Ingesting the Cultural Other: Food and Ethnicity in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

Although seeing food being cooked, served, and eaten in a movie can be a pleasurable experience for its audience, culinary imagery in film can function as more than a colorful, appetite-inducing backdrop to the main action. In fact, images of food can assist in the process of developing characters, plot structure, and theme (Keller 1). Many films have elevated the status of food from a meaningless prop to a symbolic actor. These “food films” feature food as a motif that is integral to the understanding of the aims of the movies (Shugart 68-69). Having established that food can be more than what you see on the screen, one such movie where food does not play a superficial role is the 2002 film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In this film, oral references as well as physical images of fare are profuse. The food’s significance lies in the way in which it acts as a guide for the audience to ascribe identity to the characters in the film and in the way that it helps to support the film’s plot. Specifically, I argue that in the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, food is used as a marker of ethnicity and cultural difference and it is used to help negotiate the issue of inviting a cultural other into the family. According to Robin Balthrope, when considering how food is used in an ethnic food film, it is important to note “what is prepared, how it is prepared, when it is served, for whom it is served, and, most important, the meanings behind the food (p. 103).” With that in mind, this paper will look at food in three different ways: the physical presence or absence of food, the method of consumption of food, and the use of food as metaphor.
To begin, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* will be briefly summarized. The main character, Toula Portokalos, is a thirty-year-old woman working in her family's Greek restaurant *The Dancing Zorbas*. She admits that she is stuck in a rut and goes about changing this by revamping her look and going to school to learn about computers. She meets Ian Miller, an Anglo-Saxon literature teacher, and the two begin dating and eventually become engaged. However, Toula's father is resistant to the idea of his daughter marrying a non-Greek man, as this has never happened before in their family and they have a very strong Greek identity. The rest of the movie focuses on the wedding preparations and the Portokalos' adjustment to the idea of having a non-Greek in their family. In the end, the Portokalos', including Toula's father, accepts and embraces the Millers to form one happy family.

Reinforcing this plot line are the manifestations of food to function as a character marker, especially in regards to ethnicity. One of the ways that food is used to assign cultural identity and showcase ethnic difference is through the physical presence or absence of food. In the majority of the scenes featuring the Portokalos family, food is somehow incorporated into the image. Many important discussions amongst members of the Portokalos family take place in the family restaurant or in the kitchen of the family home over a hot and fresh cooked meal. Through this type of imagery, the audience connects the Portokaloses to the abundance of food. This is in contrast with the Millers who are only seen in the presence of food when they are with the Portokaloses. When Toula meets Ian's parents for the first time, they are seen sitting at the dinner table but no food is on the table. This absence of food on the table instills the idea that the Millers are different from the Portokalos' who are constantly surrounded by food.
One scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* where the Millers are seen with food is when they are arriving at the “quiet dinner” at the Portokalos home where a lamb is being roasted on a spit in the front yard. This is the first time that the two families are meeting and the Millers bring a bundt cake as a gift. However, when Mrs. Portokalos receives the gift, she asks, “What is it?” After many failed attempts to pronounce the word “bundt,” someone tells Mrs. Portokalos that it is a cake and she politely thanks the Millers and walks away. Upon walking away she whispers, “There is a hole in this cake!” Later on, the cake is brought back out to the dinner party with a potted flower in the hole as Mrs. Portokalos proudly exclaims, “I fixed the cake!” This exchange between the two families reinforces their difference. While the Portokalos family has substantive meals replete with meat, the Millers have light fare represented by an “incomplete” or flawed cake.

