

*A people without a past is a people without a future*

Bolinas, California

[www.iasa-wrc.org](http://www.iasa-wrc.org)

Spring 2015

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

## UPCOMING

*Calorosi auguri a tutti e tutte!* I hope that the first three months of 2015 have given way to Spring and new growth (even in the seemingly eternal winter of the East Coast), and that this more temperate season bodes well for us all. In this time of renewal, I would like to reiterate my hope, and that of my fellow WRC officers, that you our readers will take part in our chapter activities and show your support for them through your membership as "Friends of the WRC." As you may recall, we established this category last year so that many of our long-standing and non-academic WRC members could continue to participate at the local level without the necessity of joining the National IASA. Only through your involvement will the work of our chapter flourish; without it, our work becomes pointless. For decades, our unique mission has been to try to bridge the gap between academia and ordinary members of the community. Many of our programs throughout the years have evidenced the richness of this effort to bring these two sectors together—made all the more feasible by committed members and officers who understand the value of what we do and have done yeoman's work to help it happen.

In addition to the events described in this newsletter, I am also pleased to announce that we plan to start a monthly reading circle, so as to bring together small groups of members and friends to delve into the reading and discussion of books with particularly salient and crucial themes—complemented by a simple shared meal and *un po' di vino*. Thanks to a suggestion by our secretary Liz Vasile, we propose to begin the first round with a reading of *Southern Thought*, by Franco Cassano, which, as Liz articulates so aptly "[takes us] beyond the South as the lesser Other in counterpoint to the totalizing North, [and direct us] to what the South has to teach us all." Dates and times for this *circolo* have not been scheduled, but stay tuned.

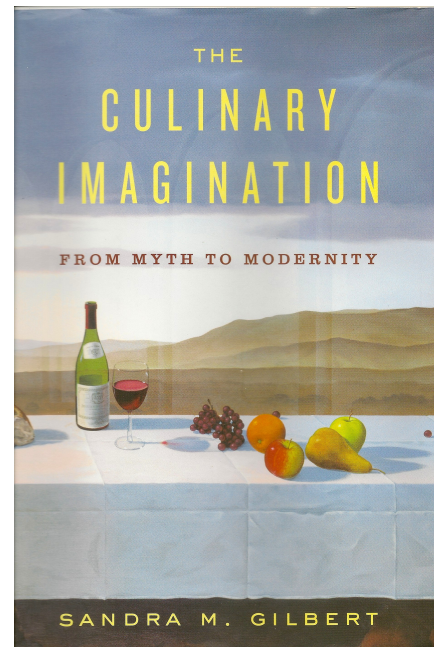
Other plans in the offing include cultural walking tours of neighborhoods where artifacts and edifices of Italian American history may still be glimpsed or imagined.

In the meanwhile, we look forward to seeing you at our upcoming events, beginning with the extraordinary Sandra Gilbert and her perceptive wanderings through culinary imaginations (see Upcoming on this page, and the Book Review on page 3).

*Distinti saluti e ci vediamo presto.*

Adele Negro

**Sandra Gilbert**



**Presenting her unique take on food as culture,  
*The Culinary Imagination***

**Date:** May 14, 2015, 6:30 to 7:30PM

**Place:** Omnivore Books on Food  
3885a Cesar Chavez St. (at Church St.)  
San Francisco, CA 94131

Sandra Gilbert is well-known, or should be, to IASA/WRC members. Poet, scholar, long-time professor of literature at UC Davis, she has here applied her many gifts to how food shapes our imaginations (especially in the modern era of food writing) to sit at the heart of most people's cultural identity. Italians and Italian Americans are no different, as any glance at the ocean of books on cooking, food as memory, food as memoir will attest. Gilbert takes us through the major elements of this recent food mania to reveal its many aspects, including some we didn't know existed. Her approach is both scholarly and personal, deriving as it does from her upbringing in an Italian American household in the borough of Queens in

New York. Her presentation will be of great interest to anyone interested in food and/or its role in our daily imaginations. The event is co-sponsored by the IASA/WRC and CHONC, The Culinary Historians of Northern California.

