

“Nice Greek Girls Are Supposed to Marry Greek Boys
... and Feed Everyone”: Food, Gender, and Ethnicity in
My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002)

ANCA-LUMINIȚA IANCU
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Abstract

My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002) captures the complex life of a Greek-American family and the struggles of the main protagonist, Toula Portokalos, to reconcile her own desires as a second-generation immigrant with those of her ethnic parents, especially in terms of gender roles and expectations. In the movie, Toula’s journey towards self-discovery as a confident woman is peppered with food references, as food represents an essential “ingredient” that brings and holds the family together. Therefore, this essay sets out to examine how food practices and choices are both a reflection of ethnic identity and of conflicting generational beliefs about gender roles and expectations in the traditional family portrayed in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

Keywords: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Greek American, food, ethnic culture, gender, first- and second-generation immigrants

In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (MBFGW) (2002), Toula Portokalos tells the story of her large Greek-American family who lives in a Chicago suburb. The movie, a very successful romantic comedy, centers on the tensions between Toula, a second-generation daughter, and her first-generation parents regarding her choice to

marry outside the ethnic community.¹ Tired of her daily routine at her parents' ethnic restaurant, Toula, aged thirty, decides to take some computer classes at the local community college to help the family business, a choice which culminates in her dating and marrying Ian Miller, a non-Greek. In *MBFGW*, Toula undergoes a process of self-discovery as she strives to reconcile the Greek and American parts of her identity, constantly torn between her duty as an obedient ethnic daughter and her desire to become a self-possessed young woman. Her personal journey to find an individual identity is peppered with food references as food is a significant element of the Greek-American collective identity and culture, an essential "ingredient" that brings and holds the family together. Therefore, this essay sets out to examine how, in *MBFGW*, food practices and choices are both a reflection of ethnic identity and of conflicting generational beliefs about gender roles and expectations in the traditional family.

In the introduction to *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, Anne Bower claims that in movies "filmmakers turn to food to communicate important aspects of characters' emotions, along with their personal and cultural identities" (1), pointing to the fact that "whether food is coded negatively or positively, whether it plays a major or a minor role, it is often a major ingredient in the cinematic experience" (4). Borrowing from Gayle Poole, Bower further states that "food serve[s] as a 'remarkably concentrated signifier'—a powerful semiotic system that effectively communicates ideas about cultural formation and identity" (10). In a similar vein, Laura Lindenfeld and Fabio Parasecoli argue that "In their seeming normalcy, representations of food on film help establish, question, reinforce, reproduce, or destroy cultural and political assumptions about society"; consequently, "images of food that appear as neutral elements of everyday life within film invite us to unpack social dynamics and power relations that we might not otherwise notice" (27), in this case, issues of ethnic identity and prescribed gender roles.

In ethnic communities, food is important because it helps immigrants to maintain the connections to their home countries and

to negotiate the emotional challenges posed by the process of acculturation to the mainstream society and culture. According to Donna Gabaccia, renowned historian of international migration, in her influential volume *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, in the past, “immigrants sought to maintain their familiar foodways because food initiated and maintained traditional relationships, expressed the extent of social distance between people, demonstrated status and prestige” (51), a statement valid in many ethnic communities even today. Parasecoli concurs by suggesting in his article “Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities” that one of the strategies of adaptation to the complex experience of immigration is “by recreating a sense of place around food production, preparation, and consumption, both at the personal and interpersonal levels” (416).² Therefore, as “Ingredients, dishes, and practices have the potential to become cultural markers that identify and rally individuals and communities, who frequently display fierce attachment to their food traditions” (Parasecoli 423), especially in ethnic communities, giving up their food traditions feels for many immigrants in the United States as if they were “abandon[ing] community, family, and religion” (Gabaccia 54), the social networks that help them to navigate the social cultural spaces of the American society. Such is the case of the Greek-American family in the movie, whose “fierce attachment” to the ethnic food practices in order to preserve the family identity and the community culture illustrates Tina Bucuvalas’ statement in her entry on Greece in *Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia* that rich food during family meals and on celebratory occasions “plays a significant role in maintaining Greek ethnic identity in the United States” (226).³

In the Greek-American community, ethnic identity and gender roles in the traditional family are strongly connected. According to Pamela Goyan Kittler and Kathryn P. Sucher, “the traditional Greek home is strongly patriarchal ... the head of the household is the unquestioned authority, with responsibility for supporting the immediate family” (413). In *MBFGW*, Gus Portokalos,⁴ Toula’s father, is the patriarch of the family, who is

also “accountable for the family reputation within the community” (Kittler and Sucher 413). Since ethnic identity represents a badge of honor for him as a first-generation immigrant, he is intent on maintaining the Greek culture at all costs. Their house, for instance, displays key symbols of Greek architecture (it is modeled on the Parthenon, as Toula remarks at the beginning of the movie), complete with the Greek flag flying in the yard and the garage door proudly painted in white and blue, the colors of the Greek flag. More importantly, though, Gus demands that “each family member” should “behave in ways that maintain family dignity and status” (Kittler and Sucher 413). That is also the reason why, as Toula recalls, he has tried to instill the Greek values and pride for the ethnic heritage into his children at an early age, lecturing them every morning over a hearty breakfast about “the history of our people, the great civilization: the Greeks” (*MBFGW* 0:05:01-0:05:08).