In these two examples, food is used as a way to identify the two families and their two cultures with sumptuous abundance being associated with the Greek Portokalos family and with insufficient cuisine being associated with the American Miller family. This idea is in line with what Diane Negra calls “ethnic food fetishism” in ethnic food films. Negra discusses how American film audiences want to see ethnic foods in movies because it brings about a sense of nostalgia for approaches to food that are no longer common in American households. According to this point of view, audiences want to see ethnic populations prepare labor intensive and dynamic foods to juxtapose American homes that more typically prepare processed and timesaving meals. These appointed roles are tools that assist the audience in ingratiating themselves in the film and makes them yearn for the meanings behind the food, with one of those meanings being authenticity. In the modern consumption focused society of America, seeing a full meal being made entirely from
scratch is a rare thing and therefore desired. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you see Toula’s mother peeling pounds and pounds of potatoes by hand and receiving a freshly butchered lamb to her kitchen door. This “farm to fork” imagery connotes a sense of authenticity and natural eating where you know where your food is coming from and you do not need to question the quality of what you are eating. This is what Americans crave to have and seeing it in a movie setting makes the characters in the film, the film itself, the culture, and the meanings behind the food more appealing. This is an underlying theme that can be seen throughout this film in multiple examples.

The way in which food is consumed is also used as a marker for ethnicity and cultural difference. For example in a conversation between Ian and Toula, their conceptions of how lamb is eaten clearly signifies that these two people are not from the same cultural background:

Ian: What do you do for Christmas with your family?

Toula: Uh, my mom makes roast lamb.

Ian: Mmm...with mint jelly?

Toula: No.

(pause)

Ian: And...?

Toula: And...

(pause)

Toula: I’m Greek right?

Ian: Right?
Toula: So, what happens is my dad and uncles, they fight over who gets to eat the lamb brain. And then my Aunt Voula forks the eyeball and chases me around with it, try to get me to eat it, cause it’s gonna make me smart. So, you have two cousins, I have 27 first cousins. Just 27 first cousins alone! And my whole family is big and loud. And everybody is in each other’s lives and business. All the time! Like, you never just have a minute alone, just to think, cause we’re always together, just eating, eating, eating! The only other people we know are Greeks cause Greeks marry Greeks to breed more Greeks to be loud breeding Greek eaters.

Ian: Wow. (Zwick)

As this interaction clearly shows, how Ian thinks lamb is eaten is a far cry from the reality of how Toula and her family eat lamb. But not only does Toula’s family eat lamb differently, the consumption of the lamb is a tradition that involves more than just eating. It is a display of the robust characterization of Greek life in the film where food is not just food; it provides memories, it assigns performances to family members, and it acts as a communication tool to show love and togetherness. As Balthrope suggests, families often display their love through acts of cooking or eating (p. 105). And not that I am proposing American families are deemed “loveless” in the film, but rather the focus of where the love is being presented is in the Greek family and this is done through foodways. This is adding to the romanticized depiction of the Greek family as rich, dynamic, and definitely different from the American family.
In another scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the method of consumption further differentiates the two cultures, when Ian is revealed as a vegetarian. After Toula tells her Aunt Voula that Ian is a vegetarian, she clarifies this by saying, “he doesn’t eat meat” to which her aunt proclaims in shock and anger, “What do you mean he don’t eat no meat?!” At this point, the room full of Portokaloses stops in a moment of disbelief, but Aunt Voula resolves the situation by saying, “Oh that’s okay I make lamb (Zwick).” For an American, like Ian, vegetarianism shows class because although he can afford meat, he chooses not to. For the Greek Portokaloses, meat is seen as a luxury and so the thought of rejecting something that people work so hard to afford seems hard to believe and accept. Again, it is evident here that the concept of not eating meat is foreign to the Portokalos’ culture and the solution that Aunt Voula proposes shows a lack of understanding, further separating the two cultures.

