

MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE AND THE LANGUAGE OF BRITISH TV FOOD SHOWS: THE CASE OF JAMIE OLIVER

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1. INTRODUCTION

In spite of the frequent association with values of tradition, localism and myths of «immobility»¹, food, like language, has always been a site of contact and contamination. Through contact, both language and food inevitably change, while they move across cultures, time and social groups. In tracing their paths, etymologists of words as well as of food might discover that «what goes out comes in again», yet completely transformed, increasingly so today, when globalization intertwines with localization in complex ways².

The present paper discusses the relationship between Mediterranean cuisine and British food semiotics, examining the case of UK-based celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, who has shaped his character with a strong reference to Italian cuisine, while his semiotics has, in its turn, influenced Italian food shows. After a review of the framework adopted and a presentation of Jamie's persona and overall semiotics, the paper will examine a two-fold process of transformative borrowing, encompassing (a) Oliver appropriating a set of Italy-related signifiers and (b) (selected traits of) the character's semiotics entering the aesthetics of Italian food shows, particularly in the case of Italian TV chef Simone Rugiati. A multimodal analysis will focus specifically on the profound transformations that signs undergo in this circular yet hetero-directed process of borrowing.

¹ Bell - Hollows 2007, 22.

² Appadurai 1990.

2. A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC TAKE ON SIGN AND SIGN-MAKING

As a theoretical framework, the paper uses a social semiotic multimodal analysis³, which adopts Halliday's⁴ functional approach to investigate the ways in which multiple modes of representation (speech, writing, face expression, clothing, music, body posture, image etc.) intertwine in a text and concur to the production of meaning.

Social semiotics⁵ assumes that signs are a motivated – rather than arbitrary – association between a signifier and a signified, while their specific association provides insights into the sign-maker's interest at the time of his/her making of the sign. Signs are constantly re-made each time they are used, according to the sign-maker's interest and to the resources available to him/her at the time of the making of the sign. Hence social semiotics focuses on the constant process of transformation that signs undergo whenever they are made and interpreted, and on the social dynamics that drive (and can be traceable in) the sign-maker's choices when producing a text.

Besides «transformation»⁶ (a socially contextualized declination of Chomsky's⁷ original notion), the analysis will use the social semiotic concept of «provenance»⁸. Akin to Barthes' notions of «myth» and «connotation»⁹, provenance defines the process of semantic change inevitably embedded in all cases of borrowing; whenever a sign coming from a given culture is imported and used in another one, its meaning is shaped by the added signifier of cultural provenance, i.e., of the values and meanings given by the importer's culture to the one originating the sign. As a banal example, the meaning of «ketchup» (the entity as a semiotic object, and, consequently, the word naming it) in the Italian context is inevitably endowed of the semantic component «American» (with all related values associated to «American» by the Italian culture), completely absent in the meaning of ketchup in the USA. Hence a sign of any kind, when entering a given culture from another, changes its meaning, adding a semantic component related to its provenance and achieving the sets of values attributed to the culture of provenance by the culture borrowing the sign.

³ Kress - van Leeuwen 2006².

⁴ Halliday 1978.

⁵ Hodge - Kress 1988.

⁶ *Ivi*, 30-35; Kress 2010, 96.

⁷ Chomsky 1957.

⁸ Kress - van Leeuwen 2001, 10-11.

⁹ Barthes 1977.

Thus borrowing involves inevitably transformation, so much so that the label becomes inadequate to represent what is in fact a process of sign-making; the sign is indeed transformed, with the signifier being associated to a new signified. This approach becomes useful in analysing the relationship between British and Italian food semiotics in the case of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver.

3. THE CASE OF JAMIE OLIVER

As one can read from the biography published on his website¹⁰, James Trevor Oliver (born in 1975 in Essex) started his training as a chef at *Neal's Yard* in Borough, London, led by renown Italian chef Antonio Carluccio. He later moved to *The River Café*, where he appeared in a documentary and was noticed by the BBC.

As young as 22 year old, Jamie Oliver started to run his first show, *The Naked Chef*, where «naked» was intended to mean «bare, simple cooking», although the sexual implication in the title played a certain role in attracting a large audience to the show. Since then he has started an intense career, running numerous TV shows, authoring several books, and opening three restaurant chains around the world, namely (a) the charity restaurant *Fifteen*, related to the reality TV show *Jamie's Kitchen*, training each year 15 disadvantaged young people as chefs¹¹; (b) *Jamie's Italian*¹², discussed in 4.2 and 4.4; and (c) *Barbecoa*, the most recent one, specialized in charcoaled dishes. Jamie Oliver is the owner of a holding company, *Sweet and Candy*, and a foundation, the *Better Food Foundation*¹³; recently, he has been particularly active in social campaigns¹⁴, running TV shows aimed at improving the quality of school meals in the UK and USA¹⁵ and at promoting healthy eating and cooking habits¹⁶; in his latest campaigns against obesity and processed food-/ready-meal-based lifestyles, he has «publicly politicised the relationships between class and

¹⁰ <http://www.jamieoliver.com/about/jamie-oliver-biog> (accessed 7 November 2013).

