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Florentine Cuisine and Culture

In paradiso ci si canta e ci si suona
e di mangiare non se ne ragiona.

In Paradise we play and sing
and think not about eating.
Tuscan proverb, from Massimo[1]

Introduction

The Florentine proverb defined paradise as the place where ***non se ne ragiona*** about eating—a complicated expression that means the food is beyond reason, without need for thinking. It implies the inescapable fact of life for many Florentines throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century—that they always had to fret about eating. Through their ways of talking about food, people identified themselves as Florentines and Tuscans. Sixty-six-year-old Elena, who in Chapter 1 criticized her fellow Florentines for their arrogance, was happy to proclaim her pride in their food: *Oh, we eat well in Florence; we eat very well. Our cooking is not very refined, but it is delicious. It's not sophisticated because generally we just do our best and don't make fancy dishes like they do in many places, in the Italian Piemonte region, for example. There they cook French style and they make refined dishes that are beautiful to look at. But they are less flavorful than ours because they are cooked with lots of butter and have a delicate taste. But our cooking uses hot pepper and pepper, you know. We use olive oil—the really good kind—and garlic, onion, and hot peppers. Yes, yes, we Florentines care about eating.*

By acclaiming her food, Elena expressed pride in her Florentine identity and differentiated herself from other Italians and Europeans. Like many Italians, Florentines constantly reproduced their cuisine and its meanings through cooking, improvising dishes, exchanging recipes, eating with others, and talking about food. Their culinary narratives were a meaningful expression of culture, history, identity, family, and gender.

Florentine cuisine in the 1970s and 1980s was a loosely coherent system of rules applied with some regularity and logic as people combined foods and spices, constructed recipes, and consumed meals in their homes.[2] This cuisine evolved from a centuries-old tradition of human transformation of the Tuscan natural environment through the ***mezzadria*** sharecropping system to produce foods consistent with agrarian potential, economic realities, and taste preferences. There was a dietary core of Florentine cuisine that was crucial to Florentine identity, but it varied in content, quality, and elaboration across class,

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Fig. 2.1 The Tuscan countryside near Cerreto Guidi in 1984, with olive, grape, and grain growing

urban-rural residence, and history. Although Florentine cuisine was always evolving, in the 1980s it began to show signs of significant alterations associated with the broader social and economic changes of modernity. In this chapter I present a panoramic overview of the most important issues that emerged as Florentines talked about food in the 1980s. In Chapter 4, I describe their diet in detail.

Florentines called their cuisine ***il mangiare fiorentino***—"Florentine eating"—and ***la cucina fiorentina,*** meaning both "Florentine cooking" and "the Florentine kitchen." Their language emphasized what was important to them about food—its eating and cooking—both of which have traditionally taken place in the kitchen, the heart of family life and the domain of women. In this book I use *Florentine* and *Tuscan* to refer to the cuisine of Florence and the surrounding towns and countryside of central Tuscany, whose produce fed the city and whose peasants swelled its ranks after World Wars I and II. Florentine cuisine had its roots in the longstanding ***mezzadria*** mode of production described in Chapter 3, which influenced city dwellers as well as peasants due to the close connections between city and country. In fact, the diet described by both poor and moderate-income city dwellers was similar to that of the peasants, differing in quality and abundance, but not in basic structure and ingredients.[3] Florentines argued endlessly during long convivial hours of shared meals about what precisely was the proper way to make any given dish, and they all thought their own way best. While they claimed affinity with the cooking of their ancestors, they also improvised constantly, and their meals and cuisine were always evolving, as they surely always have.

Florentine foodways shared much with those of other Italians in central Italy and across the nation. They were affected by similar economic imperatives, nutritional science precepts, political policies, and expert advice in nutrition, domestic science, and cuisine (Helstosky 1996, 2004). Yet because of Italy's extreme cultural diversity and historic provincialism or ***campanalismo,*** Florentines were also distinct. This detailed study of the foodways of former

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peasants, artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, and small businesspeople hopes to show how Florentines' cuisine reflected their cultural identity in central ways. It was never static, and it varied across time, place, and economic station.

Cuisine and Cultural Identity

Florentines used food to define an identity grounded in their illustrious history. In the following passage, fifty-four-year-old Raffaele from Empoli used a quintessential Florentine dish—***minestra di pane***** (bread soup)—to express the connection between food, history, and identity: *Take bread soup—**minestra di pane**—the famous bread and bean soup. That is a dish that I make often, because we really love it. First you have to cook the white beans, and that takes hours. Then you have to prepare all the vegetables, and then you have to cook them all together, understand? We take advantage of the fact that there are all these fresh local vegetables at this time of year in early summer, and make a soup that is really good. We eat it willingly.*

*We eat this soup with leftover bread, for the **minestra di pane** was invented by poor people, no? When there was leftover bread in the old days, it was a waste to throw it away, so what happened? Well, someone must have invented this **minestra di pane** one hundred, two hundred, I don't know how many years ago, maybe even five hundred years ago, because even Dante ate it. Even Leonardo da Vinci ate **minestra di pane**. Why? Because bread was an essential food at that time. . . . So they created these condiments based on bean or vegetable broth and soaked the bread in it. The bread softened in the broth and took on the taste of the vegetables and the beans—it took on an exceptional taste; it is truly delicious.*

*In Tuscany especially, people adore it, everybody knows this **minestra di pane**. There's not a person who hasn't eaten it. That's the way it is; it's like spaghetti; everyone has eaten it. In Tuscany it's more popular than anywhere else because we have our special bread that is different from other places. You couldn't make a bread soup in the Emilia region because they have that delicate white bread. You have to have thick dark bread like we have, and it has to be old, hard, and dry.*

Raffaele's words emphasized how eating ***minestra di pane*** distinguished Tuscans from other Italians, linking them together and to their illustrious past filled with the likes of Dante and Leonardo da Vinci.[4] It was uniquely theirs, edible in different variants, but with a fundamental identity linked to the flavors, beans, and bread. Raffaele also expressed how his cuisine tied him to his own ancestors: *When my wife and I married and found ourselves on our own, what happened? What happened was my wife watched how her mother made things, and I observed my mother, understand? And the same way of cooking continued. After I got married, when I went to eat at my mother's house, I didn't find any differences between her cooking and mine, and neither did my children, because we cooked the same way. I am sure that the way I eat now is the same way*

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*Recipes marked with an asterisk are included in Appendix D.