At the same time, as Kittler and Sucher assert, “Greek women have traditionally focused on family, home, and church. Even after coming to the United States, many Greek-American women continue in this role” (413). In keeping with their traditional roles and because “eating is more than a necessity ... it is one of the great pleasures of life and an essential component of social activity” (Bucuvalas 225), in the Greek-American home, first-generation women immigrants have placed great emphasis on “creating large home-cooked Greek meals” (Bucuvalas 227). One might argue that for Maria, Toula’s mother, and Voula, Toula’s aunt, as first-generation immigrant women, cooking traditional food has become their badge of ethnic and personal pride. For Maria, in particular, food represents “a powerful tool in constructing identity” (López-Rodríguez 78), ethnic – as a first-generation immigrant –, and gender identity – as a woman. A dedicated Greek-American wife and mother, Maria is in charge of the physical and emotional well-being of her family, using food not only as the universal remedy for physical hunger but also as the panacea for any emotional problem. At the beginning of the movie, Toula remarks that her mother “was always cooking foods filled with warmth and

wisdom” (0:03:57-0:03:59), never forgetting to add “that side dish of steaming hot guilt: ... Niko, don’t play with the food! When I was your age, we didn’t have food!” (0:03:57-0:04:09). In “Adapting and Adopting: The Migrating Recipe,” Marina de Camargo Heck discusses the concept of “food memories,” arguing that they “are always about love and hate, pleasure and disgust,” as “pleasurable tastes” or “traumatic culinary experiences” shape a person’s future attitude towards certain dishes or ingredients (211). “The guilt” Maria seems to add to her delicious dishes might stem from her desire to make her children understand that food should not be taken for granted, remembering her own traumatic “food memories” caused by the scarcity of food she had to endure as a young woman in war-riddled Greece before emigration. In addition, the fact that she tries to always have plenty of food on the table for her family may also be interpreted as her desire to create pleasant “food memories” for her children.

Furthermore, as an immigrant mother, Maria has tried to maintain the ethnic culture by passing on the traditional culinary practices and recipes to her daughters, Athena and Toula. Food can also “script traditional roles (the mother in the kitchen)” (Bower 6), so, in the process of cooking together, Maria has sought to instill in her daughters the ethnic expectations about gender roles in the family. Nevertheless, her daughters have chosen different paths in life: Athena has married a Greek man and is the proud mother of three young boys, having successfully fulfilled the gender expectations in the Greek community, summarized by Toula as follows: “Because nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies and feed everyone until the day we die” (0:02:03-0:02:12). Toula, on the other hand, has been aware of *being different* at an early age, a difference brought about by specific food choices, among others. Thus, her mother’s home-cooked *moussaka*⁵ as a choice for lunch and the requirement to attend Greek school in the afternoons marked her as an outsider in the school environment, excluded from the community of her blond American classmates who used to eat their “Wonder Bread sandwiches” together (0:03:06-0:03:35). Now, still

single at age thirty, Toula listens to her father's constant refrain every morning on the way to the family restaurant: "you'd better get married soon; you're starting to look old" (0:01:52-0:01:58). "Past [her] expiration date" (0:07:42-0:07:43), according to Greek expectations, Toula points out that for "nice Greek girls who don't find a husband" the alternative is to "work in the family restaurant" (0:07:35-0:07:39). "I wish I had a different life; I wish I was braver and prettier, or just happy," she often says to herself with a sigh, as she serves at tables and cooks Greek food for the customers and other family members in their restaurant, *Dancing Zorba's*, only to reach a disheartening conclusion: but "it's useless to dream because nothing ever changes" (0:12:59-0:13:10).

One thing that does not change, indeed, is that, whether in the family restaurant or in the Portokalos home, the members of the extended family heartily debate important family problems over plates filled with flavorful Greek dishes, since "family meals" may also function as "an important place where shifting gender and ethnic identities are negotiated between generations and genders" (Vallianatos and Raine 357). One such instance is when her father voices his concern over Toula's marital status to two of his close confidants, Taki, Toula's uncle, and his wife Voula. Over a substantial breakfast enjoyed by Gus and Taki, and a cup of coffee for Voula, Gus expresses his genuine shock that Toula has not only refused to go to Greece to find a suitable husband – the ultimate solution since she has not been able to find one in the Greek-American community – but "It's like she doesn't want to get married" (0:09:26-0:09:29), a most unusual attitude from a young unmarried woman in their community.