For information and directions, go to Omnivore's website, [info@omnivorebooks.com](mailto:info@omnivorebooks.com) or call (415) 282-4712. You can also email [lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net). For a taste of some of the book's highlights, see below.

### **The Italian Americans on PBS**

It was definitely something to watch. For the first time, a major documentary was touted regularly on PBS stations as a show about a major ethnic group important enough to warrant 4 prime time hours. It was even previewed on the PBS News Hour. This in itself was a big deal, something I hadn't anticipated when I was filmed for a segment about the World War II restrictions by the production team. But there it was, sitting in the feature spot, from 9PM to 11PM on two successive Tuesdays in February. And, in general, the documentary lived up to its billing. Though it devoted some time to the usual filio-pietistic paeans to the plucky immigrants who made the perilous journey to the new world and blessed it with its most iconic foods, it also made in-depth forays into politics and, almost unheard of before, some of the radicals who shaped the labor movement. Indeed, the best segment, in this viewer's opinion, was the material on the textile strike in Lawrence, MA in 1912. This probably should have been followed up by something on the Paterson, NJ silk workers' strike, but one can't have everything. Suffice it to say that though there may have been too many 'talking heads,' most were knowledgeable and told a story that is seldom heard.

This is not to say that the production was flawless. In the case of the wartime story, for example, a major omission was the absence of any mention of the national legislation passed in 2000, something that would have capped the account that was otherwise reasonable and informative. Two other critiques also deserve mention. In one, Thomas Guglielmo pointed out that while the film devoted time to the prejudice Italian immigrants routinely faced, it failed to mention that they nonetheless benefited immensely from the fact that, like most Europeans, they were classified as 'white,' thus allowing them, or their children, to enter mainstream culture because of this 'white privilege.' In another, local historian Sebastian Fichera took the producers to task for regaling us, once again, with the usual heroes like DiMaggio and Scalia and Pelosi, leaving out thereby the 'little heroes' of daily life who also deserve a place in the pantheon. Perhaps this is more than can be asked of a major survey such as this, but it should remind us that there are countless stories of such unsung immigrant heroes (Sabato Rodia comes to mind), and that they should, before it's too late, get more of our attention.

### **Del Giudice on Rodia**

Speaking of Sabato Rodia, the event co-sponsored by the IASA/WRC and the Museo Italo Americano on Feb. 27, was enjoyed by the many who attended. Del Giudice's presentation was thorough and visually arresting, featuring detailed shots of the towers as well as innumerable vignettes from the life story of this most humble of American artistic geniuses. It seems fitting that after a lifetime of working day and night in obscurity, Sabato Rodia's towers have now become one of the signature images in all of Los Angeles.

### **Italian Americans for a Just and Equal World**

Those of you who are already *Facebook* fans may know that a new page was recently put up with the rather unwieldy title noted above. But though the title may be unwieldy, the concerns raised by contributors, many affiliated with the IASA, are not. Rather, their posts show that Italian Americans are active across the political and cultural spectrum, in this case, generally left-oriented activity on behalf of oppressed and downtrodden Americans still on the margins. Check it out.

### **MLA Italian American Literature Discussion Group**

The MLA Convention has scheduled an Italian American Literature Discussion Group as part of a round-table session, "Negotiating Ethnic Politics: Teaching Ethnic Literature in an Italian American Context." The group will convene at the 2016 MLA Convention in Austin TX, January 7-10.

**The IASA/WRC**, through the efforts of Liz Vasile, will participate in the May 7, 2015 *Bay Area Heritage Open House* at the Mechanics' Institute Library in San Francisco (57 Post St). The event, from 5pm to 8pm, is an opportunity to meet members of other historical groups from the area to see how they are preserving and publicizing our shared heritage.

**Joseph Sciorra**, of the Calandra Institute, will present his recent work, "Embroidered Stories: Interpreting Women's Domestic Needlework from the Italian Diaspora," at the IIC in San Francisco, Thursday May 14, at 6:30 pm.