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my grandfather and grandmother ate in 1800—the same way my great-grandfather ate. They made the same genuine foods that we are still making now.

Eating the same things in the same way expressed Florentine cultural and familial continuity across generations. Raffaele went on: *The basic menu that we regularly eat at home is how I ate in my mother's time. Practically speaking, I haven't invented anything in cooking. I took everything my mother made when I was little, and my mother must have taken it from her mother. . . . In short, spaghetti are always spaghetti, **pomarola** (tomato sauce) is always **pomarola**, meat sauce is always meat sauce. We don't invent anything, understand?* But although food and his discourse about it enabled Raffaele to claim an unchanging cultural identity, in fact Florentine cuisine and culture were inexorably changing under the impact of modernity, and **pomarola** was not always **pomarola**.

Florentines affirmed their identity by loving best of all their own home cooking, ***la cucina casalinga.*** Fifty-four-year-old Baldo from Empoli said: *There's little to throw away in Tuscan cooking. So many times, even when we go out to eat at a country restaurant, they bring us something new like perhaps wild boar cooked in some special way, and it is exquisite and we eat it willingly. In Tuscany we have this good fortune that all our food is delicious. In fact, we feel the blow when we travel elsewhere. My wife doesn't have any problems, but I do. These little soufflés, these little things in cream sauce—they don't appeal to me at all. I like home-style cooking—**roba casalinga**—especially my wife Valeria's cooking. For example, I like lasagna, but when she makes it, it is better than in restaurants. I eat it with more pleasure.*

Baldo put home cooking at the top of the culinary hierarchy, as many Florentines did. And like him, many expressed distaste for other cuisines—whether in Italy or abroad—as Elena complained above about the cuisine of the Piemonte region. Their food chauvinism was an overt expression of cultural identity, as Baldo made clear: *I don't like British cooking. I tried it at the hotel we stayed at in Palma di Mallorca. For us Tuscans it was a struggle to find something to eat to satisfy our hunger without feeling revolted. I don't like French cooking either. Fortunately, when I went to visit Marseilles, I stayed with my Italian relatives and ate with them. They have been there sixty years and they are retired now. They have always eaten Italian food. They make special trips into downtown Marseilles to buy Italian ingredients so they can cook Italian fare.* This stubborn habit of clinging to their own food wherever they went—even in France, a renowned center of gastronomy—was a legendary habit of Italians. Not only did Italian immigrants reproduce (and certainly modify) their cuisine in homes and restaurants all over the New World, but Italian tourists were famous for wanting to eat Italian pasta wherever they traveled (Corti 1998, Diner 2001, Levenstein 1985).

In the following story, Rinaldo, the forty-five-year-old owner of a cloth-dyeing factory in Prato, expressed his Tuscan culinary chauvinism: *I don't like*

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a lot of sophisticated cooking, because we're not raised that way. But let me tell you this story about one time I went to Paris and had to eat duck in peach sauce. In Paris we work with French importers of our cloth and have a close relationship with them for everything to do with the colors and so on. So after years of working together, I went to Paris and the business colleagues took me to one of the best restaurants. One of them started raving about the specialty of the house—duck in peach sauce. He went on and on about how good this was. So I had to order it. Well, you know that French cooking is more sophisticated than ours, right? When the waiter brought it, I saw this duck in this thick peach syrup—this dense, rather sweet sauce. As soon as I tasted it, I was nauseated, truly revolted. However, this man kept saying, "Eh, how is it Rinaldo? How is it?" I absolutely could not tell him that I didn't like it. I found myself in the situation where I had to eat that duck in peach sauce even though it was completely disgusting to me. I could not refuse it. He was so content, so satisfied that he had enabled me to try this specialty that I would have eaten two of them so as not to offend him. He would have been really mortified because he had sung the praises of this dish so much beforehand. And he kept on saying at the table how good it was. Therefore I gave it all my effort.

But I like simple foods. I don't go for sophisticated dishes—like soufflés, for example—I've tried them many times, but I just don't like them. They don't have any exact flavor but they have a strange taste. I never had them growing up. I don't like them. I don't like sophisticated foods and I try to avoid them. I had to eat that duck in peach sauce once, but I won't get caught again, eh. By now I have understood the kinds of foods that I like. If I go to a restaurant, I choose simple things, like ***carpaccio****, for example. It is a really thin slice of cured meat, not cooked, but steeped in olive oil, vinegar, and some other things. It's eaten with a light mayonnaise on top with other herbs and it is fabulous, really delicious, and very light too. I also like, for example, raw onions with tuna fish, or prosciutto.* In his next words, Rinaldo reiterated a central Tuscan value, rooted in a tradition of scarcity, *It's the quality not the quantity that counts for me.*

He also emphasized the basic foundation of Tuscan cuisine: *I'm happy if you make me a good* ***pomarola*****, or a good meat sauce, or, I don't know, a risotto. I can dine with risotto—that's how I am. I can make a dinner out of it. I have two big plates full and that's enough. Or polenta. I love polenta. It's rare for me to stray from simple Tuscan cuisine.* For Rinaldo and many others, contented consumption of simple Tuscan cuisine enduring across families and generations was an important expression of cultural identity.