Instead, Toula expresses a desire for further education, which adds to her father's disbelief and grief. When she tries to persuade him that she should take some computer classes at the community college to help the family business, her question "Don't you want me to do something with my life?" receives a desperate answer from her father: "Yes! Get married! Make babies! You look so old!" (0:16:57-0:17:06). At this point, Gus feels deeply disappointed because he sees no value in Toula becoming more

educated instead of focusing on getting married and starting a family, like her sister. Maria, on the other hand, as a woman and mother, has a better grasp of her daughter's desire for self-improvement: "I know what you want ... You have a spirit. You want to see things; you want to learn. I know, you're from my side" (0:17:28-0:17:40). Yet Toula is discouraged because, given the prescribed traditional roles in their family and community, the chances that her father will allow her to study further are slim as "the man is the head of the house" (0:17:48-0:17:49), and she knows that he always has the last word. At this moment, based on her long experience as a married woman, Maria shares with her daughter an important piece of advice regarding gender roles, pointing to one of women's strengths in the family: "the man is the head, but the woman is the neck, and she can turn the head anyway she wants" (0:17:55-0:18:03). Indeed, when Maria tries to take Toula's side, Gus' question "What for she needs more school? She is smart enough for a girl!" (0:18:32-0:18:35) supports Kittler and Sucher's statement that "education is valued for Greek men but often considered unnecessary for women" (413).⁶ Yet, much to his surprise, his wife is not willing to put up with his patriarchal attitude in this situation: "Oh, you think you're smarter than me?" (0:18:36-0:18:38), emphasizing the complexity of her role as a homemaker, wife, mother, and ethnic woman: "I run the restaurant, I cook, I clean, I wash for you, and I raised three kids, and I teach Sunday school. It's lucky for me to have you to tie my shoes!" (0:18:44-0:18:59). Obviously, faced with such fierce determination, Gus grudgingly agrees to allow Toula to take the classes.

The experience at the community college represents the beginning of Toula's journey towards self-discovery. First of all, the process of changing her physical appearance (putting on make-up, wearing contact lenses instead of glasses, and dressing up) mirrors her inner change into a more confident person. Moreover, at the college cafeteria, she finds the courage to share a table and enjoy a sandwich with her female classmates, who welcome her in their midst, something she had longed for since the *moussaka* incident in grade school. This time, it is *her choice* to have a

sandwich for lunch instead of an ethnic dish, and she no longer feels *different* or *the other* among her female college mates. Secondly, she realizes that the computer classes she has taken can open other job opportunities for her (the change she had been waiting for), so she is thrilled when her aunt Voula agrees to hire her at the travel agency she owns. Yet, there is another obstacle to overcome, persuading her father to allow her to change the job and work at the travel agency instead of the family restaurant. This matter asks again for a smart female solution, offered by experienced Maria and Voula, who, over coffee and pie in the family restaurant, manage to persuade Gus that it was his idea to send Toula to the agency, a clever maneuver to reach their goal while upholding his belief that, as the head of the household, he always finds the best solutions for his family. More importantly, while working at her aunt's travel agency, Toula gets acquainted with Ian Miller, a non-Greek. Actually, they had met before, only briefly, when she had served him coffee during lunch with a colleague at their family restaurant some time ago, but their relationship starts only after their meeting at the agency. Toula and Ian enjoy each other's company, as they talk about their lives over pleasant dinners in various restaurants or during relaxed walks in the evening. Still, she is careful to keep these meetings secret, fully aware that, given her ethnic background and her overbearing family, her parents would never agree to her dating a non-Greek. She is right, of course, because, after a while, her parents find out about her relationship and are shocked, having never expected such a development.

By deciding to date a non-Greek, Toula has become *the other* in her own family, as the first female member who has dared to transgress the unwritten ethnic rule to choose a partner exclusively from the ethnic community. Her parents, therefore, react to this potential intercultural relationship according to the ethnic and gender roles they uphold in the family. Her father considers Toula's act both as a personal betrayal (of him as the patriarch of the family) and a collective betrayal (of the ethnic values and culture). However, initially, Gus' anger and frustration

