executive shrugged off the question. ‘Who cares?’ he asked. ‘You’re going to build your image,’” (Kessler 2009: 131).

This mode of consumption that is pushed by the industry and reciprocated by Americans is built around the values of volume and price instead of quality and health. Berry (1990)

explains that as the scale of these businesses increases, diversity decreases. Monocultures are much more useful in producing mass amounts of identical plants and animals, as Pollan (2006) shows is what happens in the corn market. Here is a crucial point to consider in the category of “market-defined food sphere.” Beginning with these huge corn crops, Americans have little say over how to produce the food they eat, because the growing, making, and buying of food are so far apart from each other in the process. In short, in order for intensive farming to succeed, animals and plants depend on chemicals, pesticides, hormones and antibiotics to survive the squalid conditions of feed lots and abused soil. Human health declines, and the medical market is boosted: everyone is satisfied. Even the consumers are content to indulge in industrial food because of the food’s tasty, addicting qualities and also the important role that advertisers play in convincing consumers that this food is “good, tasty, healthful, and a guarantee of marital fidelity and long life,” (Berry 1990: 149) (Kessler 2009)

Food industries began treating themselves and consumers as part of a business venture with the advent of the Heinz brand, founded by Henry J. Heinz in the late 1800s. Canning, already in America since 1819, gained more and more usage in industrial productivity as steam pressure, “crimping,” and integration into food processing lines helped to produce 35,000 cans a day by 1910. Through heavy advertising, “Heinz was able to...persuade American housewives that his pickles and other condiments were as tasty, yet healthier and more convenient, than home-made ones,” (Levenstein 1988: 36). Efficient food processing soon began to need only a small number of low-wage and low-skilled workers. The assembly line helped substitute for human labor, the prized characteristic during the Industrial Revolution. Next, powdered flavorings and extracts began to be added to processed foods because they impart a stronger, sweeter, more savory, and overall more intense flavor for the amount used compared to fresh flavorings, and do not require special attention in buying and storing. In contemporary times, consistency and uniformity have been important in chain restaurants, not only day-by-day in a

single restaurant, but also throughout the state or country. People often eat at specific restaurants because they expect a certain atmosphere, service and menu. (Kessler 2009) (Levenstein 1988)

Another response that I received was that Italy has a strong tradition behind its food, while America does not. Alyssa, an undergraduate from Lewisburg, said, “Thinking back to the history of the U.S., we have no history of food.” America certainly does have a food culture tradition, so perhaps this belief developed through knowing that Italians’ food culture has a much longer history than Americans’ (in addition to Italian restaurants being widely popular, heavily advertised, and marketed in America). Also, Italians have a conscious connection to their traditions, which can be seen in the cultural narratives of typicalities and how food united Italy in the past.

In contrast to Italy, American colonies did not develop distinct typicalities. When in Italy, I noticed that Italians, in general, knew how to ascertain the highest quality, where the best local spot in town was to acquire certain foods, and in which regions it was practically imperative to buy a certain type of food, such as *mortadella* or *mozzarella*. The average American, in general, has probably never heard of Key Islands She-Crab Soup or Kentucky Burgoo, nor will spend the effort to seek them out. American regional dishes, to the extent that they exist, are not in a broad American cultural landscape connecting all classes and societies, like Italian typicalities exist in Italy. (Byrd 2007)

In terms of an American food tradition, the colonies were a novelty because they imported food as opposed to completely sustaining on the bounty of native food, a habit begun by the early colonists. The cuisine they imported from England was not sought out for quality or uniqueness, but because old dietary habits die hard. Not only was there a myriad of new foods like varieties of squash, beans, and root crops in the New World, which they had never seen or cooked before, but those who ate the native food were the native people, believed to be unrefined

and savage. Foods that were acceptable were ones such as corn, out of necessity, and pumpkin, which looked like the European squash. (Byrd 2007) (Levenstein 1988) (Mintz 2010)

This is not to say that the multiple waves of immigration that give America its “melting pot” reputation did not influence the nation’s modern food culture. Diversifying effects include the independency of the colonies and various waves of immigrants: the British, Dutch, French and Spanish initially, and later Germany, Ireland, Scandinavia and Italy. Influences came from nearby as well: slavery in the South initiated an underground culinary influence, and later, Mexican border states – especially Texas, once it was added to the United States – developed regional cuisine. Finally, Baltic and Slavic influences were introduced by the Jews in the Northeast, and Chinese laborers from California added yet another flavor to the amalgam of dishes present in the United States by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Byrd 2007) (Mintz 2010)

As much or as little as these foods have been incorporated into the American diet, they are often seen as “foreign” today, but in many cases have become “Americanized.” One way in which this manifests is through the addition of America’s endless supply of meat added to immigrants’ traditional dishes: spaghetti and meatballs is a famous example. “Foreign” (that is, non-British) foods have not become a part of our food culture in the same way that Italian foods evolved in their culture. Even what is arguably America’s most distinct food culture, Creole cuisine of the South, is seen by outsiders as “foreign.” The one exception of food that was readily accepted was similar to Anglo-Saxon cuisine: German cuisine. The diet of the German immigrants of 1830 and 1848 emphasized beer, marinated meats, sour flavors, wursts and pastries. These tend to have an iconic image for American food culture today: hot dogs, cole slaw, donuts and hamburgers, as well as sauerkraut, pretzels, pumpernickel, and some beers. Some of these did not even undergo a change of name, such as pretzels and pumpernickel, while others have been modified according to American tastes. American beer, for example, tends to be

light in color and flavor, and “lite” in calories. (Dickie 2007) (Levenstein 1988) (Mintz 2010) (Root and de Rochemont 1976)