Cuisine and Gender

Florentines also expressed and enacted gender identity through foodways. Across the twentieth century, a rigid sexual division of labor prevailed, and men and women had clearly defined food roles: women to cook, serve, and clean up after food; men to produce and eat it. Their interdependent food roles

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mirrored and established interdependent gender roles, aptly expressed by sixty-six-year-old Elena, who said of her relationship with her husband Giorgio, ***Forse ci si compensava a vicenda***—*maybe we counterbalanced each other.* Both a man and a woman were needed in a household to ensure the survival of the family. But since men's work was valued more highly, women had to contend with a societal and familial imbalance that disfavored them and privileged men. In Chapters 5, 6, 8, and 9 Florentines' food-centered narratives present the diverse, complex, and shifting workings of gender.

Cuisine and Class

Although Chapter 4 describes a basic Florentine cuisine, Florentines' diets varied according to their class as they have across many cultures and epochs.[5] In both urban and rural Tuscan families, socioeconomic differences in diet emerged principally through the greater consumption by the wealthy of meat, fats, and luxury foods such as coffee, wine, and sweets. That early–twentieth–century French chef Louis Monod's definition of ***la cucina fiorentina*** was steeped in the upper classes is revealed in the fact that his cookbook of 190 pages had 68 pages of meat recipes on beef, veal, pork, lamb, poultry, and game—foods that most Florentines rarely ate.[6]

Seventy-two-year-old Marco, raised in a family of silversmiths, said, *In the old days there was a class of workers who could not afford meat because they earned very little. They couldn't possibly eat meat every day. But there were other classes who could eat meat—artisans like we were, shopkeepers, and the true upper classes (**i veri signori**).*

Marco's sixty-four-year-old wife Tommasa confirmed her husband's view: *We were always pretty well off because my father had a store, no? He and my mother had a bakery. Because of that, we were relatively well off and could eat better than many. We ate meat every day, at least once a day.* Tommasa's sister, sixty-six-year-old Elena, agreed: *When my father was still alive, we had meat every day. Well, sometimes during the war no, because you couldn't find it then. But normally we had meat every day. Whether it was boiled with broth, or whether it was a roast, or whether it was chicken on Sunday, or little steaks flipped over and done, well in short, my father wanted meat every day. Very often we had meat at the evening meal too. And if not, at supper we ate prosciutto, salami, cheese, those kinds of things.*

Not only did the rich have more meat, but they also had more of other prized and expensive foods including cheese, fruit, sweets, wine, olive oil, butter, and fats in general. Children of the rich had white bread and meat for snacks (Helstosky 2004, chapter 4), while children of the poor ate brown bread with oil, wine, and sugar, or nothing at all. Marianna described her school days in the late 1920s and early 1930s: *Often when I went to school, all the other children had a snack to eat. Sometimes I had some bread; sometimes I didn't even have that. So the teacher called me over next to her. She said, "Marianna, come and sit here," because she knew I didn't have anything to eat.*

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The diet of the poor lacked luxuries and was based on bread, cereals, legumes, and other vegetables. Marco described the diet of laborers: *Oh, people used to eat much more bread in the old days. Many masons and construction workers used to bring their lunch on their bicycles to work. When noon came, they sat there on the curb of the sidewalk and they took out these big chunks of bread. They had taken out the bread's soft inner part—the* ***mollica***[7]*—and filled up the space with cooked white beans (**fagioli**), tomatoes, or eggs cooked at home the night before.*

Back then the workers didn't use butter, for it was too expensive. In the morning they had bread and surrogate coffee made of chicory or barley with milk—that was all. They didn't have anything else. But we did. We were in better conditions, and so I used to eat bread and cookies, or bread and butter.

There was so much poverty in the old days that instead of buying a flask of olive oil at a time, people went with a tiny little bottle to buy it. They bought a half a cup of olive oil at a time because they were so poor. You know, people earned very little. They worked so hard, but they earned nothing. There is a Tuscan saying that describes how they used olive oil to dress something in the old days: ***fare il C****—"to make a C." It was a way of describing how you made just a quick swirl with the olive oil and that was all, because it cost so much.*[8] None of my subjects remembered eating a lot of olive oil before the economic boom of the 1960s—a fact that was supported by Apergi and Bianco's (1991) study of mezzadria farmers and Lo Russo's (1999, 30) claim that it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that olive oil lost its "luxury character" and became widespread.

Sixty-one-year-old Marianna grew up extremely poor in urban Florence in the 1930s and 1940s. Her father was disabled and her mother earned barely enough to feed them by running a newspaper kiosk. Marianna's recollections of her childhood diet confirmed the differences in food consumption by class noted by Marco and Tommasa: *In the morning we all ate bread. My brothers took a big hunk of bread to work with them. They opened the bread and put the* ***companatico*** *(accompaniment) inside, and they closed it back up. Sometimes they put potatoes inside, sometimes cooked eggs—**frittata**—made by my mother. They also put in the refried leftover boiled meat, which we called **lesso rifatto.*** * *After boiling the meat to make a broth, we refried it with onions and potatoes. It had more substance that way. Even if there was just a little meat, we used to say, "**lo stuffato di pelliccia, di molte patate e poca ciccia**"—"the stew made of skin, with lots of potatoes and otherwise thin."*[9] *Sometimes we bought the cow's cheek—**la guancia.** It was good; we cut it into pieces; it cost much less than other meat. That's how we were. In my house, we tried to fill ourselves up even if we didn't have very much.*

In addition to eating little meat, Marianna's family lacked other expensive foods: *We hardly ever ate fruit, because how could we do it? We couldn't afford to buy it. But listen to what my mother sometimes did. She delivered newspapers along a route all over the center of Florence, around Piazza del Duomo, Santa*

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Croce, all around there. There were some greengrocer shops and sometimes they kept some fruit for her. "Giulia, look, take this, bring it to your daughter." Oh, that was like Easter for me.