are directed at Ian, whom he blames for having completely disregarded his role as the head of the family, having had the audacity to date Toula without her father's explicit permission. Nevertheless, when Ian asks him, Gus is adamant: "No!" (0:39:21-0:39:42); he will not allow Toula to date a non-Greek under any circumstances. In addition, Gus is convinced that this relationship is the direct result of her getting an education: "Didn't I say it's a mistake to educate women? But nobody listened to me. Now we have a boyfriend in the house. Is he a nice Greek boy? Oh no, no Greek. No Greek, a "xeno." A "xeno" with big long hair on top of his head!" (0:40:01-0:40:29). Kittler and Sucher argue that "Though many women are encouraged by their parents to marry within the Greek community, increased exposure at school and on the job has led to a rise in interethnic and interreligious marriages" (413), a situation which Gus has become painfully aware of when he found out about his daughter's relationship with Ian. Moreover, Gus also feels betrayed because he expected her to respect the traditional gender roles, to follow her mother's example and become a dedicated Greek-American wife and mother, and this should have been done by finding a Greek husband, not by taking courses at the community college. Gus strongly believes that Toula's duty as a woman is also to carry on the ethnic culture, and, in his opinion, marriage to "a xeno" would potentially prevent her from passing on the ethnic heritage to her future children, thus jeopardizing the family honor and reputation in the larger Greek-American community.

Toula's mother is not happy about this relationship either, but she does not take it as personally as her husband. While her tone seems slightly more conciliatory: "OK, maybe you are having a little romance," the conclusion is the same: "But end it now!" (0:40:52-0:41:00). Hoping that, as a woman, her mother would understand her predicament, Toula confesses that she loves Ian, but perhaps at a loss of how to deal with this unexpected situation, Maria suggests the only solution for any problem, food, the perfect remedy to assuage her daughter's emotional turmoil: "Toula, eat something!" (0:41:07-0:41:08). Yet Toula is determined to stand by

her decision to date Ian, despite staunch parental disapproval, so her parents must find a solution to prevent a potentially disgraceful situation in case she decided to marry “a xeno.” Consequently, eager to offer his daughter a suitable ethnic alternative, her father invites to their home several eligible (older and younger) Greek-American men to bond with Toula over her mother’s tasty meals so that she would eventually forget about Ian and do “the right thing,” choose a Greek-American husband. In this situation, the home-cooked food might function both as a way of attracting suitors to their home to meet Toula, a potential wife, and as a future promise that they will marry into a family where the gender roles and traditions are respected, and the savory ethnic food is appreciated.

In the meantime, Toula agrees to meet Ian’s parents, a decision that takes their relationship to a new level. They have dinner in the subdued atmosphere of the Millers’ stylish dining room, where, over coffee and a glass of wine, Harriet Miller, Ian’s mother, tries to break the ice by asking Toula about the significance of her name, followed by an awkward attempt to connect her ethnicity to that of one of her husband’s former receptionists. As Ian’s parents struggle to remember whether the receptionist was Armenian or Guatemalan, the only thing that seems important is that the receptionist and Toula are both ethnic-Americans, regardless of the ethnic culture they belong to. So, once Toula’s identity as *the other* has been established, dinner ends with a piece of cheesecake, a typical American dessert. Although Harriet’s culinary skills are not showcased in the movie as are Maria’s – since the story is told from the perspective of the ethnic family – one might argue that Ian’s mother also believes in the power of food to overcome an emotional situation. Thus, the cheesecake might represent a food choice meant to alleviate the tension brought about by Ian’s choice to date and possibly marry an ethnic-American (maybe a new situation in the Miller family); at the same time, after his parents have been faced with the accomplished fact, the sweet treat might also signify their reluctant acceptance of his choice, and of Toula, respectively.

Unsurprisingly, when Ian proposes to Toula one evening, she agrees happily, determined to marry him, against all odds. Of course, this is upsetting news for her father, who, after having done everything he thought was possible to prevent this marriage, must admit that he has been defeated, although he can still not understand why she “is doing this” to him, as he had always hoped she would marry in their church (0:48:08-0:48:12). Ian loves Toula very much, so he is willing to be baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church in order to appease her father; consequently, over a Greek home-cooked dinner in the family restaurant, Ian is ready to listen to Gus’ informative explanation about the significance of baptism in the Greek Orthodox faith and about his newly-found luck of “becoming Greek” as a result of his marriage to Toula.

