Mountains of Cheese and Rivers of Wine:
Paesi di Cuccagna and Other
Gastronomic Utopias

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If you travel for seven months—four by sea and three by land—you will arrive at a gate. There is a guard at that gate, and only if you promise to obey the law of the land, will he let you pass through. Here are what the laws command: you must promise never to speak of work, only of eating, drinking, sleeping, playing, and dancing. You must never mention the words: war, tilling, weaving or sewing. If you look carefully, over the gate, you will read this inscription: chi più dorme più guadagna [he who sleeps most earns most].

Once you have entered, and as you walk the streets, you will see some curious sights: rivers flow with wine, houses have walls of sausage and cheese, roast chickens fall from the sky, fish jump out of the pond and into your arms. From the trees hang shoes, stockings, hats. There are caves of gold coins, and you can gather all you want. If you insist on speaking of work, the guards will immediately seize you and take you to prison which, by the way, is made of cheese. There is a large palace of pleasure with beautiful women and perfumed beds. And right in the center of this land is a huge mountain of cheese. A cauldron sits on top and maccheroni and tortellini spew forth all day long, roll down the Parmesan mountain and land in a pool of rich capon broth. Every fruit you can imagine grows in this place in all seasons. Hens lay 200 eggs a day, sheep eliminate ricotta cheese, ovens continually produce bread, cakes and pizza, and you can find marzipan trees and cookies of every kind. There is no sickness or poverty, everyone has the title of baron or duke, and there are no tariffs. Therefore, if you are hungry and tired, my friend, forget your salads and vegetables, and come with me to il Paese di Cuccagna [the Land of Cockaigne].

So reads a Neapolitan broadside, here selectively paraphrased, entitled La piacevole historia di Cuccagna (The delightful story of Cockaigne) dated 1715, sung by a street performer, Giovanni il Tranese, but itself only one of the many reworkings of earlier broadsides on this theme (Zenatti 1884; Scherillo 1884; figure 1, herein).
GASTRONOMIC UTOPIAS

The Paese di Cuccagna, Cockaigne/Lubberland (England), Schlaraffienland (Germany), Cocagne/Panigons (France), or Oleana (Norway) is a mythic land of plenty where rivers run with “milk and honey” (wine, beer, coffee, or rum), food falls like manna from heaven, work is banished, and no one ever grows old. It represents one of the most persistent desires for a return to a terrestrial Paradise Lost.¹ The archetypal pattern of humankind’s harmony with the divine and nature, followed by transgression and fall from grace, recurs widely in religious narratives (cf. Cocchiara 1956; Graf 1925; Cioranescu 1971; Costa 1972). That the myth of Cuccagna became, in the European folk worldview, a strictly sensual paradise and, in Italy, an essentially gastronomic utopia, confirms, through the inversion principle of utopian thought, that it was a “collective dream of the hungry masses” (Camporesi 1978). The Land of Plenty inversely reflects the Land of Hunger. In other words, utopian visions hold up a mirror reflecting that which the utopianist’s society lacks and desires.²

Food, of course, is essential to most Edenic (and many Infernal)³ representations, where nature gives forth its riches abundantly and without toil. In the Paese di Cuccagna however, nature becomes surreally hyperactive and magical: cows give birth to four calves a day, hens lay two hundred eggs, donkeys excrete gold coins. And while Adam was condemned to till the earth to feed himself, here poltroonery becomes the law. Further, unlike social utopias à la Thomas More, this poor man’s paradise projects from the stomach rather than the mind, and satisfies basic needs: food, shelter, sex.⁴

In Italy, references to Cuccagna recur with the greatest frequency from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries and begin to wane during the eighteenth century (Camporesi 1978; Cocchiara 1956; Zenatti 1884). They were found in street literature,⁵ in oral tradition (such as song and tales), and in high literature alike. Yet, that the largest number of attestations, and the most detailed, were destined for the public piazza, suggests in and of itself, that it had the widest currency among a popular audience. Indeed, Cuccagna was sustained largely in the popular imagination through vernacular genres such as street performances of song, broadside prints, and oral narratives. Further, the persistence of Cuccagna in Italian oral and popular tradition seems to document a condition of basic deprivation among the lower classes, which remained a constant in Italy well into the twentieth century (see Teti 1976, 1984; Del Giudice 1993, 2001). It is my contention that Cuccagna survives and animates Italian immigrant culture still.

Cuccagna may be considered an archetypic “imagined state.” Its geographic ubiquity and historic longevity may be attributable to its expression of basic corporeal aspirations. It will survive at least as long as hunger and other deprivations continue. Cuccagna, as a powerful metaphor for abundance, has
found myriad representations as it metamorphosed and evolved, in surprising, unexpected ways, and has variously functioned in a range of societies throughout its long history. But beyond expressing a basic aspiration for adequate nourishment, the power of Cuccagna as symbol rests firmly in its ability to imagine, and thereby construct, an alternative social order. That is, while Cuccagna largely described this imagined state as an edible paradise, it also abolished social ills and constraints while it celebrated values that were both anti-Christian and in tune with the social margins. As such, it remained a persistent symbol of possible and alternative worlds. Although this imagined state was largely a projection of bodily cravings, articulated through edible spatial metaphors, as a dream of social change and escape, it nonetheless animated Italian popular consciousness for centuries and sustained a craving for the imagined land of plenty, subsequently realized in actual journeys such as Italian mass-migrations to America.

This essay then, concerns itself primarily with the Italian street variants of the myth as expressed through popular print and in oral tradition. It examines the sociohistoric and ethnographic foundations of this folk utopia, as it reflected the tension between social classes in the old world, as well as the role this driving myth behind mass emigration to America (otherwise known as Cuccagna) has played in Italian immigrant foodways and worldview.

Gastronomic utopias reflect culturally determined tastes and shared cravings. Northern European variants, for instance, differ widely from the Italian in the matter of diet and hence utopian foods. Scandinavian Oleanas may feature rivers of sour cream and mountains of porridge, while the French land of Panigons has trees of butter, rocks of melted cheese, and pigs stuffed with chestnuts, and the Mexican variant presents tortilla hills, fountains of olive oil, and sopapilla (fritter) trees (see, for example, Robb 1980, 337–38). The American hobo’s vision of “hog heaven,” alternatively known as Ditty Wah Ditty, Oleana, or simply Nowhere (as expressed in the song “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” written by Harry K. McClintock in the early twentieth century; cf. Rammel 1990), projects the American taste for sugar and whiskey, whereas in Brer Rabbit’s “Garden of Eatin,” at least in a Disney version (presumably adapting the African American tradition), we find hams, a chicken gravy river, hotcake plants, and a forbidden pork chop tree (Disney Enterprises 1992, 9–10; figure 27, herein). Italy’s Paese di Cuccagna instead frequently displays a cheese mountain with a cauldron on top bubbling over with tortellini, ravioli, or maccheroni (which historically were gnocchi), rivers running with fine wines (such as Malvasia), and meats in great abundance (figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 8). The high frequency of cheese and meat make protein and animal fats the most prevalent feature of Cuccagna. Rarely are vegetables mentioned. The centuries-old dietary norms of the lower classes—a diet based primarily on grains,
legumes, and vegetables (the now fashionable Mediterranean diet)—is thereby inverted.

Cuccagna Between Written and Oral Culture

Although the first written attestations of Cuccagna appear in the literature of the late Middle Ages (for a thirteenth century French fabliau of this name, see Vaananen 1947), it should be assumed that this utopia was un atteggiamento mentale prima ancora che una prassi della scrittura, that is, “a mental attitude before it became [fixed] in the written word” (Zaganelli 1989, 146; cf. Cocchiara 1956, 160–61).

While many Italian literary authors have, in varying degrees, written of Cuccagna (cf. Camporesi 1978), often referring to it with an ironic, satiric, or moralistic twist (for example, Calandrino the fool in Boccaccio, Decameron VIII, 3), the “penny” press variety appears more indulgent (and less severe) with its willing audiences. Here instead lavish and detailed descriptions prevail. Description, in fact, is often featured in the titles themselves of the continual reworkings of this popular motif: for example, Descrittione del Paese di Cuccagna vicino a S. Daniel, città del Friuli, stato della Repubblica Veneta (Description of the Land of Cockaigne, near San Daniele, city of Friuli, state of the Venetian Republic) (anonymous, Correr Museum, Venice); or Discritione del Paese di Chvcagna dove chi manco lavora piv gvadagna (Description of the Land of Cockaigne where he who works least earns most) (Remondini di Bassano, seventeenth century, in Bertarelli 1929, 51).