In the old days we ate a lot of ricotta because it was very cheap. But butter—we only bought a little every once in a while because we couldn't afford it. . . . How could we afford it? We bought some every now and then to make a little ***minestrina**** *or pasta with butter. I used to say, "When I grow up, I'm always going to make pasta with butter." I liked it so much, but we couldn't afford to eat it often. In those days it wasn't like today, eh; they sold butter in little 2-ounce pieces back then. Olive oil was the same; you could go and ask for a little tiny bit: "Give me one-half liter of oil."*

But while Marianna lacked luxury foods, during most of her childhood she ate plenty of vegetables, pasta, and bread, which staved off hunger. She said: *When I was little, I didn't go hungry. I was already used to the foods that we ate. You know, a few greens, and* ***minestra*** *every evening, maybe with a little olive oil. I had already gotten my mouth used to all the food we ate. Maybe we had, I don't know, a great big pan full of artichokes cut in pieces and cooked in sauce. Or maybe we had fried potatoes eaten with a little tomato sauce. Bread, bread, bread. Sometimes we even lacked bread, or it was the only thing that we had to eat. A woman said to me once, "Aren't you ashamed to tell all this?"*

I replied, "But excuse me, I really didn't do any harm to anybody, so why should I be ashamed?" Today I remember the foods we used to eat then and I eat them willingly. That means that I must have eaten them willingly as a child, because if not, I wouldn't eat them again happily.

Marianna's remark, *I had already gotten my mouth used to all the food we ate,* underscored the link between food consumption and culture. And for Marianna, the legumes, grains, and vegetables were a satisfying diet: *We ate, for example,* ***le bacelle,*** *dried fava beans, fresh fava beans. I ate them right after the war. Oh, we made some huge pans of them when I was living with my cousin. Last year I made* ***fave al pomodoro**** *(fava beans in tomato sauce) for my husband Renzo. He said, "Make some for me. Go on." They were good and I ate them feeling satisfied and tranquil. I eat again willingly the foods I ate when I was young. All of it makes my mouth water.* Marianna's childhood foods followed the basic patterns of Tuscan cuisine, limited in meat and fats due to her family's poverty. Habit, hunger, freshness, flavorful cooking, and association with family made the foods beloved and important fifty years later when her economic situation permitted her a much richer diet.

Like Marianna, fifty-four-year-old Baldo grew up in the city, but in the smaller and more provincial Empoli, 35 kilometers from Florence. His parents grew up as peasants, but they moved to town where his father was a cabinetmaker, a ***falegname,*** and his mother ran the house and braided straw on Chianti flasks at home. Their diet also reflected their peasant roots and modest resources compounded by the limitations of city life. Baldo narrated: *I remem-*

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ber that in my family when I was little we used to eat a lot of one-pot meals. We used to call those dishes the ***tegamata****—the potful. You took a little meat and a lot of potatoes and you made a big pot full of that. Maybe another day we ate herring, or some other dried fish. Something I never thought I would get to eat when I was a child was a banana. I used to long for a banana when I went by the greengrocery. I looked at those bananas and I had such a desire to eat one, and I couldn't. How could I? With what a banana cost, we could buy dinner for all of us. There was no way we could afford to buy me a banana.*[10]

Baldo's recollections underscored the widespread poverty: *In the old days we only ate things that cost little—things like anchovies, sardines,* ***salacchine, baccalà,*** *lard—those were things that had price controls and so were cheap. Chickpeas, beans, lettuce—these things were inexpensive. One of the cheapest things of all was chestnut flour—used for making* ***castagnaccio****—a sweet cake.*

Baldo had a vivid memory of bread, the most basic food: *I remember when I was little and going to school, we used to hear the doorbell ring at five or five-thirty in the morning. We lived on the fourth floor and my mother used to lower a basket down to the street for the bread-man—the* ***semelaio.***[11] *This man went around every morning to his regular customers and knew how many rolls to deliver. Then my mother prepared them for us to take to school. She spread some marmalade on them that she had made after picking blackberries or other fruit out in the countryside. We took that with us to eat at school.* The scarcity of food for most Tuscans, like Baldo, meant that it was intensely consumed and vividly remembered.

Cuisine and Memory

Eating is recalling, Baldo said, ***il mangiare è un richiamo.*** That eating was a ***richiamo*** (***ri,*** meaning "again," and ***chiamare,*** meaning "to call or name") suggests that it was a remembering, a calling back, and an attraction.[12] Because the consumption of foods caused physical sensations, often of great pleasure, sometimes of severe repugnance, meals lodged memories not only in people's minds but also in their bodies. Because foods were structured into dishes, meals, and daily and annual rhythms, their consumption had an order that assisted remembering. In the multiple sensory properties of food—sight, smell, texture, and taste—lay multiple ways of conveying meanings and memories.[13] Florentines repeatedly slipped into reminiscences as they recalled either wonderful or loathsome eating events. As Rinaldo's tale of the duck in peach sauce exemplified, a disgusting dinner left a strong memory as well as a bad taste. Moreover, unpleasant mealtime interactions could ruin good food. But when in good company a good meal filled the belly, corporeal contentment intensified recollection. Baldo's memory of the ***semelaio*** delivering fresh rolls in the morning linked him to his childhood, his past, and his mother's care.