After Ian’s baptism ceremony, it is time for him to be introduced to all the members of the extended family, another occasion for a lavish festive meal, particularly as it coincides with the Easter celebration. In a merry atmosphere of Greek music and dancing, while all the members of the large family are savoring the delicious Greek dishes – presumably cooked by Maria and Toula – Aunt Voula expresses her genuine concern that Toula, who seems to be among the few not holding a heaped plate in her hand, is not eating enough, a rather unusual behavior for a happy Greek-American bride-to-be. Voula’s remark is, however, merely an ice breaker because she is eager to welcome Ian into the family in a more personal way, by offering to cook for him: “When you come to my house and I cook for you?” (0:56:55-0:56:58). Upon Toula’s discreet disclosure of Ian’s dietary choice: “Ian is a vegetarian. He doesn’t eat meat” (0:57:12-0:57:16), Voula, who emphasizes the fact that she is the best cook in the family, is left speechless for a moment. At this most unusual revelation, repeated by Voula in disbelief, “He don’t eat no meat?” (0:57:18-0:57:19), the entire family are taken aback, too, but even the experienced cook and resourceful person, her aunt has the solution: “That’s OK. I make lamb” (0:57:27-0:57:29), which helps dissipate the tension. The stunned reaction of the family members at Ian’s choice not to eat meat points to “the gendering of food practices” (Leer 14).⁷ In *How*

America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture, Jennifer Jensen Wallach argues that, in general, in society, meat has been “associated with virility,” so men were expected “to prefer heartier food, particularly meat, and to disdain more ‘feminine’ food such as salads,” the assumption being that “men needed meat in order to fulfill their role in the family” (133-134). In this context, given the fact that meat is also a staple food in the Greek cuisine, it is no wonder that Voula’s question “What do you mean he don’t eat no meat?” (0:57:21-0:57:23) expresses the general shock at hearing that, on top of not being Greek, Ian is also a vegetarian, thereby consolidating his status of *other* in their ethnic environment. Nevertheless, Voula’s solution to cook lamb for him, as “a vegetarian alternative,” points to the family’s willingness to accept him in their midst despite his culinary *otherness*.

The second part of the movie focuses on the wedding preparations, capturing the ways in which each family negotiates the complex situation caused by Toula and Ian’s relationship. In opposition to the noisy and merry atmosphere in Toula’s home, in the same tasteful ambience of the Miller dining room, Toula, Ian, and his parents are having an after-dinner glass of cognac, trying to bridge the moments of awkward silence with half smiles. As a polite guest, Toula compliments Ian’s parents on the drink; “It’s delicious,” she murmurs with a smile (0:58:11), while Ian eventually broaches the subject of the wedding. His mother offers to check available dates at the North Shore Country Club (of which they are presumably members) as a possible wedding venue, but is taken aback when Ian tells them that they have decided to marry “in Toula’s church because we are not very religious and her family is, really is” (0:58:36-0:58:42), another choice accepted by his parents with quiet resignation and a stunned look, especially after they see the brochure of the venue chosen by Toula’s family, aptly named “Aphrodite’s Palace.”

On the other hand, organizing a wedding is a complex affair in the Portokalos family, where each member has his/her say regarding a certain aspect of the wedding. This, of course, gives rise to heated debates which take place over food in the Portokalos

kitchen, with Toula's parents and siblings arguing over the wedding guest list and invitations. There is always plenty of food available in the kitchen for anyone who is hungry, so, when, in the middle of the discussion, Niko, Toula's brother, says that he is hungry, as a caring future mother-in-law, Maria includes Ian in the offer of preparing something for both of them, whether Ian is hungry or not: "Ian, are you hungry? No, I already ate. OK, I'll make you something" (1:00:41-1:00:47). Perhaps her encouraging invitation "Ian, eat, eat!" (1:01:13-1:01:15) is meant to let Ian know that he has been accepted into the family, but it might also be an affectionate suggestion that a hearty home-cooked meal can provide the necessary strength in crucial decision-making situations, in this case, a tasty "reinforcement" to help him agree with their extensive wedding guest list and the Greek-themed invitations Maria has ordered for them (with his mother's name spelled "Harry" instead of "Harriet").

After the guest list has been accepted and the invitations have been sent, Toula invites Ian's parents for a "quiet dinner" (1:05:05) to meet her parents and siblings. Much to her surprise, though, her mother has decided to turn the dinner into yet another celebratory feast for the entire extended family. Consequently, as a dedicated cook and welcoming hostess, an hour before they arrive, Maria is busy preparing the food in the kitchen, surrounded by heaps of peeled potatoes, vegetables, and skinned chicken ready to be cooked. As she wants to make a great first impression, she has asked Taki to bring in a fresh lamb to be roasted slowly on a spit in the front yard, another instance that illustrates "the gendering of food practices" (Leer 14), this time in terms of food preparation. In the chapter "Food, Drink and Identity," Peter Lugosi points out that "within domestic settings ... some areas of cooking, for example barbeques, may be considered male domains," while "the provision of food for family members, control over the household food supplies, and domestic competence (e.g. in cooking ability) are assumed to be part of a woman's role in the household" (31). This assertion might provide an explanation for the fact that Gus and other male members of the family are in charge of supervising the

roasting process in the yard, while the women are busy cooking the side dishes in the kitchen, thus reinforcing the traditional roles of men and women in the public (outside/yard) and private (inside/kitchen) spaces.

