



Review of:

## **Around The Tuscan Table: Food, Family, And Gender In Twentieth-Century Florence.**

**Carole M. Counihan. New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xi +348, bibliography, index.**

Review By: Rituparna Patgiri

---

Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family and Gender in Twentieth Century Florence is an ethnography set in Florence, Italy. Based on primary data collected during her field work in the period from 1982-84, Carole Counihan documents the changes in Florentine society in its shift from a fascist regime to a capitalist one, explores the changing role of food throughout these transformations of the twentieth century, and looks at food's place in an average Florentine's life, including its impact on gender, family, culture and society.

The author focuses on the changes that have taken place in the socio political economy of Florence and in turn how gender roles have been influenced by it. Tracing the historical trajectory of Florence, she argues that fascism enforced a sharp division of labor with women as homemakers and men as breadwinners ruling the family (Counihan 2004: 46). However, with the gradual shift to capitalism, more and more women started going outside of their homes for paid work and hence they had to deal with both housework and outside work. Looking at the division of labour around food related practices, Counihan argues that while men controlled production, women were mostly in charge of cooking and cleaning. The latter's labour was constantly undervalued and underpaid.

Describing the importance of food in the society of Florence, Counihan contends that it has shaped socio cultural relationships. Families ate together and outsiders were generally not present during meal time. Eating together after an official engagement before marriage incorporated in-laws into their new affinal families and indicated a serious commitment to a lifelong relationship (Counihan 2004:7).

The author also looks at the ideological importance of Florentine food. By distinguishing their food from that of others, Florentines take pride in the uniqueness of their culture



and identity. Certain foods can become emblematic “objects of memory” (borrowing from David Sutton’s concept), symbols of the past that are no longer regularly consumed because they are too difficult to prepare or no longer palatable or customary (Counihan 2004:25). For example, with the passage of time, young Florentines stopped making tripe in their homes as the process is very time-consuming. Hence, they ate tripe only when they visited their parents on holidays and it thus became an “object of memory.” With the shift to capitalism, the growing replacement of their foods with more processed and quickly prepared ones signified a transformation of their connection to their history, their traditional social life, and their memories (Counihan 2004:26).

While women performed both housework and paid work outside the home, most men did not share the responsibility for domestic labour. As a result, a majority of women worked one shift at the office or factory and a “second shift” at home (Hochschild and Machung 1989). That women had less time for cooking inevitably led to changes in cuisine (Counihan 2004:170). They started preferring packaged foods as these were less time-consuming. Thus by using food as a conceptual tool, the author attempts to understand the changing socio-cultural organization of Florence.

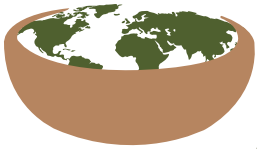
While there have been previous works on Florence (eg Florentine Histories, The City of Florence), Counihan’s attempt to understand its society through its food is a refreshing one. Counihan contributes to the existing literature on division of labour around food related practices through her exploration of Florence and her ethnography can also be read as an illustration of theoretical concepts like the “second shift” and women’s “double day.”

As mentioned above, the principal data for this book is ethnographic. It came from fifty-six hours of food-centred life histories tape-recorded in Italian with twenty-three people in 1982-84. Counihan interacted extensively with Florentines and carried out participant observation of many meals. In total, her sample size is twenty-three, of which ten of her subjects are male and thirteen are female. The method that Counihan uses can be described as both interpretive and descriptive. While she interprets the meanings behind the actions of Florentines, she also describes them at great length. The methodological techniques that she adopts are life history, interview, participant observation, narrative analysis and testimonial. The logic behind using these techniques is that they are crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise be ignored.

In addition to many strengths, one can also point out certain limitations in the methodological and theoretical contents of the book. While it is rich in empirical



illustrations, it is a little short on theoretical explanations in some places. A better combination of theory and description would have made it a more pleasurable read. Also, although Counihan’s sample size was evenly distributed on the basis of gender and age, one might argue that twenty-three is too small a number to represent a populated and diverse city like Florence. But in spite of these drawbacks, it cannot be denied that Counihan’s book makes a significant contribution to feminist anthropology on food and gender.



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

## References Cited

AHochschild, Arlie and Anne Machung. 1989. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Penguin Books.

Lewis, R.B. 1996. *The City of Florence: Historical Vistas and Personal Sightings*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.

Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1988 [1532]. *Florentine Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sutton, David. 2001. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. New York: Berg.