Particularly desired foods became associated with particularly vivid memories. For example, seventy-three-year-old Renzo remembered ice cream: *Do*

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you know what we did as kids to eat ice cream? There was one man who made it every Sunday in summer, two kinds, vanilla and chocolate. . . . He took a big container of wood like this, with ice inside it, and then he took a smaller copper container and put it inside this ice, and then we kids went "zum, zum, zum," and turned it and turned it until we turned it enough to make the ice cream. . . . And if by midnight he hadn't sold it all, well then we ate up the rest of it. Because it was impossible to keep it until the next day—there were no refrigerators then. So he sold it to us for very little, and we were there, all of us waiting. "Let's hope nobody else comes to buy ice cream." That was the scene every Sunday. When it got near midnight we said, "Only a little more to wait," and fortunately often there was plenty left, and for just a little money we bought it, all of us friends from up there in Trespiano.

A strong memory of childhood and friendship was attached to the avid consumption of a rare and much-desired food—ice cream—which represented sumptuousness because it was made of high-fat cream rarely available to the poor, because it was sweet, and because it depended on the luxury of ice. Very often special rituals were celebrated with special foods with unique ingredients and flavors that reinforced the Florentines' memory. For example, Marianna remembered eating ***finocchiona***—fennel-flavored salame—on her twenty-first birthday, because it was during the war and that was all she had.

Certain foods can become emblematic "objects of memory" (Sutton 2001), symbols of the past that are no longer regularly consumed because too difficult to prepare or no longer palatable or customary. Many such foods were emerging in Florence like the ***minestra di pane*** evoked by Raffaele above, and the bread, wine, and sugar snack recalled by forty-five-year-old factory owner Rinaldo from Prato:[14] *I don't remember much about what we used to eat back when I was a boy. I only remember one thing—the* ***merende*** *—the snacks, the delicious snacks that I haven't eaten since. Oh, I remember them—a slice of bread sprinkled with sugar and a little wine. Have you ever eaten that? I used to eat it every summer when my parents sent me out to the country to live with my aunt and uncle on their farm. Because my parents were very busy working and couldn't supervise me, they sent me out there to that farm, 6 or 7 kilometers from Prato. I loved it. I remember these delicious snacks made simply with bread, sugar and wine. The taste is stupendous. I've got to eat it again sometime soon—one of these days I'm going to have it. I'll have my daughters try it. I also used to eat bread, olive oil, and salt, but I remember best the bread with these layers of sugar. Maybe it's because in those days we felt a much greater desire for sugar because there was so much less.*

Today this farm is unrecognizable. It is unrecognizable. I went back there recently. Three years ago I stopped there in my car and I went on foot to look at the farm because I had been wanting to go for a long time. I walked in. There used to be this ditch of pure limpid water where we set traps to catch eels. I found the ditch and it was rotten, covered with dirty foam, and the water was a nauseating, sur-

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real blue. When they built the highway, it cut the farm in half. Oh, it was better if I hadn't gone back there. At least this new image wouldn't have taken over my mind and I could have kept the old memories.

Recollection of a delicious traditional snack no longer eaten triggered Rinaldo's memory of a life and a countryside no longer extant. His memory moved from the beloved food he used to savor to the countryside where he ate it, to the degradation of that environment. Eating the traditional foods that they ate as children and that their parents and grandparents had eaten tied my subjects to their past. Even as they evoked and clung to that past in memory, it receded in reality as the environment suffered, local farming struggled, processed foods appeared, and cuisine changed. For my subjects, cooking and eating traditional Tuscan foods was a continual and powerful channel for memory as well as an enactment of class status and cultural identity. The growing replacement of their foods with more highly processed and quicker ones signified a transformation of their connection to their history, their traditional social life, and their memories.

Gola: Desire, Pleasure, and Moderation

A striking thing about Florentines' cuisine was how much they loved to eat yet how they also valued moderation.[15] They took their food seriously, prepared it thoughtfully, and ate it enthusiastically. Food was one of their main topics of conversation. At work, among relatives and friends, at meals, and while grocery shopping, Florentine women constantly discussed what they ate last night and planned to cook today, and bantered about the right way to prepare certain dishes. They believed their food was the best and they extolled its simplicity, freshness, variety, and rich flavor. Because food was so important to them, their attitudes toward eating revealed significant cultural beliefs about the self.

All of my subjects expressed enthusiasm for eating. As fifty-four-year-old Raffaele said, *I really love to eat*—***a me mi garba tanto mangiare.*** Florentines called their love for food ***gola,*** which meant not gluttony as some dictionaries translate but "desire or longing for food." Gluttony implied an evil excess of desire that Florentines shunned, but they celebrated the sensual pleasure of eating delicious food. Many of my subjects described themselves or others as ***golosa/o*** or "avid, desirous, eager for" certain foods like pasta, sweets, or bread, as Baldo said, ***Sono goloso di pane***—*I'm desirous for bread.* They might use the word ***ghiotta/o***—"ravenous or gluttonous"—as Marianna called her mother ***ghiotta della cioccolata***—*ravenous for chocolate.*

Love of food was a legitimate sensual pleasure for Florentine men and women. They felt that they had a right to enjoy food and that eating with gusto was a licit form of self-expression. ***Gola*** meant not only desire for food but also "throat," the passageway for speech and breath as well as food. These overlapping meanings linked taking pleasure in food to breathing and speech, to life

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and self. Furthermore, because eating in Florence was inherently and unequivocally social, enjoying food was also a constant reaffirmation of family and broader social relations.