The connection to typicalities is an element of Italian food culture that shows Italians’ respect for the act of dining today, in contrast to American habits which have been defined in the past in not-so-appetizing terms, and which today are often seen as quick and careless. For example, Katherine, a Lewisburg adult, said, “[Italians] take their eating seriously. They really care about what they put into their food, and more about everybody being together as a family.” The opposite sentiment regarding American food culture was observed by Mr. Richard Cummings, author of *The American and His Food* (1941) from an Ohio River steamboat. “I really dreaded the coming of the hour that summoned us to table...sitting down with so many fellow-animals to ward off thirst and hunger as a business...to have these social sacraments stripped of everything but the mere greedy satisfaction of the natural cravings...” (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 125).

Italians’ conscious connection to their native cuisine today derives in part from the past, when Italy’s food was used to unite a country famous for regional pride even today. Unification through food is seen at least twice in Italy’s past, first during the Middle Ages and later after World War II. (Dickie 2007)

Cooks carried respect and were honorable members of society in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. They were widely believed to hold a superior knowledge of all food, and they were able to move freely in the urban network: among cities and within the rich and poor, they gathered information about who ate what, how they prepared it, and from where they got their ingredients. Possibly the most famous of these cooks is credited, for the first time, for unifying Italian food in a comprehensive cookbook, *Opera di Bartolomeo Scappi* (*Work by Bartolomeo Scappi*), published in 1570. Scappi drew on recipes and cuisines, techniques and traditions from most corners of the Italian peninsula (Dickie 2007). Italy’s food culture derives

from the cities, seen in the names of dishes (*bistecca fiorentina*, *parmigiano reggiano*), and often from the elite. Once Italian peasants moved to the cities during the Economic Miracle, they gladly shed peasant dishes. However, even some of the “elite” food was cunningly crafted by Bartolomeo Scappi, the chef of Pope Pius V. His aim was to unite Italian food cross-regionally and cross-class, and he did not leave peasant food culture in the cold. “Different preparations of fish are derived, the author admits, from the simple recipes of fishermen” (Montanari 2006: 40). Being a cook, Scappi was able to move within societies, including up and down social ladders; and being the chef of Pope Pius V, he was able to incorporate foods of the elite with (some) peasant foods, and serve these to the elite. (Dickie 2007) (Montanari 2006)

The second time that food united Italy was post-World War II, when Italy was war-torn. The major Fascist party of Benito Mussolini had disintegrated, and two political parties emerged: the Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Comunista Italiano. Its members did not feel unified, and could not rally around anything patriotic or nationalistic, because that smacked of Fascism. Thus, they were united by food. Food reflected the country’s diversity and at the same time provided a unity that included a common history and tradition, serving as a new sense of national pride. It was also around this time, in the 1950s, that the peasant societies that had been so prevalent for most of Italy’s history became involved in the industrial revolution. Italy’s economy was revived, and food was, eventually, better distributed. (Dickie 2007) (Kostioukovitch 2009)

Italians are also resistant to other countries’ food imports. When in Italy, I noticed that ethnic restaurants were not very numerous, and do not recall seeing more than one (a Mexican restaurant) in all of Milan and Florence. Italians prefer their own food, I was told; it is better than food from other countries. Dickie (2007) suggests that one reason for the strong preference of Italian food, while many other consumer items are imported and adopted, is because of how food unified the country throughout Italy’s long past, including during the Middle Ages and post-World War II. Resistance to foreign foods has had some positive consequences, such as the

hindrance of fast food companies bringing in their unhealthy mix of high fat and low-quality fare. Perhaps this strong allegiance to one's national food culture is not as strong (or simply not expressed in the same way) as it is in other European countries. France, the UK and Germany had between eight and eleven times the number of fast food restaurants as Italy, for example. (Fischler 1999)

However, resistance to foreign foods does not mean Italians do not import them, including industrialized and fast foods. "[E]very culture, every tradition, every identity is a dynamic, unstable product of history, one born of complex phenomena of exchange, interaction, and contamination," (Montanari 2006: 139). Many Italians eat french fries with steak and drink Coca-Cola. Food cultures are anything but static, and American-isms have been incorporated into Italian culture, just as Italian traditions were imported to America. Italian culture has, until recently, resisted the sharp incline to obesity, in large part due to a reaction that re-emphasized regionalities and high food quality. Foreign foods (namely American industrialized foods) have been imported in modern Italy and are consumed, but that does not mean that they have been accepted easily or are now welcomed. "International Coca-Cola Boycott Day" was proclaimed July 22, 2003, and several McDonalds' have recently been forced to close down or change the logo. "In the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, the liveliest spot in Milan's historic center, a black and gold script was devised for McDonald's in the same style as the arcade's other shop windows...Inside, instead of hamburgers, there are counters with brioches and slices of panettone, and they serve an excellent espresso," (Kostioukovitch 2009). I experienced this personally, having bought a satisfying espresso at this very McDonald's.