Cuccagna’s widening appeal, in fact, coincided with the High Renaissance, just as real problems of poverty became more acute, with an ever greater proportion of the population excluded from the natural resources of forest and pasture (Montanari 1987, 12; Montanari 1993, 118–21). Note that in Cuccagna, nature’s bounty is free to all. Against the images of wealth, patronage and self-celebration in the Renaissance, we can envision, at the margins of the grand tableaux, the beggars and vagabonds who now became endemic. Prisons and hospices for the poor grew, as did concerns over ways of feeding their vast numbers. Social historian Camporesi best describes this underworld of the poor and the culture of hunger in Il paese della fame (The land of hunger)—Cuccagna’s mirror image (Camporesi 1978). It was precisely among the lower classes that the imagined land of Cuccagna gained enormous popularity. Of course, the humorous, ironic, and perhaps seditious aspects of this myth (in the worldview of vagrants) may have served to seduce the collective imagination toward an irregular life of leisure, indulgence, and freedom from the established social order.9

Famines in the mid-fifteenth century became especially acute as the search for new foods to stave off large-scale starvation (such as corn and potatoes from
the new world) came to fill treatises on agronomy. Meat consumption decreased all over Europe, and bread made from the lower quality grains became the mainstay of the poor. Monotony and poverty of diet for the lower classes became the norm in Italy during the seventeenth century and remained so well into the twentieth century. Monotony of diet and reliance on a single staple were to cause real catastrophes all over Europe, since one bad harvest could mean death (as in Ireland) or else chronic vitamin deficiency and lingering disease (for example, pellagra for northern Italians).

Camporesi (1980a) describes in nauseating detail the adulterated breads and the health hazards accompanying the use of lower quality grains (some actually hallucinogenic), as he does the many forms of aberrant social behavior spawned by hunger, from cannibalism to collective deliriums (see, for example, the chapter headings in Camporesi 1980: “Vertigini collettive,” [Collective Vertigo]; “Sogni iperbolicì,” [Hyperbolic Dreams]; “Paradisi artificiali,” [Artificial Paradises]; “Il pane papaverino,” [Poppy Bread]). Unwittingly, therefore, many Italians may have participated in the delirious visions other cultures attained through the intentional, sometimes ritual, use of known hallucinogens. One may conclude that a delirious and somnolent people could dream of such far off places literally with its eyes wide open, and that the sort of relief Cuccagna song texts might have provided was akin to an addictive drug. This delirium could manifest itself in a variety of ways: from imposing food visions on the landscape, (such as cheese mountains, wine rivers, money trees) or the constructed environment (ships, houses) to projecting foods on celestial bodies (such as Menocchio, the Friulian miller and heretic who imagined the earth as a fermenting, wormy cheese; see Ginzburg 1976), or human physiognomy (such as Arcimboldo’s food “portraits”). Such flights of food fantasy suggest a constant play between reality, illusion, and wish fulfillment. Yet food mirages were not merely figments of imagination: they actually reflected facts of social hierarchy.

The images of richly draped lords and merchants and splendid tables set with every imaginable delicacy are common enough in the history, literature, and iconography of the Renaissance, and they frequently found their way into the popular imagination via other genres as well (as in the marriage banquets that close many a folktale). The codification of social rank became important in every aspect of life, from the clothes one wore to the foods one ate, all carefully monitored through sumptuary laws. One should eat, for example, “according to one’s social status” (mangiare secondo la qualità della persona; Montanari 1993, 105). In other words, proper to a peasant’s physiology were roots, coarse breads, and salt pork, while the noble’s physique required fresh meats, fish, fruit, white bread, and strong wine. To subvert this “natural” hierarchic dietary order was to subvert the social order. Cuccagna, instead,
abounds anarchically with the finest wines, white breads, cakes, and noble fowl.

Yet nobles were not to be deterred from ostentation and display. Ingenious architectural food fantasies and other sumptuous dishes were frequently paraded around the public piazza before the gaze of the common folk, then consumed by the few (Montanari 1993, 115–18). How could the Renaissance banquet not emerge as a never-never land of glut and satiety? Were the mountains of cheese or the edible palaces so fantastical if we consider that princely guests were often regaled with actual edible landscapes in the form of sculpted marzipan castles or fountains of wine or with fowl cooked and dressed in its own feathers? Such culinary tours de force find their way into the iconography of Cuccagna dreamscapes.

Is it any wonder then that mere lists of food, the insistence on vast quantities and on variety, might have entranced the street audiences in a mirage-like Paese di Cuccagna? Indeed, many of the texts meant for popular “consumption”—such as those of the street performer G. C. Croce (cf. Del Giudice 1998)—provided vicarious and surrogate gustatory pleasures, filling mental larders, creating virtual food, through descriptions of foods which would never be actually tasted, but were only imagined. Broadside texts cataloguing long lists of delicacies must indeed have had a hypnotic effect on the famished audience. And all this “bounty” for mere pennies, with the purchase of a broadside. Street performers’ very livelihoods, of course, depended on providing what the audience wanted, since the sale of the broadside was the prime objective of any performer. The large number of surviving Cuccagna broadsides, gives de facto evidence of the theme’s popularity through time.

Can words be eaten? Contemporary readers of cookbooks may ask themselves a similar question, as might anyone who has ever participated in other virtual food experiences, such as discussing menus or recounting memorable repasts. And which ethnic group has cultivated the food narrative more than Italians? They, for example, readily engage in food-related discourse, often while in the very act of consuming food, compounding gustatory pleasures both virtual and real. In that gustatory space, what complex sensory response to food may be simulated? This curious mind/body phenomenon seems to engage both psychological and physiological responses (as captured in the phrase and experience: “it makes my mouth water”). Cuccagna song and prose narratives may find their modern-day counterparts in restaurant reviews and other professional food writings, while today’s equivalent of lavishly depicted caccagnesque prints may well be found in the (quasi-pornographic) art of food photography—which has the late twentieth-century virtue of satisfying without adding calories. Nonetheless, “faux foods” are a latter twentieth-century marvel: titillating to the senses but noncaloric.
Figure 1. First stanzas of *La piacevole historia di Cvccagna, Posta in luce per Giouannino detto il Tranese* (The delightful story of Cockaigne, brought to light by Little John, alias the man from Trani), Naples: Nicolò Monaco, 1715. Reproduced from *Giambattista Basile: archivio di letteratura popolare*, Naples, 2, no. 11 (Nov. 15, 1884), 84–85.
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Figure 2. *Discritione del paese di Chvcagna dove chi manco lavora piv gvadagna* (Description of the Land of Cockaigne where he who works least earns most), Bassano: Remondini, 1606. Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milano. Reproduced from Bertarelli 1929, 51.
Figure 4. *Il paese di Coccagnia dove chi manco lavora piv guadagna* (The Land of Cockaigne where he who works least earns most), two engravings joined for *ventola*, ‘fan,’ Bassano: Remondini, 1730. Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milano. Reproduced from Bertarelli 1974, 63.
Figure 5. La Cvcagna nuova, trovata nella Porcolandria l’anno 1703 da Seigoffo, quale racconta, esservi tutte le delitie, e’ chi dessidera andarvi, gli ariva prestissimo con il pensiere con tvtta facilit. E finalmente qvi chi sempre vive mai more (The new Cockaigne, discovered in Porklandia in 1703 by Youradolt, who recounts all its delights, and he who wishes to go there, may easily get there with his mind, and in no time at all. And finally here he who always lives never dies).


Figure 7. *Il trionfo del Carneval* (The triumph of Carnival), Venice: Ludovico Siletti. Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Rome; IV, 7, d, number 01964. The fat king Carnival reigns in the land of Cockaigne.
Figure 8. *La vera descrizione del paese chiamato anticamente Scanza Fatica et hora sie nominato Chvcagna delle donne* (The true description of the land once called Shirk-Work, and now known as the Women’s Cockaigne), Rome, circa 1650. Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milano. Reproduced from Bertarelli 1929, 50.
Figure 10. *Gioco della Cvcagna che mai si perde, e sempre si guadagna* (The game of Cockaigne where you never lose and you always gain), G. Mitelli, 1691. Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milano. Reproduced from Bertarelli 1940, 131.
Figure 11. *Plumpodingo alla napolitana* (Neapolitan plum pudding). Reproduced from Vidari 1981, 40 (detail of figure 1).