¹¹ Kelly 2009.

¹² Lovett 2007.

¹³ Gosling 2012.

¹⁴ Leggott - Hochscherf 2010.

¹⁵ Broad 2012.

¹⁶ Hollows - Jones 2010.

food in Britain»¹⁷. Listed as one of the richest Britons under 30¹⁸, he was appointed a *Member of the Order of the British Empire* in 2003, while in 2010 he won the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Prize, «awarded to an extraordinary individual with a creative and bold vision to spark global change»¹⁹.

3.1. *Branding Jamie*

Table 1 lists chronologically Oliver's TV shows and books as derivable from the information present on Oliver's official website (book titles accompanying a TV show appear on the same row).

Besides Oliver's impressive productivity, *Table 1* highlights the progressive branding of his production through his first name. Show titles shift from an initial anonymity (*The Naked Chef*), to the use of his surname in *Oliver's Twist*, up to the diminutive *Jamie*. The latter has undoubtedly settled as the established signifier of his brand, to the extent that nowadays the signifier «Jamie» in the context of food is unambiguously associated to Jamie Oliver, in the UK and abroad. The same branding device can be noticed for the titles of his books, which match coherently the images chosen for their hardback covers, always portraying Oliver in the foreground, either at a close-shot or in full-figure²⁰.

Productivity in publishing is coupled by success in sales; after ranking as Britain's biggest selling author in 2009, he came second in 2010 after J. Rowling's latest novel in the *Harry Potter* series, while his *Jamie's 30-Minute Meals* became «the biggest-selling non-fiction book of any kind since records began»²¹. His TV shows and books are widely circulated worldwide, also through translated and adapted versions, so much so that he is a highly «exported» and «exporting» celebrity chef.

¹⁷ Warin 2011.

¹⁸ Habershon - Rogers 2005.

¹⁹ «By leveraging the TED community's resources and investing \$1 million dollars into a powerful idea, the TED Prize supports one wish to inspire the world», <http://www.ted.com/prize> (accessed 7 November 2013).

²⁰ Book cover images can be browsed in the «Books & Media» section of Oliver's official website: <http://www.jamieoliver.com/books-and-media> (accessed 9 November 2013).

²¹ Chittenden 2010.

Table 1. – *Jamie Oliver's TV shows and books (published by Michael Joseph - Penguin Books) listed chronologically.*

TV SHOWS	BOOKS
<i>The Naked Chef</i> (1997-1999)	<i>The Naked Chef</i> (1999)
<i>Pukka Tukka</i> (2000)	<i>The Return of the Naked Chef</i> (2000)
	<i>Happy Days with the Naked Chef</i> (2002)
<i>Oliver's Twist</i> (2002)	
<i>Jamie's Kitchen</i> (2002)	<i>Jamie's Kitchen</i> (2003)
<i>Return to Jamie's Kitchen</i> (2003)	
	<i>Jamie's Dinners. The Essential Family Cookbook</i> (2004)
<i>Jamie's School Dinners</i> (2005)	
<i>Jamie's Great Italian Escape</i> (2005)	<i>Jamie's Italy</i> (2005)
<i>Jamie's Return to School Dinners</i> (2006)	
	<i>Cook With Jamie: My Guide to Making You a Better Cook</i> (2006)
<i>Jamie's Chef</i> (2007)	
<i>Jamie at Home</i> (2007)	<i>Jamie at Home: Cook Your Way to the Good Life</i> (2007)
<i>Jamie's Fowl Dinners</i> (2008)	
<i>Jamie's Ministry of Food</i> (2008)	<i>Jamie's Ministry of Food: Anyone Can Learn to Cook in 24 Hours</i> (2008)
<i>Jamie Saves Our Bacon</i> (2009)	
<i>Jamie's American Road Trip</i> (2009)	<i>Jamie's America</i> (2009)
<i>Jamie's Family Christmas</i> (2009)	
<i>Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution</i> (2009)	<i>Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution</i> (2009)
<i>Jamie Does</i> (2010)	<i>Jamie does ... Spain Italy Sweden Morocco Greece France</i> (2010)
<i>Jamie's 30-Minute Meals</i> (2010)	<i>Jamie's 30-Minute Meals</i> (2010)
<i>Jamie Oliver's Food Escapes</i> (2011)	
<i>Jamie's Dream School</i> (2011)	
<i>Jamie's Fish Supper</i> (2011)	
<i>Jamie Cooks Summer</i> (2011)	
<i>Jamie's Great Britain</i> (2011)	<i>Jamie's Great Britain</i> (2011)
<i>Jamie's 15-Minute Meals</i> (2012)	<i>Jamie's 15-Minute Meals</i> (2012)
<i>Jamie's Money Saving Meals</i> (2013)	<i>Save With Jamie</i> (2013)