What could be called the first modern, negative Italian reaction to foreign food happened in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when America imported food for Italians suffering from the post-World War II famine. "Half of the Old World viewed this as an indispensable, timely aid, the other half as intolerable expansionism. Italy, custodian of ancient alimentary traditions, was particularly

offended by this ‘culinary colonization,’” (Kostioukovitch 2009). However, obesity has still become a growing phenomenon, and this is reflected in the new ideals for beauty: thinness. Posters of voluptuous women in the 1950s have changed to magazines ads exhibiting thinness. This new ideal of beauty has arisen from the “fear of obesity” (Montanari 2006: 121), in direct contrast to the fear of famine. It remains to be seen if the new wave in childhood obesity persists, and if a trend in marketable diets is ushered in, overriding the Italian mindset of moderation and preference for quality *over* quantity (instead of *in addition to*). As Montanari (2006) wrote, the importation of foreign foods and habits does not eliminate distinct food culture differences. In the case of Italy, regionality and high-quality preferences were made even stronger in spite of industrialization; so perhaps in the case of imported industrial foods, this will hold true. (Kostioukovitch 2009)

Another example of the resistance to foreign food and loyalty to their own is the oft-cited example of McDonalds on the Spanish Steps in Rome. When the multi-billion dollar fast food restaurant tried to start one in that historical area in 1989, an organization dedicated to good, clean and fair food, Slow Food, was pushed into action and stopped the installation. Slow Food was founded in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, in opposition to the world’s continuously faster-paced lifestyles and the negative consequences to the health and tradition of Italian food culture. It promotes food and taste education, hosts foodfare events, and publishes magazines, guides and cookbooks. Today, it has over 100,000 members in 153 countries. The Slow Food movement is a manifestation of Italian pride, respect and seriousness dedicated to high quality foods and the preservation of local tradition (Dickie 2007) (Slow Food Presidia 2009). Harry, an adult from Lewisburg, said, “The Italian culture is to sit down, eat slowly, and stop when you’re full so you don’t shovel in the calories and move on to the next thing. It’s the idea of Slow Food.”

The differences in the way Americans versus Italians view the word *diet* today show differing attitudes and relationships to food by each country’s population. Americans do not have

that deeper connection with their food culture that Italians hold. “[C]ommunicating one’s culinary tastes to the world is a declaration of belonging – to a certain city or town, as well as to a macroregion of the country, east or west, north or south. Moreover, it’s a demonstration of one’s involvement in the grand Italian culinary tradition, popular and beloved by all,” (Kostioukovitch 2009: 372). These approaches have been formed by past influences such as different characteristics of Industrial Ages; historical events that have shaped the modern cuisine; different relationships of consumers towards food; and the contemporary food systems of each country. Overall, the underlying impetus for these differences can be traced back to the origins of each nation. America, a young, unformed nation has not had enough time to develop a culinary history as strong and deeply-rooted as Italy’s, whose cuisine is enriched by over 2000 years of history.

## Chapter 7

### The Consequences of Industrial Food

As mentioned several times in Chapter 5, industrial food is a major component of the contemporary American diet. It is included in the category of market-defined food sphere and was mentioned by many respondents as the reason American obesity rates are so high. A food culture determines how the majority of its members eat, and both American and Italian food cultures rest heavily on past and contemporary influences. The relationships between seller, consumer, and food in Italy versus America are drastically different partly because of the 120 year differences in Industrial Ages in both countries.

In Italy, the relationship is still as intimate and important to Italians as it was in the past. Food is still something to be enjoyed, not manufactured at increasingly faster paces and in increasingly larger amounts, even though that may be changing, according to Italy's (and Europe's) rising childhood obesity rates (Hale 2003) (Livingstone 2001). In America, the food culture is characterized by a faster pace, larger amounts, and factory-made food, which means heavily processed, refined, and highly-caloric. My respondents were correct in believing that the amount of processed foods Americans eat compared to Italians plays a factor in obesity rates. How, exactly, this contributes to 67% of adult Americans overweight or obese is best scientifically explained by David Kessler (2009) *The End to Overeating: Curing America's Insatiable Appetite*, and Michael Pollan's (2006) analysis of the modern American food system. Kessler (2009) includes the consequences of food ingredients, layers of fat, salt, and sugar, government subsidies, and heavy advertising. In Italy, the food ingredients have remained faithful to tradition because of the respect given to these foods, a preference for quality, and the length of their food culture before the economic miracle. America's culinary tradition existed for

only about 200 years prior to the Industrial Age, which itself began 100 years before Italy's economic miracle. The government protects authenticity and quality by way of laws like DOP and IGP, instead of protecting powerful food industries. (Dickie 2007) (Kessler 2009) ("Trust" 2009)