Figure 12. *Il Vesuvio delizioso in occasione dell’annua fiera, e festa Popolare della Porchetta fatto rappresentare nel primo anno (1665) della legatione dell’Em.mo Sig.r Cardinale Caraffa, sendo Confaloniere l’Illmo Sig.r Marchese Bali Ferdinando Cospi, dagli Ill.mi/ed Eccelsi Sig.ri Anziani, li Sig.ri Gio Battista Sanuti Pellicani Dottore, Comendator Carlo Banci, Co. Annibale Ranuzzi, Andrea Buoi/Zotto (?) Guidalotti, Ermite Bargellini, Odoardo Zanchini, e Co. Cesare Malvasia* (The delicious Vesuvius on the occasion of the annual fair, and public Roast Pork festival assembled during the first year (1665) of the legation of the most Eminent Cardinal Caraffa, being Gonfalone the most Illustrious Marquis Balì Ferdinando Cospi, by the most Illustrious and Excellent Elders, Lord Gio[vanni] Battista Sanuti Pellicani, Doctor, Commendator Carlo Banci, Commendator Annibale Ranuzzi, Andrea Buoi/Zotto Guidalotti, Ermite Bargellini, Odoardo Zanchini, and Commendator Cesare Malvasia), G. M. Mitelli F. Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milano. Reproduced from Bertarelli 1940, 55 (figure 292).

Yet another example of a festive Vesuvius, a mountain of delights, spewing forth riches (it is not clear whether edible or not) on the occasion of public festivities, here in Bologna. The Festival of the Porchetta (or roast pork), was held from August 15 to 24, and on the last day (St. Bartholomew’s Day), a roast pig was thrown to the people, in commemoration of August 24, 1281, when the city was liberated from a bloody civil war.
Figures 13–22. Various prints, renderings of festive monumental, food-encrusted Cockaigne “machines” (*macchine della Cuccagna*) erected in Naples, on the square before the Royal palace, between 1729 and 1733, to commemorate various royal occasions: figures 13 (1729), 14 (1730), 17 (1731), 19 (1732), and 21 (1733) for the name day (November 4) of Charles III and VI, king of Spain; figures 15 (1730), 16 (1731), 18 (1732) and 20 (1733) for the birthday (August 28) of Empress Elizabeth Christina; and figure 22 for the visit of Bourbon king Charles to Naples on May 16, 1734. With the exception of figure 15 (designed by Domenico Antonio Vaccaro and sculpted by Francesco di Grado; cf. figure 23) and figure 22 (by Nicola Tagliacozzi Canale and Bartolomeo de Grado), all other monuments were designed by Cristoforo Rosso and sculpted by Neapolitan Francesco de Grado. Collection of Festival Prints, courtesy Getty Research Library P910002. Cf. *Settecento Napoletano* 1994, 352–3; Mancini 1968, 1979.
Figure 13

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Figure 14

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Figure 19

Figure 20
Figure 24. *Albero della Cuccagna* (Cockaigne pole). Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Rome, IV, 7, a, number 250.
Figure 25. Anonymous Italian, *L'albero della Cuccagna* (Cockaigne pole), 19th century, oil painting, private collection. Reproduced from Fortunati and Zucchini 1989: figure 17. A satirical, pornographic, and misogynistic version of the greased Cuccagna pole. It might easily have been entitled *Cuccagna delle donne* (women’s Cockaigne) since it seems to be aimed at/against diabolical women and their insatiable sexual appetite. Traditional Cuccagna representations normally present palaces of pleasure in which males are sexually catered to. Yet another example of the *Roverso mondo* (upside down world)?
Figure 26. *Albero della Cuccagna*. Example of Cuccagna pole in Italian festival setting.
Figure 27. “Garden of Eatin’” from *Walt Disney Presents Uncle Remus and His Tales of Brer Rabbit*. © Disney Enterprises, Inc.
ICONOGRAPHY: CONSTRUCTING EDIBLE PARADISES

The myriad iconographies of Cuccagna may be more powerful even than the broadside song texts they frequently accompany (cf. Pezzini 1989, who instead cautions us not to view them as subordinate). Some narrate via vignette and caption, in a decentered, comic strip manner (e.g., figure 9 for Il Mondo alla Riversa), while others instead stand on their own as elaborate and detailed illustrative popular prints (figures 2–6, 8), yet all favor detailed captions to orient the viewer. Such depictions of Cuccagna landscapes are among the most enduring remnants of a collective popular print tradition, together with illustrated proverbs, the Roverso Mondo (Topsy Turvy World; figure 9), the Ship of Fools, mestieri ambulanti (itinerant occupations), and others.

The artist/architect’s ingenuity here comes into play as he gives marvelous shape to popular food fantasies. He constructs these fantastical ships, palaces, pyramids, cities, islands, mountains, with wondrous edible building materials (just as Arcimboldo constructed “thematic” portraits out of food, flora, books, and so forth). Besides wine rivers and cheese mountains, these materials included ricotta and cheese walls, cobblestones of cheese, cooked capon stairs, roofs of cialde inzucarate (sugared biscuits). Edible ships might feature a rudder of salami (sopressata), nails of fennel stalks, planks of mixed innards (frittaglie), rigging of pork intestines (cf. Rossi 1888, 406–7). Textual utopias were sometimes even accompanied by actual maps, helping the “pilgrim” negotiate the way. Indeed, each Cuccagna text seems to be generated by “its own more or less explicit geography” (una propria geografia più o meno esplicita; Pezzini 1989, 279).

Cuccagna plays with the whimsical through iconographic and linguistic acrobatics: for example Pierre de la Maison Neufve’s Familière description du très vinoporragimalvoisé & très envitualigullementé Royaume Panigonnois, mystiquement interprété l’Isle de Crevepance (Firsthand description of the very vinoporragimalvoised and very envitualigulmented Panigonnois Kingdom, mystically interpreted as the Isle of Bustbelly) (Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center 1994, 400, and plate 9). The Italian iconographic tradition, beginning as early as the sixteenth century, seems as well to revel in the playful and the pleasurable (and at least once, in the pornographic—see the nineteenth century L’albero della Cuccagna, figure 25) and refrains from the visual moralizations found in some northern European variants (such as Brueghel’s Land of Cockaigne or the “women’s Cuccagna” represented in figure 25), just as its textual street variety typically differs in tone from literary texts.

What role did the street performer specifically play in the construction of Cuccagna as an imagined state? Street performers, it is well to remember, shared the social stigmatization of itinerants of all kinds. They were often perceived as vagrants themselves, living on the social margins, and hence suspected of sharing and promoting counter- or sub-cultural values. They may indeed
have had a vested interest, therefore, in promoting imagined and alternative “states,” both existential and social. Did Pied-Piper bards of Cuccagna not seek, after all, to lure their audiences, however light heartedly, to follow them on journeys, and to abandon the status quo (as did, for example, Giovanni il Tranese, above)? The ongoing battle the church and civil authorities waged against street performers had its own political significance, corroborating that the performers were perceived to be dangerous and capable of destabilizing the social order. Certainly, the repertoires of street performers have often featured, beyond pure entertainment, social commentary and have voiced sociopolitical views in tune with their socially oppressed audiences (cf. the journal *Il Cantastorie*, “Street Singer,” 1981–). Their compositions were not only subject to constant surveillance, as *con licenza dei superiori* ([published] with the permission of authorities) attests, but the street performers’ freedom of movement and performance as well was carefully monitored and often curtailed, until very recently (Ghidoli 1985). The constraints placed on their freedom of expression probably resulted in a preponderance of performances in a comic or satiric vein, such as G. C. Croce (Del Giudice 1998). In the case of Cuccagna texts, we might ask, were street performers merely inducing a deceitful and compliant somnolence in their audiences in order to sell them their wares, or were they instead helping to keep an impossible dream—partly their own—alive?