### **Member Activities**

**Maria Protti**, WRC Vice President, has recently been elected to serve as national IASA curator. The post will allow Maria to showcase her dual skills as librarian and lawyer. *Auguri*.

**Liz Vasile**, WRC Secretary, recently took a group on a musical tour of Cuba. The music of Cuba is a treasure that has just become more available, due to the recent political opening engineered by the Obama administration.

**Lawrence DiStasi**, WRC curator, was one of the 'talking heads' featured in *The Italian Americans* on PBS. DiStasi has also recently presented a course in Bolinas on Alessandro Manzoni's novel, *I Promessi Sposi*, in its English translation known as *The Betrothed*.

**Mary Beth Moser**, president of the Seattle Trentino Club, has recently completed her dissertation: *The Everyday Spirituality of Women in the Italian Alps: A Trentino Woman's Search for Spiritual Agency, Folk Wisdom, and Ancestral Values*. The dissertation was reviewed by novelist Mary Saracino (*Heretics: A Love Story*) in a recent issue of the online journal, *Magoism* - <http://magoism.net>.

### **BOOKS, new and noted**

**Mario Marazziti's** *13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty*, is receiving a great deal of attention. Marazziti spoke in April at the IIC in L.A., and at the Hillside Club in Berkeley.

**Elena Ferrante's** (pen name of Anita Raja?) novels are hot. Europa editions has issued 3 English translations of her gritty series about Naples, the latest of which is *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. Read anything of hers you can find.

## Book Reviews

*The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity*, by Sandra Gilbert, (Norton: 2014).

I have an Italian American friend named Gian whose obsession with cookbooks (over 5,000 at last count) threatens to force him out of his house. In her first chapter, Sandra Gilbert confesses that she, too, like most Americans these days, has a similar food-book fascination that borders on obsession. Thus her rationale for this book: not so much ‘tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are,’ but *Tell me what you read and write about what you eat, and I shall tell you more about what you are. Tell me how you envision food in stories and poems, memoirs and biographies, films and pictures and fantasies, and we shall begin to understand how you think about your life.* In short, like the true literary scholar she is, Gilbert is fascinated by her own and others’ fascination with not just how food is grown and prepared and eaten in various cultures, but *how it is imagined.* In fact, for Gilbert, the imagining has become more important, and maybe always has been, than the eating itself. The imagining, indeed, is what makes us human—for we do not simply hunt and gather and grow and eat edible foods as we find them; we distinguish ourselves from all other species by insisting on preparing foods in quite specific ways before we eat them. And then look back, like Proust with his madeleine, on our imagined past by means of the memory that specific foods, or even thinking of specific foods, inspires.

Gilbert begins by reminding us of her Italian background, so different from the dominant ‘Tale of American Culinary Transformation’ made famous by the likes of Julia Child, Alice Waters, and others whose narratives all detail how they were transformed from WASPS to appreciators of sophisticated cuisines so different from the Jello-type foods of their homes. Gilbert’s home had Italian food and garlic aplenty, but in the end, this doesn’t really matter. For Gilbert’s point here is not so much to crow about her initially more sophisticated palate (actually, her mother’s attempt to Americanize led her to use mostly American condiments and American-mediated recipes), but rather to get to her main idea: “gastronomic experience is ultimately more mental than it is physical.” We enjoy the taste of food as we eat it, but then we can ruminate on that enjoyment for as long as we wish. Indeed, it is the ruminating on it that, according to Gilbert, constitutes much of the enjoyment. Which is why she quotes the great Brillat-Savarin in this regard, who once shocked a companion with the quip that he was “enjoying my dinner in the drawing room.” “What! eating dinner in a drawing-room?” To which Brillat-Savarin replied, “I did not say I was *eating* my dinner, but enjoying it. I had dined an hour before.”