In the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century, prepared and processed foods grew in popularity in America. The middle class was growing, and servants were no longer used because those who would have occupied the servant role moved to the cities to fulfill the demand for labor. "Native-born whites in particular were reluctant to take on full-time service positions, and immigrant girls drifted away from them as soon as job opportunities opened for them in factories or other occupations," (Levenstein 1988: 62). Housewives were thrown into the role of bearing responsibility for every household task, including cooking, a task previously left largely to servants. They felt the pressures of time and their inadequate knowledge of preparing their usual dishes, compounded with the necessity of maintaining the role of successful wife. Advertising processed foods to these women was not difficult. Pillsbury (1998: 82) wrote, "A little advertising, thousands of free samples, some cooking advice, and a few old-fashioned guilt trips about taking care of one's family soon made these foods an integral part of modern life." Soon, even restaurants were buying prepared, prepackaged foods. For decades, desserts had been manufactured outside of the restaurant. Gradually, the new wave of prepared main entrees soon became the norm, especially for large franchises. (Levenstein 1988) (Pillsbury 1998)

The growth of the American food processing industry and its dependence on advertising saw one of its biggest steps with the success of the Heinz brand, founded by Henry J. Heinz in the late 1800s. Canning, already in America since 1819, gained more and more usage in industrial productivity as steam pressure, "crimping," and integration into food processing lines helped to produce 35,000 cans a day by 1910. Through heavy advertising, "Heinza was able to...persuade

American housewives that his pickles and other condiments were as tasty, yet healthier and more convenient, than home-made ones,” (Levenstein 1988: 36).

The contemporary, industrialized American diet has led to a high percent of overweight and obese Americans. As food became industrialized, individualization of people’s meals became the norm, the relationship between seller and consumer became more distant, snacks became common, and, according to Kessler (2009), conditioned hypereating (or overconsumption) further added to the nation’s overweight and obese populations.

Montanari (2006: 93), Italian author, wrote, “Eating together is typical of (even if not exclusive to) the human race.” Shared meals are no longer typical in American society. A person is often just as likely to eat alone, and not think anything of it, as he or she is to eat with another person. The individualization of people’s meals can refer to several aspects of the average American meal. A meal is individualized if the person is eating alone; or, even if, as I have observed in cafes in downtown State College, Pennsylvania, a person sits with another but texts messages on his or her cell phone to someone who is not present for the duration of the meal. A meal can also be individualized in the way that a General Mills study, summarized by Pollan (2006), demonstrated. Out of the 47% of American families who affirmed they had family dinners, permission was obtained to videotape these “family dinners.” The footage showed that each individual prepares his or her own food from leftovers, take-out, or prepared food, including microwave dinners. They made their meals within a timeframe of 45 minutes, but usually not at the same time. Sometimes, family members happened to sit down and eat together, often while texting or watching television. Individualized meals focus almost exclusively on one person and his or her food. This style of eating can be detrimental for many reasons, including limited social interaction, overeating, and a general disrespect or disregard for the food that one is consuming.

However, just because food is industrialized does not mean Americans have to overeat, or even eat it at all. After all, Italians have industrialized food, but three-quarters of the country is

not overweight or obese – although, the rise of childhood Italian obesity must be considered (Hale 2003). Rising rates suggest that, as industrialized food (including fast food) is incorporated into a population’s diet, then increasing rates of obesity follow. It is also conceivable that children do not identify with their culture’s heritage and culinary history because of their younger age and lesser life experience, and so are more susceptible to advertising and trends. In fact, Hale (2003) wrote, “Eating at McDonalds, [Luigi Biagi, Roman] points out, is ‘fashionable’ among young Romans, even though it costs more than pizza and is not healthy.”

Kessler (2009: 5) identifies the key factors of industrialized food that “cause” an individual to overeat, particularly singling out processed foods as they are made in America. He poses the question, “Certainly food had become more readily available in the 1970s and 1980s: We have larger portion sizes, more chain restaurants, more neighborhood food outlets, and a culture that promotes more out-of-home eating. But having food available doesn’t mean we have to eat it. What’s driving us to overeat?”

I observed while in Italy, and have read testimonies, guide books, and cookbooks that claim Italians enjoy every bit of their meal at a leisurely pace and in good company. That is, Italians’ style of eating is mindful and not individualized. As Coons (2000: 210) wrote,

*“There’s a wholesomeness in the way Italians eat that is charming and contagious...Italians plunge into their meal with frank joy, earnest appreciation, and ebullient conversation. Yet they do not overindulge: portions are light, the drinking gentle, late suppers Spartan with concern for digestion uppermost. It’s as if the voice of Mamma still whispers moderation in their ear.”*

I was surprised, at first, by the pitying statements and looks from Italians that I was given if ever I mentioned I had eaten dinner or lunch alone. In utterly stark contrast to the Italian diner, Kessler

(2009: 68) described a woman eating in a restaurant. While her mode of eating is not a generalization for every American, it is certainly common and has probably been observed, if not imitated, by most Americans at some point.