3.2. *Jamie's overall semiotics*

All semiotic resources shaping Jamie as a character concur to create a distinctive set of meanings, breaking the conventions of traditional British TV chefs. Indeed,

Jamie Oliver is a new kind of television chef. While prime-time British television has featured male chefs for years, Jamie is distinct in terms of age (he is under 25), class (he is constructed as ordinary, as «an Essex boy»), in terms of approach and language (he uses words like «pukka», «wicked», «sorted» in relation to food) and in terms of the spaces and discourses through which he is represented (he cooks in what was, to begin with at least, his own domestic space), and the show places a great emphasis on the access the viewer has to Jamie's personal life, from which are drawn the events which structure the shows.²²

Notwithstanding the character's evolution throughout the years (from an energetic boy in his twenties having fun cooking on TV up to a father concerned with public policies around food), all modal resources have shaped his aesthetics coherently with his cooking style and overall «mission». In his TV shows, both «embodied»²³ and «disembodied»²⁴ modal resources concur cohesively to shape the character, the former encompassing dress code and hair style, gestures, facial expressions, body movements, posture and speech, the latter including the setting, the music soundtrack and the titles of his shows.

3.3. *A multimodal cohesion of signifiers*

The signified «young», which was salient when Oliver started his career as a 22-year old TV chef, is still retained in the use of his diminutive, *Jamie*, even now that he is almost in his forties and a father of four. The diminutive matches other embodied signifiers, namely, (i) a casual dress code, invariably jeans and tucked-out t-shirt or shirt (unlike the chef uniform worn by most male TV celebrity chefs); (ii) a «just-rolled-out-of-bed» hairstyle; (iii) an open smile as his most frequent facial expression, often accompanied by outbursts of laughter or enthusiastic exclamations; (iv) a moderated use of youth slang (discussed in 3.4); (v) a relaxed and

²² Brunson *et al.* 2001.

²³ Norris 2004, 25-30.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

informal body posture; and (vi) fast movements. Taken together, these signifiers contribute to shape the character as young, presenting food for youngsters or for a young lifestyle; as easygoing but «trendy» (with «a 'cool' masculine lifestyle»²⁵), for easy-to-cook, quick yet appealing food; as enthusiastic and passionate, presenting cooking as an entertaining and joyful activity²⁶; and as spontaneous and unsophisticated, for simple, «naked» food.

As for the setting, within the overall «centrality of London as a setting for a metropolitan, cosmopolitan masculinity»²⁷, he is often featured cooking in «his» home kitchen, which in his early shows was presented as located in the pad of a young single male Londoner (in *The Naked Chef*), later turned into a suburban family-house with a large garden where he grows his own vegetables (in *Jamie at Home*). He is also famous for cooking open-air, sitting on a bench or on a tree trunk, preparing his ingredients over a stone. The easy-going, non-professional cooking setting combines with his informal dress code and with his gesturing; he indeed often disregards cooking tools and cutlery (although branding a line of cookware), favouring the use of his hands to mix, squeeze, sprinkle and tear all kinds of food.

Along with the choice of «Britpop and acid jazz»²⁸ as the preferred music soundtrack and a softly nuanced colour palette, less saturated than the usual hyper-real «sensory modality»²⁹ of food shows, all signifiers concur to communicate London-based trendy youth, endowed with an absence of sophistication, a genuine passion, a spontaneous enthusiasm, and a quite convincing authenticity of the character.

3.4. *Language*

Oliver has a regional accent, corresponding to (a domesticated version of³⁰) Estuary English³¹, i.e., the recent evolution of the pronunciation of Cockney, original of the London area and southeast England. Since

²⁵ Hollows 2003, 231.

²⁶ *Ivi*, 234; Brownlie - Hewer - Horne 2005, 20.

²⁷ Hollows 2003, 234.

²⁸ *Ivi*, 235.

²⁹ Kress - van Leeuwen 2006², 151.

³⁰ Cfr. Hollows' use of the label «mockney» to define Oliver's language, in Hollows 2003, 233.

³¹ For a description see Wells 1994.

the 90s, Estuary English has become increasingly fashionable among British youths nationwide thanks to its adoption by youth-influencing exponents, such as MTV deejays. Jamie's distinctive phonetic traits include the fronting of the interdental fricatives, so that [ð] > [v] and [θ] > [f] in words such as *other*, pronounced as [ʌvə:], and *everything*, pronounced as [ˈɛvrɪfɪŋ], together with the extensive use of glottal stops in place of voiceless stops (the dental voiceless stop especially) in intervocalic and final position (i.e. [t] > [ʔ] in V_V and _#, as in *letter*, pronounced as [lɛʔə:] and *got it* pronounced as [ˈgʌʔɪʔ]).