An imagined state which proposed complete idleness (and perhaps imprisonment) for the industrious worker, represented a profound subversion of social, as well as theological, values. The Cuccagna tradition in fact found its place in various social movements relating to, for example, labor and immigration. In its Scandinavian (and Anglo-American) traditions, which highlighted monetary wealth and the laborless utopia, Cuccagna became part of labor and occupational cultures of the nineteenth century (cf. Blegen and Ruud [ca. 1936], 187–91; cf. Reimund and Porter, herein). According to Pianta (1989), in Italy it was the image of the “triumphing” of the socially marginal in Cuccagna that provided a backdrop for the Communist anthem, “Bandiera rossa” (Red flag). Cuccagna indeed promotes counter-Christian ideals inasmuch as it does not support the virtues of resignation, self-sacrifice, and mortification of the flesh but rather celebrates the sins of gluttony, licentiousness, and idleness.

It has been widely affirmed that Cuccagna presents a static and conservative worldview and does not aspire toward social reform, that it does not attack the social hierarchy or institutional injustice head on. In Cuccagna instead, the peasant merely wishes to live as the lord is perceived to live: idle and well fed. Rather than abolish the aristocracy, here instead everyone has the title of duke or count. Yet lest we are lulled into thinking that Cuccagna’s long life is merely a series of tired and repetitive representations, basically unchanged throughout, let us recall, as Kunzle (1978) has shown for its sister
topos “The World Upside Down,” that the broadside press, by its very nature, was primarily concerned with the flux of history, suggesting it had an urban audience which observed and participated in the process of history. Within the "formulaic" contrasti, vignettes, and so forth, there was room for innovation, nuance, and satire. "‘Pure’ formal fantasy and subversive desire, far from being mutually exclusive, are two sides of the same coin” (Kunzle 1978, 89).

Although the Cuccagna motif may have found itself assisting sociopolitical goals, it did not generally itself engage in overt political discourse. Cuccagna as an imagined state represented primarily a gastronomic utopia and therefore was content to revel in the carnivalesque—an abundant and meat-based diet, conventional expressions of social inversion, and the joke, only to return to social order once the escape valve had been turned off and the performer moved on to another piazza. Cuccagna, indeed, came to be closely associated with Carnival and through this association came itself to co-opt aspects of social criticism always implicit in carnivalesque "reversible worlds” (cf. Babcock 1978). As Bakhtin has amply shown, though, laughter forms such an integral part of folk culture that the culture of fools is an important ingredient of festival generally, Carnival specifically, and represents ultimately a means of compromising authority through social inversion (Bahktin 1968).

Cuccagna and Ritual: A Time for Feasting

Between Carnival and Cuccagna is much semantic overlapping (or “reciprocal contamination,” according to Pianta 1989, 31). At times, Cuccagna broadsides make this connubium explicit (see Il trionfo de Carnavale nel paese de Cucagna [the triumph of Carnival in the Land of Cockaigne], in Bertarelli [ca. 1929], 25; Toschi 1964, table 55; figures 6 and 7, herein; Trionfo dei Poltroni [Triumph of the Poltroons] in Zenatti 1884). Carnival revelers (see figure 7) even find their place in the iconography of Cockaigne (cf. Pianta 1989; figures 2, 3, 4, herein). Cuccagna celebrates a perpetual Carnival of abundance and indulgence, while meatless Lent, as stated in at least one northern European Cockaigne variant, occurs but once every twenty years. Cuccagna represents festive time run amok. Like Carnival—at least in its latter incarnations—Cuccagna features pigs, sausages, and other pork products (in other words a winter diet) and a fat king “triumphing” in a procession of cooks and scullions (figures 2, 3, 4), but unlike king Carnival, Cuccagna has no calendrical restrictions, and hence never dies.

Carnival, as folk drama and as elite spectacle, ranged from “grotesque eating performances” to commedia dell’arte, and was accompanied by rich oral and literary traditions. Primary among the carnivalesque literary and oral traditional genres, however, were the many contrasti (or mock battles) between Carnival and Lent (cf. Lozinski 1933, Grinberg and Kinser 1983), battles
between a carnivorous and rotund boyish Carnival and a mean, piscivorous, and haggard Lenten crone. But the relentless alternation of feasting and fasting, of abundance and hunger, in the liturgical calendar, never adequately balanced in the actual lives of peasants, which instead tilted heavily toward the latter states. The battle of the proteins (meat versus fish) impinged little on their diets alas, since fish was seen on their tables almost as rarely as meat. Italians had long been “vegetarian by necessity and not by choice” (Pellegrino 1952, 24).

Cuccagna’s ritual dimensions are clear, and even in common parlance Cuccagna has remained a term for abundance and celebration. Linguistic remnants of Cuccagna in many Italian dialects reduce the once richly articulated place to simply festa, “feast” or “good time,” as in che Cuccagna! expressed as che pacchia! “what a great time!” To Italians, this altered state of feasting, the much craved “time out of time,” continued to be obsessively and endlessly replayed in immigrant life until the festa itself became redundant and practically obsolete (Teti 1984; Del Giudice 2001). Indeed, ritual abundance, and hence Cuccagna, is reenacted with every life- or nature-cycle celebration (such as a baptism or wedding), weekly and seasonal markets or fairs (for example, St. Martin’s as it is celebrated in Sant’ Arcangelo in Romagna in Sobrero 1994), harvest festivals and saint’s days (on sagre: see Vidari 1981, 44; on food altars, for example, see Del Giudice forthcoming), and even Sunday dinners. All replicate, celebrate, and give thanks for the miracle of prodigious nature and divine goodness. The altar of Christianity is a dinner table. The last act of God on Earth was to break bread together with disciples in the Last Supper. God himself is food (in the Eucharist). As Gandhi once noted, food is the only form in which God dare appear to the poor.

But while the cuccagnesque is implicitly part of any festivity, rituals making explicit reference to Cuccagna are rarer. A significant example may be found in the greased Cuccagna pole (l’albero di/della Cuccagna, figures 24, 26) which is still featured at many public festivities in Italy (see Maggini 1977, 9–11; Coltro 1982, 152–59; Ciceri 1983, 172) and among immigrants (see Noyes 1989, 1995, 449–52), provides yet another spatial metaphor of distance and unattainability. Typically, hanging high atop a greased pole or albero, “mast” or “tree” (perhaps either recalling the Ship of Fools or the magical trees of the Cuccagna landscape), are prizes—the symbolic remnants of those vast territories of yore: salami, sausage, or prosciutto (that is, pork products recalling the carnival pig), wine (as in, former cuccagnesne rivers and fountains), a bag of money (recalling caves of gold coin and gold-excreting donkeys), pasta (for the giant Cuccagna cauldron), cheese (for a mountain), and so forth. But in at least one recent instance, in the Verona area, the Cuccagna pole yielded coupons for free gasoline, rather than food (Parks 1993, 210)!

Cuccagna may not be a u-topia so much as it is a poli-topia. It is nowhere and everywhere. It is a movable feast. For Goethe it seems to have been Italy;
for the Lithuanians it was Hungary; to immigrants it was America. How do these realignments occur? Let us consider one very significant case for its Italian contexts.

**Naples as Il Paese di Cuccagna**

In seventeenth-century Italy it was Naples which became explicitly associated with the Paese di Cuccagna and with Carnival. Indeed, Naples’ magnificent and irreverent Carnivals were famous all over Europe during this time. There are several reasons for imagining Naples as a Paese di Cuccagna. As it was then, it has remained: a “Land of Plenty” for the few and the “Land of Misery” for the many. The axis upon which the world of Cuccagna turns is that of social inequality. Yet, where there is misery, there too is the hope of abundance. The topography of Cuccagna required peaks and abysses. These peaks were frequently rendered in architectural constructions stressing vertical height (cf. Barletta 1981; figures 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, herein). More specifically, however, the Mountain of Cheese spewing forth maccheroni seems to be none other than Vesuvius, a (gastronomic) emblem of Naples, the by-then maccheroni-eating capital of Italy. There are other gastronomic Vesuvii one may cite, such as a volcano-like *Plumpodingo alla napolitana*, “Neapolitan plum pudding,” presumably served hot, since it is depicted as emitting a plume of smoke from its crater (Vidari 1981, 40; figures 11, 12, herein).