As expected, the encounter between the parents represents another culinary highlight of the movie that reveals more intricate connections between food, ethnicity, *otherness*, and gender roles. Upon arrival, Ian's parents are completely shocked by the impressive gathering of people in Toula's front yard, with food sizzling and family members dancing and socializing merrily, and they are not sure how to react to the effusive display of passionate welcome into Toula's family. After meeting Gus and Maria and being introduced to the large family of brothers, sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews, Harriet offers Maria a gift, a Bundt cake, a common American dessert. However, this sweet food item creates an awkward culinary moment based on a cultural misunderstanding. As Harriet presents Maria with the cake, both women are puzzled: Harriet because she has assumed that the cake would be an appropriate gift for the hostess for a first visit, and she cannot understand Maria's confusion over the sweet treat, and Maria, perplexed because she does not know what the gift represents as she is not familiar with Bundt cakes. Eventually, after being told by a relative that it is a cake, still wondering why a cake would have a hole in it, Maria smiles politely and thanks Harriet for the food gift.

Initially, Maria and Gus are delighted to have distinguished guests in their home, and, as a sign of welcome into the family, they proceed to shower them with rich, tasty Greek food, starting with the appetizers, *spanakopita*,⁸ a Greek-style pie filled with spinach and cheese. After the appetizers, Rodney and Harriet Miller are invited to "sample" some Ouzo, a popular Greek alcoholic beverage. Ian's father associates the taste with one that they are familiar with, of licorice, while Ian's mother remarks that the drink is "delicious" (1:10:21-1:10:22), similar to Toula's polite solution to bridge an awkward moment during her visit to their home. As she had done before with Ian, Aunt Voula takes it upon herself to

make the guests comfortable, so she encourages them to drink more: “Another! You’re Greek now; don’t be shy” (1:10:33-1:10:). On the one hand, Voula’s invitation to share the Greek beverage might be interpreted as a sign of acceptance into the ethnic family; on the other hand, Harriet and Rodney Miller’s willingness to taste the drink (and later the food) offered so generously might suggest that they, in turn, have accepted Ian’s choice, and Toula’s family, respectively. Several Ouzo shots later, Gus announces proudly that “the meat is here, everybody” (1:11:06-1:11:08), entering the room with a large plate filled with the eagerly awaited main course of the evening, potatoes and roasted lamb. “Would you like some Greek meat? Very good” (1:11:12-1:11:15), he enthusiastically invites his guests to partake of the Greek delicacy, but, faced with so much (possibly unfamiliar) culinary abundance, on top of having been overwhelmed by the ebullient hospitality displayed by several family members, Ian’s parents seem to have lost their appetite, much to Gus’ disappointment at their refusal to taste the Greek meat. The icing on the cake, to use a culinary reference, is when Maria triumphantly brings in the dessert, the Bundt cake with the gap in the middle filled with a nice flowerpot, an ingenious solution that stuns Ian’s parents, who are rendered speechless in the presence of Toula’s happy and voluble family.

Gus, on the other hand, is extremely frustrated by the outcome of the visit. Although he has tried to be a most welcoming host, he is deeply disappointed by the less than enthusiastic attitude displayed by Ian’s parents during their visit. Parasecoli’s statement that “specific ingredients, dishes, and practices from the migrants’ place of origin . . . can become sources of emotional ambivalence between the need for comforting food that echoes the migrants’ past and the awareness that the consumption of those very foods might mark them as outsiders in the host society in terms of flavors, smells, and behaviors” (420) is illustrative in the context of this cultural encounter. Gus feels that their family has become *the other* in the eyes of the Millers because of their culinary choices and their passionate welcome: “I tried, you tried, we were all nice to them. And they looked at us like we’re from the zoo” (1:11:42-1:11:49).

"This 'no' work. ... They're different people. So dry," he utters desperately, using a food analogy when referring to Ian's parents, "That family is like a piece of toast. No honey, no jam, just dry. My daughter is going to marry Ian Miller, a 'xeno' with a toast family! I never think this could happen to us! I tried to put a little marmalade. Oh, no, they don't like that. They like it all dry and cracked" (1:11:51-1:12:28). For Gus, Harriet and Rodney Miller's refusal to feast on the Greek dishes and their reserved attitude throughout their visit is another sign that Toula's choice to marry "a xeno" is a wrong one, since they seem to have nothing in common, culturally or from a culinary point of view. Maria, too, feels torn regarding Toula's decision, but she tries to appease her husband and is ready to support her daughter because she understands that while the ethnic culture is important, their daughter's happiness is more important, and maybe it is time for them to come to terms with her "unconventional" choice of marrying a non-Greek.