Lexically, he makes occasional use of regionalisms (e.g., *I'll get mi bowl here*) and colloquialisms (*give them a good wash*; *pop these little babies in*, referred to small potatoes; *tuck in*³² and *bevvie*³³), with a mild use of non-standard but quite established slang (e.g. *mate*, *blokes*; cfr. also *mi missus*³⁴ to refer to his wife), never too subculture-specific as to result obscure to the general public.

His vocabulary combines with gestures and facial expressions in connoting his cooking both as easy/fast and as producing spectacular results; the former is expressed by the extremely frequent use of adverbs such as *just* and *literally* combined with fast movements, while the latter is found in the frequent use of *fantastic* or deictic exclamations such as *look at that!*, combined with spontaneous outbursts of pleasure communicated through gestures and facial expressions when tasting the results of his cooking (often using his index finger). Exclamations occur also in the case of an unexpected negative outcome or an accident, in the case of him inadvertently grasping a hot bowl, for example, thus communicating a sense of unplanned and non-staged show, endowing his character of a sense of ordinariness (rather than professionalism), triggering the audience's identification as peers.

With a general absence of any swear or taboo words (unlike UK celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, who has turned cursing into one of his distinctive signifiers, e.g., in his TV show *The F Word*), his expressive language contributes to reinforce the overall spontaneity of the character's aesthetics. When he first appeared in *The Naked Chef*, his accent and vocabulary as markers of down-to-earth spontaneity emerged saliently in the sharp contrast to the BBC English of the behind-the-camera director

³² Brownlie - Hewer - Horne 2005, 19.

³³ *Ivi*, 20.

³⁴ *Ivi*, 22.

with whom Jamie would interact (once again breaking the conventions of the TV food show format³⁵).

3.5. *A Jamie-focused semiotics*

Thanks to the highly distinctive set of signifiers connoting his character, he has been able to construct a clearly identifiable style, so that the uniqueness and appeal of his TV and book production is very focused on the character, rather than on the recipes or cooking style, with food being slowly backgrounded in the covers of his books, for example.

Since the very beginning and increasingly so in his later evolution, Oliver has branded his products through his character and persona, starting with his TV shows and books, up to his restaurant chains and social campaigns. The branding image includes not only his personality traits, but also his social network and history, so that his shows frequently host members of his family (as in *Jamie's Family Christmas*), his friends (as in *The Naked Chef*) and his cooking mentor, Gennaro Cataldo (cfr. the discussion in 4.1). The branding of the character hinges quite effectively on the personalization of the chef figure, presented less as a professional who instructs the audience on how to prepare food, and more as a person and a personality who shows that cooking is an enjoyable and essential part of his life, thus shaping a «more approachable domestic figure of the 'cook'»³⁶. By presenting himself as a peer (endowed with expertise), the character has restructured traditional power roles in cooking TV shows, especially in those led by male chefs, conventionally shaped discursively as professional instructors towards a learning audience.

His more recent evolution, as an adult, husband and father, has seen an increased concern and commitment towards healthy, home-made, fresh, seasonal and organic food, and is shaping the character as an *engagé* chef, as in two of his latest shows, *Jamie's School Dinners* and *Jamie's Food Revolution*, where he travels the UK (in the former) and the States (in the latter) to convince schools to ban processed food and cook their own meals using fresh ingredients. In his adult turn, the character still retains the distinctive traits of freshness, simplicity, passion, spontaneity and authenticity, to which his appropriative relation to the Mediterranean and Italy has contributed significantly.

³⁵ Brunson *et al.* 2001, 36.

³⁶ De Solier 2005, 474.

4. MEDITERRANEAN JAMIE: OLIVER'S RELATION TO ITALY

«If Britishness plays an important role in the construction of Jamie Oliver's image, Italianicity is also crucial to his construction of a domestic culinary masculinity»³⁷. Since his early career as a TV chef, Jamie has tightly related his persona to Italy, through the use of selected signifiers shaping his background, his production and his cooking. In so doing, Jamie has constructed a transformative relation to Italy, which Chiaro defines as trans-adaptation³⁸; he indeed appropriates Italy-related signifiers, endowing them with new meaning and thus turning them into new signs.

4.1. *Italy in Jamie's background*

The narrative on Jamie's past is characterized by his training as a *sous-chef* in Italian cuisine, thanks to his mentor, the chef Gennaro Contaldo, whom he met when working at Antonio Carluccio's *Neal's Yard*, and who features often as his guest in Jamie's shows. Migrated to London in 1969 when he was twenty, Contaldo has worked there as a chef in Italian cuisine since then. His semiotics, including his speech, gesturing and cooking, is highly representative of the prototypical (if not stereotypical) Italian chef. Besides his occasional use of Italian words, his accent has marked phonetic transfers from Italian, a loud tone of voice, and a rising-falling intonation with over-elongated vowels, as a typical signifier of «Italian language» among English speakers. This combines with his frequent, ample and salient gesturing accompanying his speech. His cooking makes use of Italian ingredients and he presents his recipes as Italian or with signifiers recognizable as Italians to an Anglophone audience (e.g., risotto or pasta).