Florentines' wholehearted approval of enjoying food had roots in their peasant past. Peasants developed a visceral awareness of the need to fuel their bodies to do their physically onerous work (Falassi 1980, 11–12). For peasants, hunger was always knocking at the door, so pleasure in food was precarious and valued. Distrust of excess consumption typified ***mezzadria*** peasants as well as contemporary urban Florentines. Peasant proverbs encoded a sense of measure: ***Chi mangia troppo, la pancia li dole, e chi non mangia, lavorar non pole***—"Who eats too much has his belly hurt; who does not eat, cannot work"; and ***E' meglio alzarsi da tavola colla fame***—"It's better to get up from the table feeling hungry" (Falassi 1980, 12).[16] Pecori (1980) reprinted the proverb: ***Il Fiorentino mangia sì poco e sì pulito, che sempre si conserva l'appetito***—"The Florentine eats so neat and so small, that his appetite quits not at all."

Condemnation of excess consumption persisted among my subjects in the 1980s. For example, forty-five-year-old Rinaldo from Prato said, *I love to eat, but I'm not a* ***mangione***—*an excessively big eater.* Raffaele from Empoli said, *I love to eat but* ***non mi abbuffo***—*I don't pig out.* They distinguished between enjoying luscious food and eating to excess. As Rinaldo said above, *It's the quality, not the quantity that counts for me.* Marianna's family imbibed her father's philosophy: "***Poco, ma buono***—*only a little, but let it be good.*" These values on taking pleasure in food and accepting parsimony were widespread among the working and peasant classes in Italy due to decades of food scarcity and to public political and scientific policies promoting measured food consumption (Helstosky 2004).

Florentines valued the ability to control their eating. For example, twenty-one-year-old Arturo said, *Look, as far as desire goes, I'm the type that until I'm full, really full, I would keep eating. However, I try to brake myself (**frenarmi**) a little.* Sixty-six-year-old Elena also used the word ***frenarmi*** in describing her desire: *Yes, I'll tell you, I'm a little* ***golosa.*** *I'm* ***golosa.*** *I try to brake myself (**frenarmi**), but I'm* ***golosa.*** *Every now and then I feel the desire to eat something sweet. So I go in the kitchen, and I look for, I don't know, the jam jar, a candy, something, because it is clear that I need something sweet. If I don't have anything, I have to put my shoes on and go out and buy myself something sweet. A couple of pastries or something like that. Maybe I eat that and nothing else, but I feel the need to eat it. Maybe my blood sugar falls or something. Sometimes I make a rice cake—**torta di riso*****—which is delicious. It is just a simple home-style dish, but it is good. I cook rice in milk, add eggs, sugar, a pinch of salt, and grated lemon peel. If I have some, I add candied fruits or a little bit of rum or other liqueur or sometimes some cocoa to vary the color and flavor.*

Elena respected the compulsion of desire, but also felt it had to be controlled. A baker's daughter, she recounted a story about pastries that revealed

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the widely held belief that excess consumption destroyed desire and pleasure. *I remember that at one point my father decided to sell pastries as well as bread in our bakery. He hired a highly skilled confectioner—a* ***pasticciere****—who made exquisite pastries. Imagine, Sunday we had a line of cars in front of the bakery filled with people who came to buy our pastries because they were so good. I remember that on the first day that the pastry chef began with us, my father said to my sister Tommasa and me, "Girls, here are the sweet pastries. Eat as many of them as you want. Don't hold back. Go right ahead and eat as many as you want." And off we went, eating, eating, eating, eating—so much that the next day we could not even look at a pastry. And then we realized why he had urged us to dig in. Oh, we had such a nausea—we couldn't even look at those sweets. That was it; we had had enough, because after that, we could never eat another one.* Elena's words expressed a cultural belief in striking a balance between enjoying food greatly and consuming it moderately. Uncontrolled gluttony was bad because it destroyed delectation. But in the 1980s and even more at the turn of the millennium, Florentines were increasingly able to consume ever more abundantly.

Eating as Consolation

All Florentines recognized that eating brought satisfaction and pleasure, and for some it was an extremely important source of emotional comfort. Fifty-year-old Valeria said, *I have the kind of nervous system that I don't get mad, no, no, but I eat and eat in continuation until food comes out my ears. It's not hunger because I feel uncomfortably stuffed, but it's stronger than me. I can't help myself; I have to eat. It stems from my nerves—a doctor told me this. I need to treat my nerves. Do you know how many times I have said this? But the doctors always said, "Oh, no, just eat less." They told me this as if that was all there was to it. Instead, when I feel anxious, I feel that I have to eat. It doesn't matter what, as long as I eat. . . . Then maybe an hour later, I go back and I get something else. It's not like I eat huge sandwiches, but I snack (****sperluzzico****). I went through a period where I used to eat in the middle of the night—I had to eat. I am capable of eating four or five cookies in the middle of the night. In short, I eat things that I shouldn't eat, especially at that hour. I feel badly afterward because I feel stuffed and uncomfortable, but at the same time I always feel the craving for food, especially in these anxious periods. I don't know why, but when I'm in a state of anxiety, the need to put something in my mouth is overwhelming.*

Her daughter, twenty-six-year-old Caterina, expressed a similar relationship to food: *Look, when I am nervous, I would eat even an ox. For my nerves, understand? For release, I don't know, a kind of release. I don't understand it; it's just instinctive; it's stronger than me. I am like my mother. There's little to do about it. We vent ourselves by eating.*

The use of food to express and calm emotions was both dangerous and salutary.[17] It was dangerous because it could lead to excess weight gain that

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could threaten health and trigger diabetes. Caterina, for example, had been told by her gynecologist to lose weight to facilitate conceiving the child she wanted. She also feared developing adult-onset diabetes like her mother's mother Berta, who died from complications of the disease. Valeria weighed nearly 200 pounds and attributed her difficulty walking and her physical discomfort to her excess weight. But using food for consolation was salutary because it helped deal with difficult situations. Valeria had to bear Baldo's debilitating illness that left him bedridden for years. She had to manage the increased workload and bolster Baldo's spirits. His illness on top of her heavy caretaking role put Valeria under considerable stress. Eating helped her cope and assuaged her nerves because of its gratifying effect on both body and soul.