So, early on the morning of the wedding, a host of bridesmaids and other female relatives have gathered in the Portokalos kitchen to sip coffee, drink juice, and perhaps enjoy a home-made snack, while they are putting on make-up and doing their nails. Everybody is excited to help the bride with her make-up and hair, and, of course, her dress. Yet none of the female relatives of all ages gathered in the room expects Toula's reaction upon seeing her image in her overly ornate wedding dress in the mirror when she remarks, in a rather disappointing tone, that she looks like a "snow beast" in it (1:20:00-1:20:01). After the religious wedding ceremony, however, when she tries to adjust the dress in the car by removing some of the unnecessary embellishments, Ian compares her to "a frosted cupcake" (1:24:11-1:24:12), a delicious American dessert. These two references might illustrate two different perceptions of Toula's identity. On the one hand, the "snow beast" at home, before the ceremony, might remind Toula of her life before meeting Ian, when the wishes of her overbearing family were always prioritized over hers, having engulfed her like the voluminous and heavily embellished wedding dress she had on. On the other hand, after the ceremony, in the car, away from her

family, her gesture of tearing off some of the excessive ruffles, bows, and frills, as well as Ian's remark that she looks like a "frosted cupcake," a delicious cake that should bring about joy and happiness, seems to somehow restore her hard-earned self-confidence. It might be argued that Ian has always appreciated her thoughtful, witty and smart personality, including "the flavor" of her "ethnic frosting," which she has also tried to come to terms with. Therefore, the two references might refer to the "before" and "after" images of Toula's transformative journey of self-discovery, at the end of which she is ready to accept and appreciate both sides of her hyphenated identity, the ethnic and the American one.

After the religious ceremony, in "Aphrodite's Palace," the perfect Greek-themed venue for a lavish wedding in the Portokalos style, Gus offers the ultimate blessing to Toula and Ian, in the form of yet another food-based metaphor: "I was thinking last night, the night before my daughter was going to marry Ian Miller that, you know, the root of the word *Miller* is Greek. Miller comes from the Greek word *milo*, which means apple, so there you go. As many of you know, our name, Portokalos, comes from the Greek word *portokali*, which means orange. OK, here tonight we have apple and orange. *We're all different*, but, in the end, *we're all fruit*" (1:26:05-1:27:03, emphasis added), a delightful short speech much appreciated by all the wedding guests. Moreover, Gus and Maria's wedding gift is a house next door to theirs, so that Toula, Ian, and their future children, will be able to have their own home, close to their loving family, who will make sure that the ethnic culture and culinary habits will be preserved faithfully in the new Miller-Portokalos household.

At the end of the movie, Toula ponders on the recent changes in her life, remembering her dream (at the beginning of the movie) to do something else except cooking, preparing and serving food in the family restaurant: "I'm scared I'll wake up and *still be buttering garlic bread* waiting for my life to start" (1:30:02-1:30:11, emphasis added). At the same time, she is aware and maybe proud of her courageous decision *to be different* in her ethnic community – because of her choice to marry a non-Greek –

hoping that it may pave the way for other second-generation female relatives to find their own voices and individual identities. She is also ready to come to terms with her large family and the traditions, including the food practices and culinary choices of her ethnic culture: “My family is big and loud but they’re my family. We fight and we laugh, and yes, *we roast lamb on a spit in the front yard*. And wherever I go, whatever I do, they will always be there” (1:30:16-1:30:32, emphasis added). Indeed, as if to reinforce her statement, food is present even in the last scenes of the movie, when, a few years later, Toula and Ian take their young daughter to Greek school, and, passing by her parents’ house, they are greeted merrily by her mother and sister who are busy offering a snack (possibly *baklava*, a sweet Greek treat) and coffee to the male members of the family gathered in the front yard.

As Toula admits in the end, food is a significant part of her ethnic culture, and the daily and festive meals with her (extended) family provide them with a physical and emotional space to share the joys of everyday life and/or to complain about their problems. As illustrated in *MBFGW*, for the Greek-American family, the traditional recipes and dishes are meant to alleviate the first-generation parents’ nostalgia for their country of birth, allowing them to maintain a strong emotional connection to their lives before emigration. Moreover, by passing down the traditional recipes to their daughters and granddaughters, first-generation women also foster the preservation of the culinary memory of the ethnic culture. At the same time, while consuming ethnic food has highlighted *the otherness* of the Greek culture, for instance during Ian’s parents’ visit to Toula’s home, the culinary choices have also helped to bridge the cultural differences between the two families, especially during the joyous wedding reception. Finally, food has been a key “companion” during Toula’s inner journey to understand her identity as a Greek-American woman, and, although she has chosen not to marry “a Greek boy,” she may be willing to continue the tradition of “feeding everyone,” by combining Greek and American flavors in new and creative ways.