Besides Contaldo, whose presence in Jamie's shows is a signifier of Jamie's past, thus supporting his expertise in Italian cuisine, Oliver often makes allusions to a non-better defined cooking experience in Italy when he was young. This all contributes to construct a strong Italian-related background of Jamie as a chef.

³⁷ Hollows 2003, 235.

³⁸ Chiaro 2008.

4.2. *Italy in Jamie's production*

Although the character's discourses have broadened to include a series on British food and social campaigns for better food and food produce, Jamie Oliver's production has maintained a strong and recurring reference to Italy.

With Gennaro Contaldo, he has started a high-street restaurant chain, *Jamie's Italian*, with 30 restaurants in the UK and abroad; the character's explicit relation to Italian cuisine is found not only in the name of the chain, but also in the narrative of its original idea, as expressed in the «Our Story» section of the chain website:

Years later, having toured Italy and declared that he «should have been Italian», the now-famous Jamie decided he wanted to share everything he knew about Italian cuisine with the rest of the world – *the fresh, locally sourced ingredients; the bold and simple flavours; and the relaxed way of sharing dishes*. With his old friend and trusted mentor from Neal Street, Gennaro, Jamie planned to open a UK restaurant that reflected *the passionate, humble and sociable attitude of Italians towards food*. Jamie's Italian was born.³⁹

Here the signifier «Italian cuisine» is associated with a rather naïve image of Italian food, cuisine and eating culture, as can be noticed in the italicized passages in the excerpt. The qualifiers suggest a mythological (or stereotypical) image of Italy as *fresh, local, bold, simple, relaxed, passionate, humble* and *sociable*, thus constructing a distinctive sign complex for Italy, designed according to the set of connotations on which the restaurant chain is branded.

In line with the signified «authenticity», with which Oliver has appropriated Italian cuisine, his TV show *Jamie's Great Italian Escape*, aired in 2005, and the tie-in book *Jamie's Italy*, published in the same year, are constructed around the narrative of «Jamie's need to escape 'the pressures of being Jamie Oliver, Inc.' by traveling to his culinary spiritual home, Italy»⁴⁰, where he can find inspiration «by connecting with the 'authenticity' of Italy and Italian cookery»⁴¹. In the show, Jamie features as a «researcher-style chef»⁴², driving around Italy on a vintage-looking Volkswagen van (thus bringing a signifier of London «trendiness» to the

³⁹ <http://www.jamieoliver.com/italian/our-story> (accessed 8 November 2013); italics added.

⁴⁰ Bell - Hollows 2007, 26.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, 27.

⁴² Chiaro 2008, 204.

Italian theme of the show), visiting restaurants, private houses, farms, village feasts and monasteries. There he meets the (often non-professional) cooks, watches them cooking and eats their dishes, learns from them and cooks his own versions of Italian food for his hosts. Although a mythological image of Italy is maintained in the often rural and festive rather than urban contexts (thus reinforcing the signified of «authenticity» as the cultural provenance of his appropriated version of Italy⁴³), the locations and dishes usually step outside the range of culinary options of the stereotypical imagery for Italian food worldwide (e.g. the *Salt Cod Soup / Zuppa di Baccalà*, or the *Roasted Squash / Zucca al forno*), contributing to connote the character as a *connoisseur* of Italian culture and cuisine.

4.3. *Italy in Jamie's food*

Jamie's cuisine is rich in Italian signifiers. Italian recipes feature often in his shows and books. As shown in *Fig. 1*, in the «all videos» section of Oliver's official website, the links under the label «recipes» present *italian* as the only nationality-based grouping *vis-à-vis* the others, grouped by food typology (*bbq, dessert, meat, salad, snacks and sides*).

Besides recipes, he has introduced a series of structural elements of Italian cuisine in his personal cooking, such as the use of extra-virgin olive oil, grated parmesan (on top of salads), fresh herbs (rather or more than spices) and balsamic and wine vinegar.

Analogously, he makes frequent use of Italian language, also when explaining non-Italian recipes, both to denote food (he prefers *zucchini* over *courgette*, for example) and connotatively, or interpersonally, as to give proof of his knowledge of Italian culture, through the use of Italian expressions such as *all'onda* to describe the right density of risotto, for example, also with some occasional creativity, e.g. *They call it Quattro gusti pizza*, appropriated from the Italian *Pizza quattro stagioni*.

⁴³ «Jamie accentuates the importance of an 'authenticity' homologous with popular conceptions of Italian cooking in the UK» (Hollows 2003, 236).



Fig. 1. – The bottom section of www.jamieoliver.com (accessed 15 October 2012).