Health: Balance with Body and Nature

Although eating when anxious brought consolation to Valeria and Caterina, Florentines believed that excess eating not only ruined the pleasure of food but also destroyed the body's health that depended on measured consumption and balance between types of foods.[18] For example, Florentines eschewed extreme temperature differences between foods and the body, so they never drank ice cold drinks on hot days. Many avoided excessively spicy foods, and they ate meat moderately and in conjunction with vegetables, pasta, or bread. Most of my subjects drank wine at ***pranzo*** and ***cena***—only at meals—and usually only a glass or two; never did I see any of them drunk.

Only my oldest subjects remembered using traditional folk healing techniques such as curing stomachaches with castor oil and applying the fat from pigs or sheep to treat colds or muscle aches.[19] Sixty-six-year-old Elena said that in her youth they used ***sugna*** *for pains.* ***Sugna*** *was a special kind of pig fat, aged, because if it was fresh it did nothing. It had to be aged for many years and stinking, and then they used it to cure their aches and pains. They rubbed it to make friction in the place of the pain.*

All my Florentine subjects advocated the traditional dietary treatment for illness—***mangiare in bianco***—literally, "to eat in white," meaning to eat bland foods.[20] When sick with stomach flu or fever, people ate rice or pasta with just a little butter or olive oil. They implicitly distinguished such "white" consumption from eating rice and pasta made with red tomato or brown meat sauces. Raffaele said, *If someone is sick, we'll cook rice with olive oil or rice with butter for the sick person and the rest of us will eat spaghetti with sauce.* White foods were believed easily digestible and restorative, allowing the body to regain its health. Seventy-six-year-old Berta said that when she was a peasant girl in the hills outside of Florence, *If someone was feeling sick and it wasn't too serious, they made her a little pap*—***una pappina***—*with a little bit of olive oil—or a little flour gruel*—***una farinata.*** *They took flour ground from their own grain and mixed it up with water and boiled it. It had to be thin and soft to be restorative.*

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Coffee was also defined as a treatment for illness. As seventy-five-year-old former peasant Massimo said, *We had coffee only when we were sick.* Marianna's father was sick all her life, first with bone tuberculosis and then with cancer. She remembered him getting special foods for strength: *Sometimes my father might have an egg, a raw egg beaten with sugar in the morning, because he was sick. No one begrudged it to him, truly. That egg did him good. We hardly ever had coffee, but if we did, it was for my father. In the old days, coffee was for sick people.* Seventy-three-year-old Renzo said, *When a woman went to buy coffee back then, they asked her, "Do you have someone sick at home?"* He added that when he contracted pneumonia right after World War II, he had to eat raw eggs and horsemeat as well as coffee to regain his strength.

Sixty-six-year-old Elena told of getting sick with worms from eating too many sweets that disturbed her body's equilibrium. Garlic and magic combined to make her well. *They told me when I was little I used to suffer from worms. I'll tell you how I got sick with worms. My father had his bakery in the piazza in Fiesole then, when I was really little, one or one and a half. I had just begun to walk, they told me. I used to wander around that piazza, which was always full of foreigners. Because I was a very sociable child, I went there and I talked with everyone, even though we couldn't understand each other. My mother recounted that I always came back to the bakery with my little apron full of candies, sweets, and pastries. My mother always said, "I had no idea how many they gave you. You brought some back home, but who knows how many you had eaten?" Oh, I ate them. Frankly, I admit I ate them. So because I ate so many sweets, I became infested with worms.*

*I have to tell you that I was near death from those worms. I really was. I grew up wearing a little necklace of garlic (**la collanina d'aglio**) until finally I rebelled and I said, "I won't wear it anymore." I wore it from the time of my birth. My grandmother burned some garlic, threaded a string through it, and hung it around my neck. They said that it made the worms go away, intestinal worms. My grandmother said, "You'll see, you'll see, with the little necklace of garlic they will flee." They say that they fled. Thank heavens I don't remember this because I have a terror of worms, a real terror.*

*I remember that there was an old woman in Fiesole, really, really old, who cast a spell to get rid of these worms (**segnava bachi**). I remember my mother telling me that I was like a little blob on the bed so sick was I with worms, but the doctor said it wasn't anything. So my mother called in this old woman, Tonina, who came and cast a spell on the worms, and I got well. They used to say that sometimes I vomited the worms out of my mouth.* Elena's graphic story described how an overindulgence of sweets made her sick, and a cure of magic and garlic restored her body's balance and health by causing her to vomit the worms that represented her immoderation back out of the mouth that had ingested them.