Notes:

¹ In the article “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts,” sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut explains that “when referring to the first generation, immigration scholars in the United States commonly have in mind persons born and socialized in another country who immigrate as adults,” adding that “the second generation technically refers to the U.S.-born and U.S.-socialized children of foreign-born parents” (1165).

² For interesting immigrant stories about food, see Anderson (2010). One of the persons interviewed in the chapter “Remembering Where You Started” points out that ethnic food – Greek food in this case – “sort of gives you a continuity of what you are. I think it reminds you of where you started from. Food is a cultural thing, definitely. My mother is visiting now, and it’s wonderful because she cooks every day, mostly Greek food. Yesterday she made stuffed green cabbage with rice. She makes her own yogurt. It’s like we’re eating in Greece again” (110).

³ For more comprehensive information on Greek-American immigration and lifestyle, see Jurgens (2000).

⁴ Or Costa, his Greek first name, preferred by his wife and close family members.

⁵ For more on the significance of ethnic culinary choices outside and inside ethnic communities, see Avakian (2005).

⁶ For information on gender roles in the Greek-American community, see Orfanos (1992).

⁷ For more on gender and food, see Inness (Introduction) (2001), and for more on the connection between food and the family power structure, see Counihan and Kaplan (Introduction) (1998/2004), and McIntosh and Zey (1998/2004).

⁸ For more on Greek food and recipes, see Sourligas (2019).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Lynne Christie. *Breaking Bread: Recipes and Stories from Immigrant Kitchens*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2010. Print.
- Avakian, Arlene Voski. “Shish Kebab Armenians?: Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identities

- among Armenian American Feminists.” *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. Ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber. Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 2005. 257-280. Print.
- Bower, Anne, ed. *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Bucuvalas, Tina. “Greece.” *Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia*. Ed. Lucy M. Long. Lanham, MA: Rowman, 2015. 225-234. Print.
- Counihan, Carole M., and Steven L. Kaplan. *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*. 1998. Rpt. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004. 132-153. Kindle. Web. 16 Feb. 2021.
- Gabaccia, Donna R. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and The Making of Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998. Print.
- Heck, Marina de Camargo. “Adapting and Adopting: The Migrating Recipe.” *The Recipe Reader: Narratives, Contexts, Traditions*. Ed. Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster. London: Routledge, 2003. 205-218. Print.
- Inness, Sherrie A. *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*. Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 2001. Print.
- Jurgens, Jane. “Greek Americans.” *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Ed. Jeffrey Lehman. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2000. 732-747. Print.
- Kittler, Pamela Goyan, and Kathryn P. Sucher. *Food and Culture*. 5th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2008. Print.
- Leer, Jonatan. “Gender and Food Television: A Transnational Perspective on the Gendered Identities of Televised Celebrity Chefs.” *The Handbook of Food and Popular Culture*. Ed. Kathleen Lebesco and Peter Naccarato. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 13-26. Print.
- Lindenfeld, Laura, and Fabio Parasecoli. “Food and Cinema: An Evolving Relationship.” *The Handbook of Food and Popular Culture*. Ed. Kathleen Lebesco and Peter Naccarato. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 27-39. Print.

- López-Rodríguez, Miriam. "Writing the Recipe for Subversion: The Creation of Patriarchy-Defying Communities by Means of Cookery." *Mapping Appetite: Essays on Food, Fiction, and Culture*. Ed. Jopi Nyman and Pere Gallardo-Torrano. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 68-84. Print.
- Lugosi, Peter. "Food, Drink, and Identity." *Food and Drink: The Cultural Context*. Ed. Donald Sloan. Oxford: Goodfellow, 2013. 20-50. Print.
- McIntosh, Alex, and Mary Zey. "Women as Gatekeepers of Food Consumption: A Sociological Critique." *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*. Ed. Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan. 1998. Rpt. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004. 132-153. Kindle. Web. 16 Feb. 2021.
- My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Dir. Joel Zwick. Perf. Nia Vardalos, John Corbett, and Michael Constantine. Gold Circle and HBO, 2002. DVD.
- Orfanos, Spiros D. "A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspective on Greek-American Gender Arrangements." *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 9 (1992): 9-18. Print.
- Parasecoli, Fabio. "Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities." *Social Research* 81.2 (2014): 415-439. Print.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States." *International Migration Review* 38.3 (Fall 2004): 1160-1205. Print.
- Sourligas, Christos. *My Big Fat Greek Cookbook: Classic Mediterranean Soul Food Recipes*. New York: Skyhorse, 2019. Print.
- Vallianatos, H., and K. Raine. "Consuming Food and Constructing Identities among Arabic and South Asian Immigrant Women." *Food, Culture and Society* 11.3 (2008): 356-373. Print.
- Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman, 2013. Print.