4.4. Jamie's appropriation of Italy

As is often the case in human semiosis, Italian food is not merely «used» in Oliver's semiotics; rather, it has undergone a process of appropriation (cfr. the title of one of his earliest TV shows, *Oliver's Twist*). When cooking Italian in his shows, Jamie often personalizes his dishes, framing the appropriation through explicit announcements, e.g., *this is my version of...* Titles signalling appropriation, e.g. *Lasagne Jamie's style*, result also when browsing among the recipes on his website or searching for his videos on *YouTube*.

In Oliver's recipe titles, the signifier expressing appropriation *par excellence* is the genitive case for his name, in *Jamie's Pizza dough* or *Jamie's spaghetti bolognese*. His appropriation is often acclaimed; indeed, as an example of the impact of Oliver's transformative power, Smith reports that

after Oliver suggested in his series that it [nutmeg] was «just the job for a pukka Spaghetti Bolognese», weekly sales of jars of nutmeg rose from 1,400 to 6,000, prompting Sainsbury's to order two years' worth of stock.⁴⁴

His restaurant chain *Jamie's Italian* testifies to Oliver's appropriation process not only in its name. Located in different continents around the world, his restaurants attract customers who go there precisely to eat Jamie Oliver's Italian cuisine. Here the character is the distinctive signifier, which provides the added value to his restaurant, distinguishing

⁴⁴ Smith 2012, 122.

it from the many Italian restaurants existing internationally. Not only has he managed to promote Italian cuisine as fashionable, endowing it with connotations transferred from the character himself, such as young, easy-going, trendy and passionate; he has also been able to root his British character so profoundly in Italian cuisine that he has now gained full authority to promote his appropriated version and distinctive Italian style around the world. Against the many British celebrity chefs showing how to prepare Italian recipes on British TV, Oliver's exception consists rather in making the British chef as the added value to Italian food internationally.

As a last example of appropriation, the cover image of Oliver's book *Jamie's Italy*⁴⁵ is emblematic of the set of meanings associated to Jamie's (version of) Italy. The photograph portrays Jamie Oliver, wearing casual clothing (denim, loose shirt, «old looking» All Stars training shoes), sitting very informally on a stool, very close to the back of a *Fiat Cinquecento*, with a dish of tomato spaghetti in his hand and a glass of beer lying on the car. He smiles and looks away from the camera, as if unaware of the photographer's presence. In the photograph, several signifiers express informality, e.g. the character's clothing and posture, and his eating on a stool, holding the dish with his hand, while using the car plate light as an improvised table for his glass of beer. Italian cuisine is here represented in the traditional dish of tomato sauce spaghetti and the hardly-visible ingredients (tomatoes, a can of olive oil and *radicchio*) in a wooden cask at the bottom-left; Italy is present less traditionally in the car, *Fiat Cinquecento*, which is now fashionable among young adults in the UK, whose vintage style tunes in with the scraped wall in the background. The setting, the objects, Jamie's posture and expression, all contribute to portray a rather non-(stereo)typical image of Italy, strongly shaped by a late British-youth taste and by Jamie's aesthetics. Jamie's Italy is then easy-going, casual, joyful, vintage (intended as a creative re-signification of old signs) and trendy; it is postmodern and can afford to improvise, transform, and escape the rules, e.g., by accompanying spaghetti with beer rather than traditional Italian wine.

The rather unconventional setting, paired with the gaze of the character, not directly addressing the viewer, thus communicating a sense of

⁴⁵ Penguin Books Ltd has denied copyright permission to reproduce the image of the book cover page; it can be accessed online at: <http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,978071814709,00.html> or by searching «Jamie's Italy Penguin» on any search engine or on Google Images.

non-staged photograph (cfr. also the dirt on Oliver's shoes), contribute to an overall sense of non-conventionality, of modern informality, spontaneity and, once again, authenticity.

5. THE OTHER WAY ROUND ...

After examining the transformative ways in which Italy contributes to shape the character of Jamie Oliver, the present section discusses the role of Jamie Oliver in influencing Italian food semiotics.

5.1. *Jamie's production in Italy*

Along with many other countries worldwide, Italy has imported Jamie Oliver's production. *Gambero Rosso Channel* has aired his shows, keeping the original English titles, with scripts either subtitled or voiced-over in Italian⁴⁶. His books have been translated, with titles undergoing some changes. *My 15-Minute Meals* and *My 30-Minute Meals* have been quite literally rendered into *Le mie ricette da 15 minuti* and *I miei menu da 30 minuti*; yet for the latter, the sub-header has changed radically, from *A Revolutionary Approach to Cooking Good Food Fast* into *Ricette per chi ha poco tempo ma ama la buona cucina*, thus omitting the «revolutionary» component and failing to reproduce the pun with *fast food*.