These thoughts about food and gastronomy inevitably lead Gilbert to deeper cogitations associated with food, eating and cooking. We are reminded, for example, that “God is in a sense the first cook. He takes a lump of clay, pats and pokes it into shape until it’s a sort of strange cake, then breathes on it with a hot breath from the furnace that is his Being—and lo, it’s a man.” But we are also reminded of the association of food with love, with dissolving the boundaries between soul and body, with death, with sacred ritual. Besides the obvious Christian ritual of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ in the mass, there is the Zoroastrian cult of a priest slaying a sacred bull “whose blood the congregation may have

drunk,” and the food mystery underlying the Eleusinian mysteries: Hades kidnapping and raping Persephone, and then feeding her the “berry of the pomegranate,” the consuming of which forces her to spend four months of the year with him in his underground kingdom.

Behind all this ritual, of course, lies what Margaret Visser calls ‘the Perils and taboos of an Ordinary Meal.’ Gilbert quotes liberally from Visser’s 2010 book, *Much Depends on Dinner*: “carefully walled off from ordinary consideration..lies the idea of cannibalism—that human beings might become food, and eaters of each other.” Table manners, Visser argues, really function, like most forms of etiquette, “to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes,” to underline the “determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish.” Amen to that.

There is much more in this vein as Gilbert roams far and wide in the literature to demonstrate how complex indeed are the simple acts of cooking and eating. But my favorite chapter has to be the one where she describes her own food history, a chapter she calls “Bitter Herbs or the Spices of Life.” Here is where she tells us about her mother and her determined Americanizing: “she mostly didn’t cook during her thirty years of marriage to my father,” producing “lamp chops or pork chops, instant mashed potatoes, and canned peas.” Her standard spice was not *basilico* but tarragon, probably because it was available in local supermarkets. This is not to say Gilbert didn’t have cooks in her extended family. Her father’s Nicois-Ligurian family boasted a restaurateur, and though he lost the restaurant during a labor dispute, this Ligurian grandfather cooked until the end, his *piece de resistance* being roast turkey stuffed with his “inimitable spinach-mushroom-sausage stuffing.” Gilbert traces this stuffing back to her grandfather Mortola’s Ligurian roots, in a town called San Rocco, which still boasts a street named Via Mortola. The stuffing was so good that it outshone and long outlasted the turkey itself: “On the days after Christmas, Grandma rolled out noodle dough and together she and Grandpa made ravioli that they crammed with leftover stuffing.”

Gilbert caps her personal chapter with a tale that will have reverberations for most of us, for it relates her painful come-uppance at the hands of two Italians she befriended on a Mediterranean cruise. Thinking that her Italian roots gave her a genetic insight into their common culture, she one night extended her compliments about a pasta dish the couple had instructed the cooks in preparing, by referring to a similar *pasta primavera* her Sicilian aunt used to make. Though polite, the couple remained distant, as if the American had somehow been “impertinent.” Gilbert explains: “Impertinent familiarity! That, I realized later, had been the social solecism I committed. I had professed familiarity with the ways of a culture that, from the perspective of ‘real’ Italians, is not my own.” Possessed of dreadful, halting Italian, Gilbert had tried to engage in their conversations, but could not keep up, the result being that the two Italians were sure she could not understand their contempt: *She’s just an American, what does she know about Italian cooking...Italian culture?* In short, Gilbert concludes, “I inhabit a country of hyphenation,” and furthermore, “Italian-American cooking is a bastardized cuisine.” Though this is not the end of her culinary journey, it seems emblematic, and hence sufficient inducement to read this book; it will inform you, make you laugh, fill you with longing for the keys to your own imaginings about food.

**WE VALUE YOUR SUPPORT.**

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Members with items for the next newsletter should send them to:

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Bollinas, CA 94924

**The Italian American Studies Association**

**Western Regional Chapter**

P.O. Box 533

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**IASA National Conference – Oct. 15<sup>th</sup> thru 17th**  
The Marriott-Wardman Park Hotel,  
Washington, DC

“Italian American Values”