During the earlier part of the seventeenth century, Neapolitans themselves literally replicated this landscape in popular Carnivals in the form of the Cuccagna “mountain,” “il monte di Cuccagna” or “coccagna,” (Mayer 1840 1948, 234–235). Like a Vesuvius, it emitted maccheroni, sausages, *focacce* (flat breads), and other foods which slid down its sides and were gathered—fought over—by the common people. These mountains were moveable *carri* (floats) which made their way through the city (Mancini 1963). Unlike the ideal of endless bounty however, in practice the competition for limited goods was a typical feature of this ritual, as it continued to be in the subsequent contests to scale greased Cuccagna poles.

It was the Spanish (and then Austrian) regimes of the latter Settecento in Naples, which best capitalized on the Cuccagna concept however. Intuiting the importance of this theme for the populace, these regimes actually staged periodic Cuccagna festivals in the public piazza before the royal palace. These were no longer given by the people by members of their own class, but rather for the people by the ruling class (Scafoglio 1994). This politically astute use of Cuccagna, which wove together traditional motifs and celebrations—but bending them to official objectives—began to take hold under what were, arguably, the most oppressive regimes Neapolitans have ever known. The evolution of the festivity
began with the suppression of the moveable carri, traditionally offered to the populace by the various *arti* and *mestieri*, that is, guilds and artisans (especially the food-related ones: millers, bakers, butchers). During the first decades of the 1700s, these floats were converted into a single, fixed architectural structure, strategically placed in front of the Royal palace (Scafoglio 1994, 12; figures 13–23, herein). Contrary to official rhetoric, they were not bestowed from above but rather continued to be financed by the corporations. At this time, however, it was the royalty who commanded full attention, at the expense of the corporations, thereby denying the latter a direct rapport with the people. The king himself became the festivity’s focal point: *Cocagne c’est moi*, he might have said (cf. figure 18, with a royal portrait displayed at the apex of the structure). The once egalitarian spirit of the popular Neapolitan Cuccagna festivities (such as the itinerant floats) now confirmed and heightened the social hierarchy. This case merely provides another example of how the absolutist regime in Naples elaborated in numerous variations the “fiction of sovereign generosity and abundance” (Feldman forthcoming), in theater (*opera seria*), on the piazza, and elsewhere.

Grand apparati called *macchine della Cuccagna* (Cuccagna machines) were assembled as ephemeral, edible structures, encrusted with various foods, and consumed by the hungry crowd on each of the four Sundays of the Carnival season. As seen in one contemporary oil painting (figure 23, herein, from *Settecento Napoletano*, 1994), the king and the aristocracy could view the frenzied, famished struggle to dismantle the Rococo marvel of food from the balconies of the Royal Palace, while the official guards controlled the crowd below. The king’s guard gave the signal of attack and in 5–8 minutes the structure was completely demolished and picked apart by the hoards of beggars (*lazzari*) who sometimes knifed each other in the process—all under the entertained gaze of the royal court (Scafoglio 1994, 35). The structure was patched and reassembled, and the sack was repeated on the three successive Sundays of Carnival. This ritual spectacle created for the people, became a spectator sport for the bestowers who, one is sometimes reminded in the literature, either enjoyed it as hidden voyeurs, or could snicker at the spectacle of barbarism and uncouthness in full view from the royal balconies and could thereby publically reaffirm their social superiority.

Such Cuccagna monuments were erected on other occasions of royal commemoration, such as weddings, birthdays, and so forth (cf. banners on prints in *Settecento Napoletano* 1994, and in the Collection of Festival Prints [Getty Research Library]; figures 13–22, herein). They frequently took on the form of temples, mountains, or ships, interweaving mythological motifs, and invariably emphasizing *verticality*. The mythological recollections of a Golden Age, as noted by Barletta (1981) and Feldman (forthcoming), were intended to cast the king in the role of bestower of all riches and social harmony.
Of what foods did this feasting consist? While the quality of the foods (primarily meat and bread) may not have been high, the quantities needed to be vast (Barletta 1981, 33–34). Some of the animal carcasses were quartered and pinned to the structure while other live animals were hunted down. The violence, cruelty, and barbarism of this Neapolitan festivity was inevitably noted by tourists on “the grand tour.” De Sade, for one, in search of strong festivals, described one Neapolitan Cuccagna in great detail: the intentional collapse of the _macchina_, with the subsequent death of many, the pinning of live animals to the monument, the general waste of animal (and human) life, and the transgressive aspects of the festivity. He concluded that the very essence of this festival was cruelty and its enjoyment (in Scafoglio 1994, 37–38).

Coinciding as it did with the great famine, the 1764 festivities marked the turning point for Neapolitan Cuccagna as it resulted in tragedy—and insurrection (Scafoglio 1994, 57–87). During that Cuccagna season, some of the bolder participants did not wait for a royal signal but, under the eyes of the king, impudently attacked the structure itself. The violence which resulted from such a desperate situation was quickly snuffed out, but did not resolve itself in any institutional change from above. Rather, in a collective ritual expiation of guilt, the people both prayed for forgiveness and pleaded for a miracle—not to the king, but to San Gennaro, Naples’ patron saint. This penitential resolution was well-liked by Church and Court alike. Cuccagna, thereafter moved quietly and progressively farther away from the Royal Palace, and by the end of the following decade (1779), was substituted with the traditional (and safer) distribution of dowries to poor girls (i.e., _maritaggi_).

Such rituals explicitly linking the city of Naples (and the king himself) to the imagined state of Cuccagna, created and sustained a fiction, a _mask_ of royal magnanimity, while ignoring the ongoing plight of its poverty-stricken citizenry. Since Carnival was the traditional time for donning masks, after all, and it is well to remember that while Charles VI played King Carnival, the people’s traditional (i.e., commedia dell’arte) mask—in perfect opposition to the rotund reveler—remained Pulcinella, the perennially-starved and scurrilous maccheroni-eater, who is even today an emblem of the city. During the seventeenth century in Naples, as part of a general crackdown on the more pagan aspects of festivities all over Europe this campaign also translated into the Church’s attempt to banish Pulcinella (Scafoglio 1994, 42–45).

Even into the nineteenth century, though, when the Cuccagna machines had been put aside for over a century, Naples was still associated with Cuccagna by at least one novelist. In her 1891 novel, _Il Paese di Cuccagna_, the Neapolitan writer Matilde Serao insightfully used Cuccagna as a metaphor for the widespread lottery mania that was devastating the rich and poor of that city. Serao here continued a time-honored literary tradition of moralizing on the Cuccagna
theme and focusing on its darker and dangerous side. The desire for a material paradise on earth varied according to class. By playing the lottery, a nobleman wished to restore his family fortunes, a merchant to open a pastry shop in a more fashionable quarter of Naples, but to Antonietta, of the urban poor, to win the lottery would mean to eat maccheroni and meat morning and night, every day! A rather modest dream, one might say, and yet one which eluded Italians until the post-WWII era.

Serao here describes the psychology of Cuccagna as a preying Lotto agent reflects:

He saw again [in his mind] the weeks of Christmas, of Easter, when the game became frenzied, fierce, so great was the desire of the people to enter into the long-dreamed-for Land of Cockaigne and he saw himself again, always happy over those delusions which ended in painful disappointment; happy that the mirage blinded the weak, the foolish, the sick, the poor, the hopeful—all those who longed for the Land of Cockaigne, happy that of all those who had been infected by the disease, none would be saved; delighted that during major feast days, the rage increased, and gaming increased, as did his percentage [of the sales].

Such delirious dreams have, and always will, comforted the poor and overworked. The sharp rise in American gambling, from bingo and state lotteries to full-fledged casinos, painfully corroborate that such dreams of instant wealth are thriving yet. Early immigrants to this country, and others, (Bernardi 1994, 122–23, 133) had similar dreams. The flight to Cuccagna, the Land of Plenty, in fact, became the propelling myth behind Italian mass emigration, a mass exodus at its height precisely as these pages of Serao’s were being written in the 1890s. Many purchased steerage class tickets to paradise, boarded ship at the port of Naples itself, and headed for the “new world”—to America, where the streets were said to be paved with gold, and where they believed they would never go hungry again. But, as one wit has it: they quickly learned that not only were the streets not paved with gold, they were not paved at all, and furthermore, the immigrants themselves would have to pave them (cf. Italians in America 1998!)