Others have been localized, like *Jamie's Italy*, turned into *Il mio giro d'Italia*, with the top header changing from *As Seen on Channel Four* to *120 ricette della cucina Italiana riscoperte dallo chef più famoso del mondo*. *Jamie at Home: Cook Your Way into the Good Life* has become a slightly misleading *La mia cucina naturale*, the Italian connotation of which associates with cure and healing rather than taste, recalling the more frequent collocation *medicina naturale*. *Jamie's Ministry of Food* has undergone standardization with *La mia scuola di cucina* (once again) completely devoid of the political component. Interestingly enough for the Mediterranean theme, *Jamie Does... Spain Italy Sweden Morocco Greece France*, which, in the cover, displays the countries typed in different fonts and sizes fitting a square, has changed into *Le mie ricette da... Italia Grecia Francia Marocco Svezia Spagna*. Change involves not only a different sequencing of the

⁴⁶ For an analysis of the translation, see Chiaro 2008.

countries, but also a different variation of font size, which now sees *Italia* with the largest size, whereas in the source text *Spain* and *France* had the largest size and hence maximum salience. Therefore Italy is given maximum prominence in the Italian version, with other Mediterranean cuisines backgrounded, maybe assuming a traditionalist and locally oriented attitude of Italian buyers of cookbooks. In sum, Oliver's book production has been localized, hence re-signified, to fit the (publisher's assumptions on the) preferences of the Italian market.

5.2. *Jamie's semiotics in Italian food shows: the case of Simone Rugiati*

Jamie's semiotics has influenced and is increasingly influencing Italian TV food semiotics. Some of Jamie's distinctive signs are occasionally reproduced by Italian TV chefs, at times crediting the source explicitly; for example, Jamie's characteristic squeezing of a lemon sieving its seeds with his hands instead of using a tool was quoted by TV chef Nicoletta Tavella in her show *La cucina degli altri*, aired on *Gambero Rosso Channel*, while explicitly referring to Jamie Oliver (*ecco, faccio come fa Jamie Oliver... / there, I'm doing it the way Jamie Oliver does...*).

Besides the borrowing of isolated signs, a whole complex of signs shaping the character has been appropriated in the case of TV chef Simone Rugiati. Born in 1981, six years younger than Jamie Oliver and with a popularity limited to the Italian scene, he was nearly as young as Oliver when he first featured on *Gambero Rosso Channel* in 2006, running his show titled *Oggi cucino in...* (*Today I'm cooking in...*), preparing dishes in 10, 15 or 20 minutes, seemingly recalling Jamie's *15- and 30-Minute Meals*⁴⁷.

He too displays a casual informal look, wearing t-shirts, using colloquial language and often addressing and interacting with the behind-the-camera crew, as first Jamie did in his *Naked Chef*. Like Jamie, he has branded some of his later shows by his first name (e.g. *SOS Simone*; *Io, me e Simone*; *Io, Simone e gli altri*; *Simone alla griglia*; cfr. also his book *Se in cucina c'è Simone*). Finally his show *Nudo e crudo* recalls directly Oliver's *Naked Chef*⁴⁸. His book *Stupire in cucina in 20 minuti* again shapes his cooking as quick but spectacular.

⁴⁷ Yet Jamie's shows were aired only in 2010.

⁴⁸ «L'Italia risponde all'Inghilterra [...] se Jamie Oliver poteva essere chiamato il cuoco nudo anche Simone, che non è da meno, potrebbe essere chiamato nudo e crudo»

As to personality traits, he too is characterized by a young aesthetics, an easy-going and energetic attitude, often communicating spontaneity, through exclamations, or side-comments on unexpected outcomes, with interruptions and digressions while describing and performing a recipe. He too has a regional accent (from Tuscany), uses colloquialisms and makes occasional use of youth slang, mainly Milan-based (e.g., *bella lì*), i.e., the linguistic prestigious centre for Italian youths, equivalent to London for British youths. His narration is enriched with references to his life, personal tastes and passions, together with recounts about when he was a child. Simone too is simple and trendy, but here «trendiness» actualizes in a more sophisticated way; if Jamie is shaped around the prestigious aesthetics of London young adults, Simone is oriented towards Italy's equivalent prestigious centre, i.e., Milan, reproducing its tastes praising «glamour» more than «authenticity». Simone too is highly entertaining, disseminating laughter and jokes in his shows – and charming. Unlike Jamie's charm of the good-boy-next-door who married his long-time girlfriend and then has become a father of four, Simone has fashioned the signified 'charm' around the figure of a (predominantly) single Italian male, as a party-goer and a contemporary metropolitan version of the Latin lover⁴⁹ (cfr. also the title of his latest book *Il gusto di sedurre*).

Simone's similarities with Jamie's semiotics have not passed unnoticed; he has been frequently labelled as *il Jamie Oliver italiano*⁵⁰ (*the Italian Jamie Oliver*), and *il nostro Jamie Oliver*⁵¹ (*our Jamie Oliver*), as in

Nel programma lavora il bravo Simone Rugiati, il Jamie Oliver italiano (cioè un cuoco moderno, non convenzionale, televisivo, giovane, di bell'aspetto, che cucina per show e non all'interno di un ristorante).⁵²

(Sergio & Ellen 2011). Eng.: «Italy's answer to England [...] if Jamie Oliver can be named the naked chef, Simone Rugiati is no less and could be named naked and raw» (my translation).