*“I watched as the woman attacked her food with vigor and speed. She held the egg roll in one hand, dunked it into the sauce, and brought it to her mouth while using the fork in her other hand to scoop up more sauce. Occasionally she reached over and speared some of her companion’s french fries. The woman ate steadily, working her way around the plate with scant pause for conversation or rest. When she finally paused, only a little lettuce was left.”*

What has caused this woman, and doubtless many others, to eat her meal at such a hurried pace? Kessler (2009) proposes that industrial foods in America have been engineered so that consumers eat like that. One of his main points is that the layering of the most addictive food qualities to humans— sugary, fatty, and salty – is more than just tasty, especially if processed or prepared in concentrated layers. Now, food scientists and consultants, surveys, and other modern researchers have succeeded in rendering these combinations to be perfectly delicious, utterly satisfying, and, according to Kessler (2009), addictive. Human beings find fats, salts and sugars especially delicious and addictive because these are effects that evolved from our ancestors’ environment. Throughout most of human evolutionary history, human beings were highly active and burned many calories every day. Fats, sugars, and salts are high in calories, making them beneficial to human fitness to consume, and were registered in the brain as very tasty so that our ancestors sought them out. Chemical reactions of opioids and dopamine in the brain, probably an evolutionary remnant, cause humans to enjoy such foods even more. (Kessler 2009)

Palatability is exploited by food industries to create the best-tasting foods possible by incorporating pleasing qualities that engage the full range of our senses. Mouthfeel, salt, fat,

sugar, anticipation, and stimulation are all properties of food that make it palatable, and when layered and used in combination, make it “highly palatable,” (Kessler 2009:36). Highly palatable foods activate the opioid brain circuits and release dopamine. Kessler also said that “cues” (2009:32) are associated with certain addictive foods, activating a person’s psychology to want more. For example, driving by a McDonalds will cause a person to crave a milkshake, even though he or she may not have been entertaining the thought before. The cue, which can be as simple as seeing one’s favorite restaurant, triggers dopamine release, encouraging the person to eat the food and releasing opioids. The effect stimulates a person to continue eating, possibly ignoring natural levels of satiety. This is particularly problematic because cues can come in any form and anywhere, especially in the form of advertisements, something with which modern American culture is overrun. Seeing the foods themselves, of course, can also cue a person to want more. American society is constantly surrounded by just the sort of food that begins the process: those that are laden with fats, sugars, and salts. (Kessler 2009)

When the salts, fats, and sugars are layered multiple times in a food, Kessler (2009: 84) calls them “hyperpalatable:” “Take the creamy rock shrimp tempura at an upmarket Japanese restaurant in Manhattan. The shrimp was rolled in mayonnaise, fried in a sweetened tempura batter, then rolled again in spicy mayonnaise. That’s fat on sugar on fat on fat.”

As can probably be assumed, the overall effect of cues, dopamine, and opioids is overconsumption. Using this logic, America’s high obesity rates are a direct result of hyperpalatable foods and cues bombarding our everyday lives. Dopamine levels do decline over time, because homeostasis curbs the body’s responses, causing a sort of habituation to the cues and foods that release the chemicals. However, if the stimulus is variable, intermittent, or powerful enough, the brain might not curb dopamine response at all. There are so many novel foods on the market that habituation would likely never occur in today’s society. (Kessler 2009)

Kessler uses the chain restaurant Chili's as an example of hyperpalatable food that is marketed directly to a consumer and tends to have the opioid-dopamine effect on its consumers. A food consultant from the company described Chile's food as such (Kessler 2009: 69):

*"He believed the chicken had been chopped and formed much like a meat loaf, with binders added, which makes those calories easy to swallow. Ingredients that hold moisture, including autolyzed yeast extract, sodium phosphate, and soy protein concentrate, further soften the food. I noticed that salt appeared eight times on the label and that sweeteners were there five times, in the form of corn-syrup solids, molasses, honey, brown sugar, and sugar.*

*"This is highly processed?" I asked.*

*"Absolutely, yes. All of this has been processed such that you can wolf it down fast...chopped up and made ultrapalatable...Very appealing looking, very high pleasure in the food, very high caloric density. Rules out all that stuff you have to chew...When you're eating these things, you've had 500, 600, 800, 900 calories before you know it," said the consultant.*  
*"Literally before you know it."*

Intense flavors, including salt and sugar, and mouthfeel, including the effects of fat, are all used by food companies so often because a person usually eats the food too fast to taste subtlety, as this consultant described and as Kessler (2009:73) demonstrated in his restaurant observation. This description of Chili's shows exactly how and why the woman in the restaurant with the egg roll ate exactly as she did. Her manner of eating is in direct contrast to the average Italian sitting down to a meal. Suffice it to say that Italian food consultants and scientists do not seem to be creating foods that are eaten quickly and pack up to 900 calories in an egg roll or two. Italians are more than content to eat the food that they have always eaten, with the exception of consuming more meat in their diet. They are able to keep this tradition and not be influenced

perhaps, in part, because these huge businesses cater to food indulgence. Indulgence is heavily marketed as a right, as Kessler (2009) wrote, and so it has become a component of the modern American food culture. “By encouraging us to consider any occasion for food an opportunity for pleasure and reward, the industry invites us to indulge a lot more often... ‘Self-indulgent treating fulfills a very important psychological function,’ declares one report. ‘Indulging in a premium snack is a self-centered activity, a small moment of relaxation, of ‘me-time,’” wrote Kessler (2009: 80). Food industries appeal to the individualistic nature of indulgent food, seen in snack items. In Italy, huge food industries do not press the indulgent “rights” that American food industries advertise.