The theme of hunger was widely present in the literature of the nineteenth century since it was, after all, a painful reality of Italian streets from north to south. But hunger had been a staple of oral traditions long before (see, on narrative, Beduschi 1983; Bottigheimer 1986; Tatar 1992; on lullabies, Del Giudice 1988, 276–77). How many classic tales spoke of great famines whereby a hero/ine would venture out into the world to find their way; or the horrific—but
all too common—cases of attempted cannibalism at the hands of ogres and witches, mirage-like gingerbread houses, or lavish wedding feasts ending many a happy-ever-after tale? Traditional narratives are especially important sources for understanding ethnographic food systems. In the Italian tradition, many are the magic tablecloths, sacks, or pots which produce food whenever asked to do so (Cusatelli 1982; Luciani 1994; Milillo 1994). Numerous Italian tales begin with the scattering of large families due to famine; children (often brothers) are sent into the world to seek their fortune (Calvino 1956, introduction; “Jump in My Sack,” tale 200). For Italians, a people with a long history of emigration, these tale types take on curiously ethnographic undertones, and may indeed be considered emblematic tales of immigration. Not surprisingly, they have endured among immigrants themselves both as tales (see Agonito 1967, 52–64) and as oral histories—corroborating Calvino’s maxim that *le fiabe sono vere* (folktales are true). Not only were these tales “true,” but so were the fantastical fictions of Cuccagna and Upside Worlds (partly) materialized through the immigrant experience.

**AN EVOLVING TOPOS: CUCCAGNEQUE JOURNEYS AND IMMIGRATION**

Cuccagna has proven surprisingly resilient: it has come to assimilate a wide range of motifs and genres in literature and oral tradition, as well as intersected ethnographic and historic realities. Cuccagna indeed is a cauldron into which new ingredients have been continuously added over the centuries (Cocchiara 1956). Therein can be found the Ship of Fools (Barca dei Rovinati, Galea di Cuccagna), Topsy Turvy Land (Il Roverso Mondo), and especially Carnival, not to mention myriad minor oral expressive and literary genres. Cuccagna’s most recent metamorphoses however, may be found in Italian immigrant culture, and in children’s literature (see Del Giudice 1997, 1998). It is on its place in immigrant culture that the remainder of this paper will focus.

Cuccagna tales circulated in oral narrative, illustrated street songs, and kept an imagined state alive, but certainly did not coincide with any on the Italian political map. Progressively, they helped shift its geographical configuration from the “old” world to the “new.” Italians came to associate Cuccagna with America as it was imagined and as immigrant propaganda—and immigrant narrative itself—came to depict it: the land of plenty, the land of opportunity, and the land of equality.

Oddly, it may be Cuccagna’s intersection with the travel tale, so prevalent during the Renaissance, an “age of discoveries,” which may have provided a distant source for future journeys. In that earlier narrative genre, which characteristically merged truth and fantasy in marvelous tales of discovery, new and surprising worlds (largely “imagined states” of their own) came to present
themselves as possible, alternative worlds. Some depicted abundant, verdant landscapes, laden with all manner of fruits and edible wildlife. Others spoke of clement and benign nature where natives lived in a state of innocent bliss and in social harmony. This literature fed the growing body of utopian literature.

Whereas fantastic voyages had been, as we have seen, a staple of oral and literary traditions, masses of Italians, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, found themselves aboard real ships bound for North and South America, as well as the farther reaches of the world (such as Australia). The banner on one Cuccagna print in particular, might well be describing an immigrant ship sailing to the Americas were it not for the fact that it was published centuries earlier: “The ship of the destitude which departs for Trebisbonda, where all the failed, the ruined and consumed, and those who cannot show their faces on account of bad debts, are invited.” Might echoes of this Ship of Fools have stirred somewhere in the subconscious of immigrants boarding trans-Atlantic freighters to the New World, ships on which literally millions of Italians sought passage to a new Cuccagna?

Somewhere between folly, desperation, and wish fulfillment lies the existential state of Cuccagna. In truth, even the street variety had always pointed to the fact that Cuccagna was an elaborate lie, a tall tale, a fiction not to be taken too seriously. Had it not frequently been given facetious place names such as Nowhereland (as well as dietro le Alpi che non si trovano mai, “behind the Alps which are never found”), and hadn’t its various authors borne fictitious names such as Messer Bugia (Mr. Lie), Bugiardello (Little Lier), or signor Valcercha (Mr. What-have-you)? These expedients did not make the people dream of such marvelous places with any lesser fervor. The dream for a better life and a better state—in the political as well as existential sense—fueled the mass emigrations from Italy. This was a dream of profound renewal, fully embodied in the imagined land of Cuccagna, but only partly found in the new land of America.

How do such patently fictional and fantastical dreams come to be believed by a people? How do such lies actually prompt to action? Consider this analogy: the legend of the “flying African” in African American folk culture did much to fuel a belief in the possibility of breaking the chains of slavery and escape. The belief in the ability of early-arrived Africans to take wing and fly back to their homeland—but in reality (and only later) on the “underground railway” to the North—had real and positive consequences. “The story of ‘flying Africans’ was so important to slaves, because it provided them with the magical powers needed to escape brutal reality, and the legend’s metaphorical use provided the ability for psychic survival. It taught that escape was possible. And many slaves did escape.” Metting goes on to claim: “oral traditions . . . protect and empower readers through lessons on survival, identity, and health” (Metting 1994, 1995, 285–86). The belief in Cuccagna did as much for Italians escaping to the
New World—emigrating, despite official resistance to the mass exodus, despite the many accounts of danger they would encounter. From the discovery of America onward, a desire for *renovatio* (renewal), and the marvelous descriptions of a *nuovo mondo* (new world) circulated among the peoples of Europe, and when mass migrations were finally possible, brought millions of the destitute to the New World (Honour 1975; Chiappelli et al. 1976; Franzina 1995). Immigrant narratives are full of such aspirations. Conversely, and on a more sinister note, it was precisely the fiction of Cuccagna, narrated in all its appealing detail, which helped Europeans lure and enslave many Africans during the age of slavery (Minton 1991).

Myriad representations of America as a mythic land of plenty may be found in immigrant personal narratives and correspondence, but also in propaganda literature, in tour books, in immigrant agents’ brochures, in nationalistic political writings, and in the popular literature of the nineteenth century. For Italians, America was alternatively known as Il Nuovo Mondo (the New World), La Terra Promessa (the Promised Land—and one should not discount the literal sense of this term, for peasants turned immigrants sought land, cultivatable land. Del Giudice 1993, 55), and Cuccagna (Vecoli 1988; Franzina 1992). A basic aspiration, however, and one abundantly elaborated in the landscape of Cuccagna, was the desire to feed a hungry body. As Teti (1984, 9) succinctly summarizes the immigrant’s relationship to food (in this case, speaking of Toronto Italians): “they carry with them the traditional culture and values of the peasant world, but especially bodies marked and undernourished, an ancient hunger, the aspiration toward a better world, toward a world of abundance that in the old country could not be achieved.” The most dramatic change that occurred in the life of every immigrant to the new world, in fact, regarded diet—a most immediate and tangible gauge of success and literal fulfillment. Writing in an immediate post-WWII milieu, Pellegrino looks back on his own family’s migration in the 1930s, and personally recalls “an experience in which millions of immigrants to American have shared” (1952, 33): “I found, first of all, the meaning, the consumable, edible meaning, of a simple word, lost in the dictionary among thousands of others—the meaning of the word *abundance*” (Pellegrino 1952, 27). Pellegrino recounts some of the (tall) tales told about America/Cuccagna which he later experienced to be true: tree trunks so large several couples could dance around them, wheat fields so vast no train could cross them in a single day, meats, sweets, fine clothes for everyone (so that one could not distinguish the rich from the poor—a recurrent cross-cultural theme in immigrant narratives), and incredible waste. Literally, therefore, one could find not gold but food in the streets. Furthermore, nature may have given up many of its riches freely in the new land, but not without toil. Pellegrino and his family, residing on the edge of a forest in Washington state, lived off the fat of
the land, collecting edibles (nuts, mushrooms, wild game, berries, etc.) and firewood at their pleasure.