Florentines also believed that emotional distress could upset the body's psychosomatic balance, and special herbs or foods could restore it. In the following story, Elena told of how a severe fright threatened her body with illness

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and how her grandmother used an herb to make her well: *When I was young, there were many herbal cures. There was the famous "herb for fear"—**l'erba da paura.**[21] It is a plant that my grandmother Lisa used to gather in the forests, a special herb. My grandmother said that when a child got severely frightened, it was necessary to treat her with this herb for fear so that the child would not get sick.*

I remember one time when I was little and I was nearly run over by the tram in Via della Colonna. I was in first grade, and I used to go to school by myself because my mother and father were too busy in the bakery to accompany me. So one day when I came out of school, I saw my uncle in the distance, coming to get me with his bicycle. From the joy of seeing my uncle coming to pick me up—because I never had anyone come for me—I started to run towards him. I ran across the street in the exact moment that the tram was passing. Luckily, instead of running me over, it hit me and threw me a great distance. Then I lost consciousness and I didn't know what was happening. I remember vaguely that this uncle carried me home and then they took me to the doctor. The doctor checked me all over and I didn't have anything except a huge swollen ankle that I've always felt a little bit ever since. Then my grandmother immediately took off to Fiesole and searched in the woods for the herb for fear. I remember that my mother made an infusion from it and washed my legs with this black water to keep me from getting sick.

Florentine health beliefs mandated a psychosomatic corporeal balance dependent on proper eating with moderate consumption of complementary foods. They celebrated eating but disdained excess. Traditionally, they believed that a plump body reflected good health, emotional stability, and good care, and that a too thin body revealed poor health, emotional distress, and social neglect; Florentines especially loved fat babies.[22] Excessive thinness was problematical as the following story by sixty-six-year-old Elena revealed: *As a young girl I never ate. I would go even a week without eating. You see, I realized as an adult why I didn't eat—because in my house there was discord between my father and my mother. . . . I heard my parents arguing and my stomach closed and I couldn't eat. . . . So then my parents were extremely worried about me—not eating today, not eating tomorrow—it was bad. But I realized later that I didn't eat precisely because of my parents' disharmony. I am frighteningly emotional, so much so that from not eating—because I ate nothing—I found myself in bad shape. My health promised nothing good. I always had a fever. I was continually losing my voice. So they took me to the doctor, and he found that I had swollen glands that were of course due to my bad nutrition—to the fact that I didn't eat, in short. So my parents were really worried and they cried from desperation, even more so because in the family there was an uncle, my mother's brother, who had died from tuberculosis. So they had a terror of that illness, especially because I was so thin; I was like my little finger. I realized later, however, that it would have taken nothing to cure me—just having harmony in the family. For me, that was everything.*

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Elena expressed a Florentine belief still widely held in the early 1980s that extreme thinness represented physical illness or emotional upset. Older Florentines did not think exclusively or primarily about the body as an aesthetic object but as a symbol of inner states—of mental and physical health. They derived this belief out of a past where hunger and infectious disease were chronic and where a thin body represented vulnerability. A common Florentine expression often uttered after lamenting something was, "***Basta la salute***—*health is enough,*" which meant that if you had health, you had everything essential. An excessively skinny body represented ill health and was considered ugly. As forty-five-year-old Rinaldo said, *Some people take thinness to absurd extremes. If a person tries to get thinner than his or her constitution permits, it interferes with the bodily equilibrium and health so much that it is difficult to recover. Getting that thin is not worth it.* A plump body signified both health and fertility. Their emphasis on health reduced Florentines' emphasis on appearance and made their standards for body appearance rather flexible. Under the increasing commodification of their economy, foods, and bodies, however, these beliefs were already eroding in the 1980s and giving way to an increasing cult of thinness in the new millennium (see Chapter 6).

Florentines also believed that bodily health depended on maintaining a balance with nature through their foodways, and they traditionally ate seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables.[23] Fifty-four-year-old Raffaele from Empoli, one of the few men I knew who regularly cooked, explicated, *Let me tell you something about our Tuscan cooking—it follows the seasons. It's the same old reason: poverty. When there was so much poverty, people ate what the earth gave them. If it was the period of tomatoes, they ate so many tomatoes. They ate them fried, they ate them stuffed, they ate them with eggs. Then when tomatoes were finished, there were string beans. So they ate those in sauce, boiled, or in a* ***frittata.*** ** They were always changing, but they were always string beans, understand? Then string beans finished and peas began, then asparagus, then artichokes.*[24] *In these parts there are so many artichokes. People invented spaghetti with artichokes, risotto with artichokes, fried artichokes, eggs with artichokes, stuffed artichokes. You can eat them a thousand ways, but they are always artichokes, for heavens sake. However, they take on a thousand different flavors. Understand?*

This is what the seasons mean for me, and this is important. You eat what the earth, what nature, gives you. Let's say that now is the time of artichokes, we should eat those. They do you good, because nature created this marvelous plant. It's the same when it is the time of grapes, of tomatoes, of potatoes, of peas, and of all these delicious vegetables that we have. Meat is different; meat is always available. But those vegetables also mark the end of winter, because in winter you don't have all these beautiful foods. You don't have tomatoes, you don't have string beans, you don't have peas, you don't have artichokes, you don't have any of these vegetables. Of course today they keep these vegetables in refrigerators and you can

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get them even in January, but nature didn't create refrigerators. It created peas, fava beans, each according to its own season. The fact is that the human body really needs to eat what matures in each season, because it is really good for you and it tastes good then. It would be laughable to eat a cold watermelon in January. Nature made them mature in August. Because watermelons are cool and thirst-quenching, they taste wonderful in the hot summer.

Raffaele expressed a traditional Florentine value on maintaining a balance with the earth through cuisine and consuming the seasonal round of fresh foods provided by nature. The freshness of the ingredients was one reason why their food was so delicious, and their enjoyment of food intensified its cultural significance. Their cuisine conveyed their identity as Florentines. They enjoyed eating as a channel for pleasure and self-expression, but were against unbridled desire. Implicit in their habits was the notion that unrestrained individual desires would decrease gustatory pleasure and lead to want. The next chapter examines the historical roots of Florentine cuisine in centuries of ***mezzadria*** farming inevitably altered by two world wars, twenty years of fascism, and the postwar economic recovery.