At the same time more calories are layered into each food product, there are more of these cheap calories to go around, thanks to the huge government subsidies for corn and soy the resulting surpluses. Huge monocrops of corn and soy are profitable and subsidized by the government because “these two plants are among nature’s most efficient transformers of sunlight and chemical fertilizer into carbohydrate energy (in the case of corn) and fat and protein (in the case of soy,” (Pollan 2008). The use of corn and soy in various forms can be found in just about anything that is processed, as well as in the feed for livestock. In fact, 75% of oils in the American diet, or about 20% of a person’s daily calories, come from soy; and over 50% of the sweeteners, or about 10% of a person’s daily calories, are from corn. (Pollan 2006) (Pollan 2008)

Corn is an example of the evolution of a crop that was once used as an alternative to being intensely farmed today. In the past, farmers used corn to quickly fatten cattle or in times of grass shortage. Cattle are ruminants, which means their four stomachs digest grass and turn it into protein. They have evolved to consume grass and were traditionally raised by farmers in grassy pastures. Corn slowly became more tempting to use because it is a highly efficient grain: it grows quickly, it delivers many more calories compared to the same amount of grass, thus fattening the cow in a shorter amount of time, and it is reliable because it can more easily

withstand seasonal variation and regional differences than other crops. Gradually, the knowledge of grass-growing faded, and corn was more widely used. Farmers all over the United States began growing huge amounts of corn, leading to surpluses that could be stored, and actually driving the price down so much that it was cheaper to buy corn instead of growing it. Because of these surpluses, the government subsidized the construction of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFOs), or modern feed-lot facilities, and enacted a meat grading policy that judges meat by a specific marbling only possible when feeding cattle with corn. Soon, feeding grass to cattle became not only unprofitable, but nearly impossible to do and still earn a living. (Pollan 2006)

If cattle were bred for eating corn, none of this would be a negative problem. Unfortunately, cattle grow sick and diseased by eating it, conditions that are compounded even more by the confined conditions of CAFOs. Cattle are fed large amounts of antibiotics as a result. Not only are we eating meat that is from a possibly diseased (and certainly distressed) animal, but we eat the meat from an animal heavily injected with antibiotics to counter the diseases that living conditions force upon them. Americans continue to demand this kind of meat because the marbling is considered superior, it is cheap and abundant, and because the average American does not understand or know about the implications of the food industries as they stand today. Other foods that contain large amounts of corn in various forms – that is, almost all processed foods in modern America – are cheap, as well. (Kessler 2009) (Levenstein 1988)

However, the low price is superficial, because the true cost of corn can be seen in external costs, including rising obesity rates and its associated ills. Corn- and soy-based products contribute to obesity because of their low nutritional quality combined with low price. These foods are the processed snacks and liters of soda that are cheaper, calorie-for-calorie, than healthy, whole foods like vegetables and fruit. They are the foods that are heavily advertised and very often appeal to children who then clamor for them to their parents. Pollan (2008) wrote,

“Very simply, we have been breeding crops for yield, not nutritional quality, and when you breed for one thing, you invariably sacrifice another.” To obtain the same nutritional benefit out of processed foods today, one must eat more. Many of those extra calories are “empty calories,” or substance with no nutritional value. Cheap meat is one of the driving forces of fast food restaurants. The Dollar Menu at McDonalds and all processed and prepackaged foods would not exist if not for large government subsidies. (Pollan 2006)

While a cornucopia of food is positive, the manner in which it is served in America, and the fact that most of it is in the form of corn and soy, is negative. Food is present at all times during the day, and often in the form of prepackaged snacks. Snacking has had such a malicious consequence on the American diet because, according to Kessler (2009), it occurs without a decrease in mealtime calorie intake. As Tim, a State College undergraduate, said, “The snack food industry doesn’t exist there [in Italy] as much. People here eat all the time during the day.” Bigger, higher-calorie meals are eaten more often today than in the past, in addition to snacking between meals, something encouraged by advertising from restaurant and food service industries. Simon (2010) wrote, “...the food industry spends upwards of \$36 billion annually to market its products...Marketing strategies such as ‘Dollar Menus’ and ‘Meal Combos’ are designed to get you to think you’re getting a great deal. But what they really do is get people to consume more while corporations get rich.” As Erika, an undergraduate from Lewisburg, says about restaurants, “The portion sizes are ridiculous.”

While food available all day long has not been a part of Italian culture, it has become prevalent in recent years, along with a subsequent rise in childhood Italian obesity (Hale 2003). In Florence and Milan, too, food was present throughout the day. Florence is a tourist-friendly city, so perhaps the snacks found a market in the (often American) tourism. Milan, though, is not tourist-based, and yet snacks and prepackaged foods are available all day long throughout the city. The rise in snack foods, however, is minimal compared to their prevalence in American

food culture. For example, vending machines were not as common as they are in America.