Immigrants and food are indeed firmly linked in American consciousness. Culinary metaphors for ethnic immigrants themselves abound. In the great cauldron of immigrant America, itself a “melting pot,” a homogeneous stew sits bubbling, while, nonetheless, food continues to set social boundaries and contribute to ethnic stereotyping. Folklorists recognize the truism “you are what you eat” as a means of marking a group by its most basic (or its oddest) food. In America, where ethnically mixed communities are common, this is an especially marked tendency. The dominant culture has labeled the French Frogs, the Irish Potatoes, the Germans Krauts, and the Mexicans Beaners. Italians have continued to be gastronomically stereotyped as pasta-eaters or Spaghetti-Benders. On the other hand, Anglo-Canadians, are known as Mangiacocche (mangia-kaykee)—“Cake-Eaters”—or simply as Cakes to Toronto Italians.

Italian (and other) immigrants came to this land, in part, to escape hunger. Those who emigrated during the post-WWII wave could not have known that a decisive turning point for all Italians, even in Italy, was just around the corner. It came to be known as il Boom economico (the economic boom) or il miracolo italiano (the Italian miracle) of the 1960s. During these miracle years, Italy suddenly became a Cuccagna of its own (cf. Parks 1993, 60, 82–84, 210). Only then did the eating habits of common Italians profoundly change, and the long-held desire for meat finally become appeased. Meat became a daily staple (Somogyi 1973; Montanari 1992) as vegetables, legumes and even pasta diminished somewhat in importance. As a negative outcome, of course, national health surveys marked an increase in coronary disease.

Cultural History and Personal Experience

A look at Italian immigrant foodways, narrative, and worldview, immediately makes evident that food became the primary focus of their lives as immigrants (cf. Teti 1984, Chairetakis 1993, Del Giudice 1993, 2000, 2001, and forthcoming). Italian immigrants’ obsession with food seems indeed to document and embody centuries-old mass traumas. I am coming to the conclusion however, that the legacy has farther-reaching effects than imagined. That is, not only can we readily find its imprint on those peasants-turned-immigrants themselves, who personally experienced hunger, but in their third and fourth generation progeny. These latter-day, peasant-derived Italian Americans, have creatively metamorphosed this basic preoccupation with food in far more “evolved” ways. They may no longer tend vegetable gardens, make their own wine, cure their own olives or prosciutti, or stock cantinas, but they still display this attachment to food through occupations as high-end restaurateurs, vintners, food distributors,
food critics, writers of cookbooks, and so forth. On a personal note, I too have found myself progressively on this trajectory, as I come to understand for instance, how and why the immigrant experience has moved this present research and involvement in food organizations such as the International Slow Food Movement. Ultimately, these combined activities corroborate my thesis that Cuccagna animates immigrant consciousness still, mine included.

How many ways had I experienced firsthand, the central role of food in my family’s life and worldview? While growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in the Toronto Italian community to which I had immigrated as an infant of four months, it seemed to me that an inordinate percentage of discourse revolved around food (favorable markets and costs), as did the amounts of time spent on food-related activities (making wine, bread, pasta, cheese, planting a garden, gathering wild foods, fishing, hunting). Most socialization occurred around a table (family dinners, picnics, and visits from paesani, “fellow townpeople”). At the very center of all family and community ritual moments, both sacred and profane, there was food, from the obligatory, twice-yearly Catholic Eucharist at Christmas and Easter (followed by major feasting), to the lavish wedding banquets, baptismal parties, and even Sunday dinners. Around the dinner table itself, food discourse and food narratives were common: the pre-immigration personal experience narratives regarding my father’s life as a peasant and a fisherman (both food-centered occupations); war stories on both sides of the front, stealing potatoes from under an official’s nose while in a German prisoner of war camp, as told by my father, or the ongoing trauma of procuring food during the war years, and of watching her father fail and eventually die (essentially from starvation), as told by my mother. These bleak narratives occasionally alternated with the more wondrous, and truly cuccagnesque, tales of food literally falling from the sky (as fish were deposited on the beach during a hurricane), or gutters gushing with olive oil (from a carter whose load of oil jugs had crashed in the streets (Del Giudice 2001).

It was in response to these specific personal and communal immigrant experiences that the need to search for traces of a coherent peasant cultural past was awakened. Although it was in library and archive alike that I found the mythic land of plenty known as Cuccagna, it was through lived experience, that I found it to be true. This dialogue between recent and remote past convinces me that cultural historical research of this sort is strictly relevant to the present, that it actually contributes to writing the history of a people in large measure without a written historical record. Furthermore, it confirms the importance of personal life experiences and field work for folk cultural research, as well as, for conventional, historical inquiry. That is, folklore research combined with oral historical methodologies and archival research, make a mutually sustaining and convincing partnership.
Cuccagna indeed, became a concise and eloquent emblem onto which could be hung many personal, but also common, experiences of peasant and immigrant life. I believe it makes a powerful symbol for Italian immigrants. How far had the songs which spoke of a mythic land of plenty, sung by street performers in the public squares of Italy over the centuries, and told in folktales shared among family and community, taken a people! On many far-flung shores, Italians translated this imagined state, first into hovels, and ultimately into dreamhouses . . . a brick at a time (Del Giudice 1993). But unlike the laborless utopia, they learned to construct it with their own hands. It is no coincidence that Italians came to so dominate the food and construction industries in many lands, so eager were they to realize their imagined world (and so had their own strong artisan traditions given them the skills to accomplish this realization). On those new domestic landscapes food reigned supreme and Cuccagna was re-enacted at every possible turn, for while hunger itself may have been vanquished, the fear of hunger and scarcity kept cuccagnesque practices alive (Del Giudice 1993, 2001). Little did they realize the paradox of Cuccagna however: in the very act of festivalizing the quotidian, they would exorcise, and thereby render, Cuccagna—never actually a place but the desire for place—obsolete. Through the literal embodiment of this imagined state into their own flesh and blood—by their overindulgence in cuccagnesque abundance—Cuccagna, they have discovered, may indeed be detrimental to personal and cultural health. Yet, should the search for mountains of cheese and rivers of wine be abandoned, might not the very center of Italian folk cultural practice and identity, so bound up in food—and in the search for its abundance—unravel?

Notes

Variations of this paper have been read at the following meetings: Kommission für Volksdichtung (S.I.E.F.), Faeroe Islands, 1993; American Folklore Society, Milwaukee, 1994; Museo ItaloAmericano, San Francisco, 1994; University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1995; UCLA, Los Angeles, 1995, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Los Angeles, 2000. A full-length study, upon which this much-reduced version is based, will be forthcoming in Luisa Del Giudice, In Search of Abundance: Mountains of Cheese, Rivers of Wine and other Italian Gastronomic Utopias.

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1. Paradise apparently derives from the Persian *paradis*, an otherworldly prize for the Muslim warrior, wherein lies a luxurious garden with fruit trees and plentiful beasts to be hunted. If these such edible paradises indeed are the heavenly goal, Vidari speculates, “la religione esprime forse il ricordo di fami terribili,” (“religion perhaps records the memory of terrible famines”; Vidari 1981, 40). Richter sees in Cockaigne a flowing together of literary and mystical Judeo-Christian and Islamic sources (Richter 1989). On Schlaraffenland see Ackermann 1994, Richter 1989; on Cocagne: Delpech 1979, Delumeau 1976.

2. For example, a crime-ridden society might crave an orderly, harmonious, and peaceable kingdom, whereas a developing society might project cucagnesque visions such as the one here described.

3. In the literature and iconography (and hence in the popular imagination as well) of Christian Europe, Hell, too, was frequently depicted as a kitchen in which evil souls were roasted, fried, fricasseed, or eaten raw by a voracious, cannibalistic Satan.

4. This is not to say, however, that dietary concerns do not form part of literary utopian writings as well (see, for example, Chiarotto 1982, on More, Campanella, Bacon, etc.), although the perspective is markedly different and may concern systems of food production and distribution, for example. Indeed, the differences between these two utopic models and their value systems are rather marked: indulgence vs. sobriety; the individual vs. the public good; a full belly and idleness vs industriousness (cf. Richter 1989).

5. See the many food-related games found in the prints of Mitelli (in Bertarelli 1940): *Gioco della Cucagna*, (The Cuccagna game; p. 131; and figure 10, herein); *Il gioco importantissimo del fornaro, banco, che mai falisce, chi hà robba da mangiar sempre hà moneta*, (The most important game of the baker, bank which never goes bankrupt, where one who has food to eat never loses and always has money; p. 133); *Gioco della Signora Gola*, (The game of Lady Gullet; p. 137); *Gioco Nuovo di tutte l’osterie che sono in Bologna*, (The new game of all the taverns of Bologna; p. 138). See also Camporesi 1975.