However, despite the differences between Ian and the Portokaloses, Ian is exemplifying culinary tourism by injecting himself into many of the other Greek food customs of the Portokalos family. Culinary tourism, as defined by Lucy Long, is “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other (p. 21).” Even though in the previously described scene he is differentiating himself, the mere fact that he is willing to explore and participate in these feasts indicates his interest in the foodways of a different culture. When he first dines at *The Dancing Zorbas*, Ian comments on the potatoes that he is eating and asks his friend Mike what the spice is. Mike responds with, “Like I care.” (Zwick) In this interaction, the different responses by these two men shows that Ian takes an interest in ethnic difference, while his friend is apathetic to this type of exploration. After Toula tells Ian that her family owns the restaurant, he repeats how much
he loves the spices on those potatoes (Zwick). This, plus his interest in Toula, reinforces his culinary and cultural tourism. Ian even acknowledges this when he declares that he came alive when he met Toula and says, “Here’s some news about my life to this point. It’s boring. Then I met you. And you’re interesting; you’re beautiful and fun (Zwick).” This is also tapping into the appeal of ethnic women as different and more enticing. Ian even directly references this when his friend Mike shows his a picture of a blond American girl he wants to set Ian up with. Ian comments that Mike has already set them up before and that “They look the same. They’re all the same” (Zwick). Ian’s desire for difference and cultural exploration is made possible through the commodification of Greek food, which is the idea of turning goods or ideas not ordinarily used as a commodity into an economic exchange. As Negra discusses ethnic family food films, she points out that these families often reside in urban areas and the characters in the film often have jobs related to the production of ethnic foods. This is certainly true in My Big Fat Greek Wedding where the Portokaloses own a Greek restaurant in Chicago. Ian is able to get in touch with and eventually become a part of the Portokalos’ culture because of the commodification of Greek food.

Another example of varying methods of consumption occurs when the Millers attend the dinner at the Portokalos home. Upon being ushering into the house the Millers are consistently offered food. They eye the pile of meat on a plate with great suspicion and are horrified when they see other people picking up slices of meat with their fingers and eating it. Food here is used to establish difference in a number of ways. In her analysis of food in My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Luanne Roth uses class and race to further explain the contrast between the Millers and the Portokaloses. She concludes that the Millers are, “Caucasian, upper-middle-class members of the North Shore Country Club and exemplify
the classic sense of Victorian aesthetics (p. 175).” She relays the scene where Toula is first meeting the Millers and discusses how uncomfortable the Millers feel to be in a setting with a nonwhite person who is not a servant or employee. In trying to find some common ground with Toula, Mr. and Mrs. Miller banter for a moment trying to remember the ethnicity of a past employee before realizing that the employee was Guatemalan, not Greek. In this ignorant faux pas moment, the class difference between the two families is seen. Additionally, this comes out at the family dinner at the Portokalos’ home. The type of dinner party that the Portokaloses are having is not “normal” to the Millers who ordinarily identify with behavior consistent with Victorian restraint (Roth, 175). So in seeing people eating meat with their bare hands, which is akin to more primitive and low class modes of consumption, the Millers are completely thrown out of their upper-middle-class element. Here, the difference in food consumption is cultural but also class based because from the Millers’ point of view, this foreign family is not of the same class level as them.