Vending machines are the perfect example of the venue for individualization of a meal: a person does not even have to speak to a person to obtain his or her food, and nearly always eats the vending machine food alone or on-the-go.

Kessler believes that culture cannot withstand the onslaught of hyperpalatable foods. Instead, it becomes the culture. “As the availability of hyperpalatable food is exported, it will become more apparent that conditioned hypereating does not respect national borders,” (Kessler 2009: 176). The advent of rising Italian childhood obesity rates testifies to Kessler’s prediction. (Hale 2003) (Livingstone 2001)

Industrialized foods and the resulting low quality, highly palatable characteristics that can be seen in American processed foods have not posed a problem in Italy up until the present-day problem with Italian childhood obesity rate. In very general terms, this is because the delay in the Italian Industrialization Age, and the consequent attitudes of seller, consumer, and food. While Italians retained their respect of quality and tradition, America’s path led to food being treated as a business.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusions

The majority of Americans, or 67%, are obese or overweight, and more Americans are obese than are overweight (32.7%). By contrast, Italy remains among the leanest of all industrialized countries, with 18% of obese or overweight adults, and 8.5% obese adults. The percentages of obese adult Americans and Italians are increasing.

My analysis of the eating habits and perceptions of the Mediterranean diet of Italians in Florence and Milan is based on experience and seven months' observation in Florence and Milan, Italy, a published thesis on Mediterranean dietary perceptions of Italians, and background research. Italian food culture includes specific guidelines about times to eat certain meals, and how to eat specific foods. The Mediterranean diet of Ancel Keys is often followed in modern times, with the exception of higher consumption of protein and refined grains. Overall, I observed the respect that Italians in Florence and Milan show towards their food culture by the division of meals, a lack of individualized snacking or eating, and traditions such as mealtimes and *caffè* as moments to gather with friends or family for company and conversation.

My interviews included questions on how respondents perceive the American diet and their personal insights into obesity, while reflecting on the differences between Italian and American diets. I also observed and conducted background research. My interview style was casual, so tangents and other opinions related to my questions were considered equally. The data includes four separate groups: Undergraduates from Lewisburg, West Virginia and State College, Pennsylvania of the ages 18 to 22 constitute two separate groups; and adults born on or before the year 1975 from Lewisburg, WV and State College, PA are the last two groups. I have 9 WV undergraduates, 10 WV adults, 12 PA undergraduates, and 9 PA adults for a total of 40

respondents. This sample is a sample of convenience, chosen because I have access to the above cities. They represent two different environments and possibly different mindsets, and cannot be said to be representative of nation-wide trends.

Overarching trends include the following: while roughly half of the respondents saw *diet* as a lifestyle, people assume the average American diet requires dieting. The top two mentioned factors were that Americans eat too many processed foods *or* Italians ate natural foods; and that the lifestyle of Italians is less stressful than that of Americans *or* the American culture is built around being as efficient and fast as possible, including eating. In general, many responses seemed to touch upon the differences between Italians' and Americans' relationships to food. No one mentioned anything about the American diet being healthy or good in any general way, in direct contrast to Italians. Some Americans I interviewed could be said to portray a sort of shame regarding the American diet. No one showed or voiced pride. Also in contrast to Italy, foods that were mentioned as a part of the American diet were never regional specialties (typicalities), but hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, or fast food. Often, people mentioned what is *in* the foods, or the bad quality of them.

Other trends mentioned were the fact that people do not have time to cook, and that the present, American, unhealthy eating habits are a change from the healthy ones of the past (a belief only mentioned by adults). Time and convenience were often cited as the reasons why people eat fast food, prepackaged, or processed food. These food types were frequently mentioned, and all respondents thought they were unhealthy foods and played a large part in the American diet. Responses to the question about the frequency of eating out at a fast food or traditional restaurant showed that eating out is thought to be common while it used to be a luxury.

The majority of both undergraduates and adults had a personal eating pattern, but every answer was different. This is another opposing factor when comparing Italian and American food cultures. The Italian food culture can be described in such a way that defines typical food types

and even times to eat, and Italians in Florence and Milan often defined their diets in just that way. In contrast, according to responses, American food culture can be generalized and loosely defined through, among other things, a lack of a nationally common structure and individualized eating preferences and patterns.

My original hypothesis was that the concept of *diet* epitomizes the differences between Italian and American food cultures. Even though respondents, and adults especially, tended to view the Mediterranean diet as a lifestyle, other factors show the different concepts that Americans hold regarding the word *diet*. Almost all respondents believed that the average American will diet at least once a year, and this shows that *diet* exemplifies a crucial difference between food cultures.

The responses to the open-ended final question included common themes across and within age groups. These include: the lack of Americans' exercise as opposed to Italians' frequent walking, mentioned by slightly more adults than undergraduates; a factor within what is defined as the "market-defined food sphere;" and that Italians eat natural and healthy foods compared Americans who eat processed and unhealthy foods. Overall, when comparing adults and undergraduates, the biggest differences are in multiple categories. More undergraduates than adults think that Italians eat less processed and more natural foods, and that the main difference is in the lack of an American food culture tradition while Italians have a strong one. More adults than undergraduates believe that the role of exercise and transportation (by bike and foot) is an important difference between cultures.