6. On this motif in Scandinavian tradition, see Blegen and Ruud [ca. 1936] 187–91; Amundsen and Kvideland 1975; Wright and Wright 1983, 221–23); see also two sound recordings of “Oleana”: Harvey 1986; side 2, track 6, and Glazer 1991; side 1, track 6.

7. Even, though, according to Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (1989), in the Anglo-American world, asceticism and puritanism prevented the American utopia from focusing on food and pleasure, and therefore it became more symbolic, or figurative (Eldorado, Golden Land). The Big Rock Candy Mountain, however, does seem to be an exception, since it features the hobo’s vision of streams of whiskey, stew, and candy—as well as no work or police and bulldogs with rubber teeth.

8. Note that maccheroni in the Middle Ages referred to gnocchi, “dumplings” of fresh flour (not of potatoes, obviously, since they were a later “New World” addition to the European diet). Note too that the parmigiano cheese onto which they
were rolled was their prime condiment (since tomatoes too were added after the “discoveries”; (Montanari 1987; 12; cf. Messedaglia 1942).

9. Pianta 1989 and personal communication. Other occupational (and antioccupational) groups, sharing a similar worldview, such as Norwegian navvies (cf. Kvideland and Porter’s paper, herein) and American hoboos (cf. Rammel 1990), may have been attracted to such motifs for similar reasons.

10. On the other hand food often does appear on the landscape in the form of toponomastics, see Desinan 1982.

11. Indeed, Montanari contends, hunger can only be understood through the binary opposition of hunger and abundance, hence the title of his work, L’abbondanza e la fame (1993, 120).

12. The recipe “Per far pavoni vestiti con tutte le sue penne” (How to make peacocks dressed with all their own feathers) is reproduced in Guerrini [1879] 1969, 293–94. For other recipes on such culinary feats, see Giovanni[i] de Rosselli’s cookbook: Opera nova chiamata Epulario, la quale tracta il modo de cucinare ogni carne, ucelli, pesci, de ogni sorte, et fare sapori, torte, pastelli, al modo de tutte le provincie, [et] molte altre ge[n]tilezze, co[m]posta p[er] maestro Giovanni[n[i] de Roselli, Fra[n]cese ([1574] 1974, 6 Rpt.).

13. This is not to say that this exercise was not also somewhat sado-masochistic, for merely filling one’s ears was little consolation for not filling one’s stomach. An Old Irish Vision recounts the bound Cathal forced to listen to long lists of food without being fed: “Though grievous to Cathal was the pain of being two days and a night without food, much greater was the agony of listening to the enumeration before him of the many various pleasant viands, and none of them for him!” (The Vision of MacConglinne 1936, vision 573). I thank Victoria Simmons for this reference.

14. It has been stated somewhere that the modern illustrated cookbook is “pornography for women.” I thank Gerald Porter for this note.

15. Significant Italian iconographic representations may be found in Angeleri 1953, 122, n. 159, and 131–32, n. 184; Bertarelli 1940, n. 605; Bertarelli 1974, figure 13 and n. 553, figure 14; Camporesi 1978, 228–32; di Mauro 1981, 97 n. 169, and 120, n. 239; Morelli 1969, 139; Segarizzi 1913, 236, n. 258; Toschi 1964, figure 105; Vidari 1981; Many related depictions from other traditions as well as the Italian may be found in Harms 1983; Harms and Kemp 1987; Fortunati and Zucchini 1989; Rammel 1990; Foster and Palomino 1992, 9–10.

16. Until recently, for instance, they were closely associated with markets and fairs and hence, as itinerants, shared in their negative social status (Leydi 1978). On the Pavese street performer, see Callegari’s account of his father shaming his farming family by becoming a street singer (Centro di Studi 1978, 310–12).

17. It has also been noted that it was precisely during times of severe strictures and social repression that topoi such as Cockaigne, Feast of Fools, and Carnival—that is, temporary safety valves—became most necessary and efficacious, for example, during the times of Rabelais, Cyrano, and Marivaux (cf. Trousson 1989, 35). The evolution of Cuccagna, for instance, during the seventeenth century was, in part, due to the increasing rigidity of economic conditions, the reaffirmation of social class and privilege, and the culture of the Counter Reformation, intent on quashing all expressions of presumed immorality and licentiousness (cf. Montanari 1987, 12).
In northern European versions, in fact, Carnival’s emblematic animal, the pig, is frequently depicted running about with a knife in its back, ready for carving.

For King Cockaigne in the German tradition, see the illustrations in Harms 1983, n. 28, and Harms and Kemp 1987, n. 41, likely derivative of the Italian Il trionfo di Carnevale nel paese di Cucagna, 1565.


Sanga sees in the worldview of marginals, hobos (and peasants and immigrants as well), the reflection of these “paleolithic [biological] rhythms,” and a worldview therefore dominated by the philosophy of the crapula, that is, to glut whenever the opportunity arises (cf. Sanga 1994, 39–40).

This albero may originally have been a Maypole, a phallic symbol (cf. L'albero della Cuccagna in Fortunati and Zucchini 1989, figure 25), decorated with flowers (cf. Barletta 1981). On the “planting of the tree” (the ritual pole) in traditional contexts see the forthcoming work by Domenico Scaffoglio, “Le radici dell’albero.” For print depictions of the Cuccagna pole see Toschi 1964, 147, figures 24–27, and in the Getty Collections (Vol. 1: Amboise-Ferrara), two variants of “alber[i] della Cuccagna,” dated 1735 and signed G.A. Belmondo.

This was the age of ingenious apparati and mechanisms, capricious and inventive techniques that enhanced, indeed made, theater and spectacle—on the public piazza as well as in the theater proper. Any occasion (baptisms, funerals, births, marriages) provided a pretext for erecting them, and major architects and artists, with a solid artisan tradition at their disposal, were set to work on the design and construction of these often “most capricious creations,” (creazioni capriciosisissime; Mancini 1964, 3). The art of scenografia (stage sets) was born from such an Italian milieu, and its identity merges with architecture during the Baroque period (cf. Mancini 1964, introduction; see also Mancini 1968).

Similar spectacular feedings of the poor at the public trough could have been witnessed in many parts of Italy. The traditional dispensing of dowries, for instance, was often followed by a public banquet; for example a print entitled Banchetto dato ai Giardini Pubblici a duecento sposi, “a banquet given in the Public Gardens for 200 newlyweds,” shows couples seated on palchi, raised planks built for the occasion on the public square (Bertarelli and Monti 1927, 218). Under the gaze of refined citizens, the inelegant and uncouth country brides and grooms must have once again provided good fun.

Published in 1891, and during the previous year as installments in Il mattino, Naples. A more recent edition, edited by Mario Pomilio was published in Florence by Vallecchi in 1971 (Serao [1891] 1971). On Naples and Cuccagna, see also Serao (excerpted from her Il ventre di Napoli) in Carabba 1976.

27. Of course, the Gold Rush itself did much to reactivate that part of the myth, as many Europeans (not necessarily of the lower classes this time) made the trans-Atlantic journey as goldseekers. And wealth has remained the substance of the American Dream, one might add.

28. On this motif, see Cocchiara 1963; Kunzle 1978; and Lafond and Redondo 1979; on the general topic of inversion, see Babcock 1978.

29. “La barca de’ rovinati che parte per Trebisonda, dove s’invitano tutti i falliti, consumati e male andati, e tutti quelli che non possono comparire al mondo per li gran debiti” (Croce 1946, 287).

30. On Italian songs of emigration, see Savona and Straniero 1976. One song in particular, “Mamma, mamma, mamma, dammi cento lire” (Del Giudice 1989, tape 1, side B,9), popular among immigrants, warns against the journey and ends in ship-wreck.

31. “Si portano dietro la cultura e i valori tradizionali del mondo contadino, ma soprattutto i corpi segnati e denutriti, una fame antica, la tensione a un mondo migliore, a un mondo dell’abbondanza, che in patria non avevano potuto realizzare” (Teti 1984, 9). I was delighted by Teti’s writings, found after the substance of this paper was already completed, for they corroborated many of my own intuitions and findings on Toronto Italian immigrants.

32. This represents an international movement to safeguard local foodways and food producers while educating the public on global food economics and their impact on biodiversity and food traditions (see <www.slowfood.com>).

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