Another role that food plays in My Big Fat Greek Wedding is as a metaphor. After meeting the Millers, Toula’s father laments about the differences between the two families by saying, “They different people. So dry. That family is like a piece of toast. No honey, no jam, just dry. My daughter...my daughter gonna marry Ian Miller. A xeno, a xeno with a toast family. I never think this can happen to us. I try to put a little marmalade. Oh no, they don’t like. They like themselves all dry and crackling (Zwick).” By likening the Millers to toast, Toula’s father establishes their bland character that is contrasted with his family’s preference for a flavorful life. Again, this food imagery paints the American Miller family as the boring and unexciting counterpart to the vivacious Greek Portokaloses. Through this toast metaphor, the differences between the two families are made evident.
Another example of a food metaphor is in the first few minutes of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, when Toula uses voiceover and flashbacks to recall and describe her memories of childhood and how she always felt different. In one scene she explains, “When I was growing up, I knew I was different. The other girls were blond and delicate and I was a swarthy six-year-old with sideburns. I so badly wanted to be like the popular girls...all sitting together, talking...eating their Wonder Bread sandwiches (Zwick).” In contrast, Toula is eating moussaka at a table by herself. The image here places a stark distinction between what is American, white Wonder Bread sandwiches, and what is not, Greek moussaka. This is also how we learn that Toula is not completely comfortable with her Greek identity and she wishes to assimilate and be like the American girls. Toula’s desire to explore beyond the boundaries of her Greek identity is also seen in her description of the ideal Greek female, “Nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone...until the day we die (Zwick).” Instead of prescribing to this role, she chooses to go to college and receive an education in order to elicit a career change. This defies her ideal cultural gender role according to the movie. She also chooses to date and marry a non-Greek man, which she knows is problematic because no one in her family has ever married someone who is not Greek. She goes so far as to keep her relationship with Ian a secret and even attempts to break up the relationship because she thinks they are too different and it will never work because her family will not accept him. But in the end, she allows herself to fulfill her happiness even though it requires her family to adjust. In this way, Toula breaks down misogynistic gender roles. Instead of allowing herself to be confined to the role of wife, mother, and cook Toula wishes to achieve more than that by going to school to get a job that does not require her to continue
to work at the family restaurant. However, her father does not view female education as valuable, because it is not necessary for Toula to fulfill her duties as a Greek woman. When she brings up the idea of attending college he says that she is already smart and therefore does not need to get more schooling. After Toula reveals her relationship with Ian Toula’s father accuses her digression from the norm of having led to her meeting Ian, which he views as a negative event. She does not let any of this discourage her and in fact, by straying from the norm Toula finds individual happiness. Her desire to have that “Wonder Bread” experience gave her the opportunity to create her own future. In this way, the food metaphor differentiates cultural identity but it also acts as a motivation to allow Toula to depart from misogynistic and limiting gender roles.

As much as food in this film is used to establish differences, it is also used to reconcile the cultural clash between the American Millers and the Greek Portokalos’. At the end of the film when Toula’s father is giving a speech at the wedding reception he explains that “Miller” comes from the Greek word milo, which means apple, and “Portokalos” comes from the Greek word portokali, which means orange. “So, here tonight,” he announces, “we have apple and orange. We all different but in the end, we all fruit.” This is clearly a reference to the commonly known idiom “comparing apples and oranges,” which is used to describe a situation where two things are incomparable because they are so different. However, Toula’s father reverses this by asserting that in end, they are all fruit, indicates that in the end, they are all human. Therefore, they can coexist and find commonalities in order to form a happy family. Food here is used to negotiate how these two seemingly unequivocally culturally different families can actually be united. There is also great significance in Toula’s father delivering this speech and making the apples and oranges
connection because he was the one most resistant to this idea of change. By embracing the Millers through food, he is finally giving his consent and approval to his daughter and his new son-in-law.

Food is used as a story telling agent throughout *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Through its physical presence or absence, the way in which it is consumed, and its use as metaphor, food gives identity and creates difference. However, as we see in the culmination of the film, it can also be used to negotiate otherness and create common ground in which otherness can be embraced. But taking it a step back, one must consider the film’s audience. Even though Toula is the narrator and main character, the audience is led to identify with Ian. And just like Ian was a culinary tourist attracted to the ethnic foods and culture of the Portokalos family, the audience becomes a culinary tourist who wants to be a part of, and experience the deliciously portrayed Greek family. In this way, the Greek culture is romanticized and commodified within the text and outside of the text as seen through Ian and through the audience of the movie. Food here makes otherness attractive by portraying authenticity and bringing a sense of nostalgia for labor intensive home made meals. This in itself is representative of the consumption nation that America has become and the film alludes to a desire to return to simpler times when food took days to make and hours to enjoy with family and friends. As this analysis has shown, food in film plays a role and takes on meaning beyond being a source of sustenance and in the end it gives *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as many layers of symbolism and significance as are in a slice of baklava.
Works Cited


Shugart, Helene. "Sumptuous Texts: Consuming "Otherness" in the Food Film Genre."