Some of the major differences between contemporary American and Italian food cultures that could signify contributing factors to obesity can be seen in the way each country views the word *diet*. Through observation and daily interaction with Italians, I found that *diet* signifies eating habits characterized by genuine pleasure, respect, quality, heritage, tradition, and pride in Italy. Some of these factors have grown from a more serious consideration of food, including its

importance in unifying Italy at different times throughout its history, and preference or knowledge of regional typicalities. In addition, a negative reaction to the globalization of industrial foods has strengthened Italians' preferences for local and regional foods. In America, by contrast, the term *diet* is often synonymous to losing weight. The typical American seems to lack a sense of respect and seriousness that Italians have for food culture. In contrast to Italy, this might be seen in the lack of knowing about a broader, country- or region-wide food culture tradition, and a focus on quantity rather than quality. Other factors that have shaped these differing views of *diet* derive in part from different timing and characteristics of Industrial Ages, past food influences that have shaped the modern cuisine, a difference in focus on quantity versus quality, and the contemporary food systems of each country.

The relationships between seller, consumer, and food in Italy and America are different, in part, because of the development of each country's Industrial Ages. The industrialization of each country evolved in two different ways, leading to a profit-driven mentality in America regarding the sale and consumption of food, a result of huge food industries. This did not happen in Italy because the economic miracle (industrialization) did not have as much time to evolve as America's, and when it did, it actually strengthened Italian food culture. Furthermore, Italian food culture before industrialization had even longer to evolve. In addition, the powers that determine the food on a person's plate include the government, which actively protects typicalities in Italy; while in America, the government heavily subsidizes the growth of food industry.

A consequence of industrialization is, according to Kessler (2009), "conditioned hypereating." He proposes that industrial foods in America have been engineered so that consumers psychologically and physiologically crave the high content of salt, fat, and sugar. In Italy, the food ingredients have remained faithful to Italians' preference for quality. The Italian government protects authenticity and quality by way of laws like DOP and IGP and, as

mentioned, stronger preference to these foods is a backlash against industrial food. By contrast, government support for intensive agriculture has led to corn surpluses and animal feeding lots in America. While a cornucopia of food is positive, the manner in which it is industrialized in America, and the fact that most of it is in the form of corn and soy, is negative.

The American and Italian food cultures are complex and intertwined with a myriad of influences that I am unable to cover within the scope of this research. This is primarily an anthropological study of both contemporary cultures, with my observations and responses gathering reasons to comparing and contrasting American and Italian food cultures and the links to rising obesity rates. These responses highlight what aspects of American and Italian cultures stand out as prominent reasons for rising obesity rates. I used these responses to guide my background research.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

**Diana Renee Zahuranec: drz5004**

### Education

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 2006-2010

-BA in Cultural Anthropology; BA in Italian; BS in International Studies

-Schreyer Honors College

-Thesis in Nutritional Sciences: *The Meaning of "Diet:" A Cross-Cultural Comparison of American and Italian Food Cultures and Links to Obesity*

### ABROAD:

The Institute at Palazzo Rucellai Education Abroad program in Florence, Italy 2009

-Focus: Anthropology and Italian

College credit in Austria and Germany with Advanced Placement English class 2005

-Focus: Cultural immersion

### Experience

Internship at US State Department in Public Affairs Office, Milan, Italy 2009

-Translated speeches

-Events photographer

-Interim secretary for Consul General for two weeks

Leader for ORION 2008-2009

-Six-day wilderness orientation program for incoming University Park freshmen

-Inspired teamwork, group cohesion, and lasting friendships

Blackhawk Homestead, PA; The Greenbrier Nursery, WV; West Virginia State Fair 2006-2008

-Production and customer service

Habitat for Humanity mission trips to southern WV and Anchorage, Alaska 2001-2005

-Volunteer work

### Grants and Awards Received

Josephine Rhea Award for Excellence in Italian	2010
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant	2009
Schreyer Honors College Summer Internship Grant	2009
Plum Creek Community Scholarship	2006

### Certifications and Memberships

The Irving L. Foster Memorial Award for Outstanding Achievement in Italian	2010
Josephine Rhea Award for Excellence in Italian Studies	2010
Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society	2009
Gamma Kappa Alpha National Italian Honors Society	2008-2009
Secretary and member of Penn State Anthropology Society	2007-2008
Secretary and member of Penn State Outing Club	2006-2009
First Aid, CPR and AED, and Wilderness First Aid by SOLO certified	2007-2009
Modern Music Masters, a national music honors society	2003-2006

Additional Accomplishments

Won WV Lion's Club Youth Exchange Program essay contest; lived in Finland for six weeks with host family and at an international camp	2005
Placed first in annual WV SCORES Art Festival contest, fine arts	2005
Selected for Governor's School for the Arts, piano discipline; three-week residential program at West Virginia University	2004