⁴⁹ «A prima vista, è un incrocio tra Jamie Oliver e Robbie Williams. E lui prende subito il paragone come un complimento. 'Il primo lo stimo per la fama mediatica globale che ha raggiunto come chef. Il secondo, per le donne e la vita mondana'» (Corna 2010). Eng.: «At first glance, he is a mixture between Jamie Oliver and Robbie Williams. And he takes the comparison as a compliment. 'I appreciate the former for the global popularity in the media he has achieved as a chef. The latter, for women and his glamorous life'» (my translation).

⁵⁰ Mattei 2011.

⁵¹ Melchioni 2010.

⁵² Eng.: «The show features the talented Simone Rugiati, the Italian Jamie Oliver (that is, a modern, unconventional, young, good-looking TV chef, who cooks for TV shows rather than in a restaurant)» (Tibaldi 2011; my translation).

And in «Simone Rugiati può essere considerato la risposta italiana di Jamie Oliver, come lui è molto carino, un po' sfrontato e ci offre una cucina giovane, veloce ed originale»⁵³. He himself, while denying any influence on his character, has admitted his profound admiration for Jamie Oliver, «L'unica persona, a cui non mi ispiro, ma per cui nutro una grandissima ammirazione è Jamie Oliver, che è stato capace di creare – o almeno dare un grande sviluppo al lavoro degli chef in TV»⁵⁴.

Obviously, as an Italian chef in Italy, Simone Rugiati could not borrow Jamie Oliver's «Italy» as a signifier to construct his character; rather, he has taken a superordinate one, by endowing his cuisine with occasional exoticism (using ginger in his recipes, for example), portraying himself as a big fan of Japanese cuisine (particularly fashionable among Italian young adults in the last couple of decades) and appropriating it, by showing his own versions of sushi, e.g. using sliced courgette instead of *nori* (seaweed) to wrap his *maki*-rolls. Like Jamie, Simone too has his own line of world food shows and food-oriented travel shows; one of these is *The Great Miami Escape*⁵⁵, directly citing Jamie's Italian one, but re-orienting the goal of the escape given the change in the character's point of view. As Jamie has used the cultural provenance of authenticity attributed to Italian cuisine by the British culture, Simone's exoticism (cfr. also one of his latest books, *Storie di Brunch / Brunch Stories*) is culturally shaped as sophisticated, modern and for relatively expensive lifestyle because of the values of its provenance among Italians.

If Simone has appropriated specific signifiers of Jamie, which, as seen, achieve different connotations in the Italian context, he too has now evolved, so the two characters have increasingly diverged their paths. Against Oliver's socially engaged campaigns, Simone has developed towards mainstream TV show (he is currently running a TV game show on cooking, *Cuochi e Fiamme*) and has featured in TV commercials for *Coke*, against Jamie's campaigns for naturally and home-produced food⁵⁶;

⁵³ Eng.: «We can consider Simone Rugiati as the Italian response to Jamie Oliver, like him he is very cute, a bit cheeky and offers a young, quick and original cuisine» (S. Rugiati, *Storie di Brunch*; my translation).

⁵⁴ Eng.: «The only person, whom I do not take inspiration from, but for whom I have a profound admiration, is Jamie Oliver; he's been able to create – or at least to give a great push forward to the role of chefs on TV» (S. Rugiati, *La mia passione per la cucina*; my translation).

⁵⁵ <http://www.simonerugiati.com/extra> (accessed 15 November 2013).

⁵⁶ This sharp difference in the two characters is discussed in Liverani 2012.

he has also played a controversial⁵⁷ role in reality TV shows (*L'isola dei famosi* and *Pechino Express*), in this sense shaping his character as mainstream, commercial and glamour, while not particularly engaged with issues of public concern.

Overall, Simone shares with Jamie a series of signified (youth, informality, spontaneity, trendiness and domesticated exoticism), while borrowing (or recalling) specific signifiers (the use of his first name, dress code and hairstyle, behind-the-scene addressee, regional accent and slang). Yet these are shaped and appropriated specifically to produce a rather different persona, which hinges on rather different discourses, (life)styles and ideologies than Jamie's.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The essay has discussed the transformative process that signs undergo when imported in a different culture for different aims. It has focused on food and its semiotics in British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. It has considered the case of Italy as an instance of Mediterranean cuisine and culture, both influencing British TV shows and appropriating its semiotics. In appropriating Italy and Italian food, Jamie Oliver has endowed both with a mythical yet unconventional set of signifieds. He has transferred the character's distinctive traits, such as youthful, easy-going, spontaneous, joyful and trendy onto his Italian cooking, while shaping the latter as simple, passionate and authentic, by leveraging on the meaning potentials of its provenance among Britons. This has enabled him to transfer a so-appropriated Italian-related signified of authenticity to his persona, which has played and is playing a crucial role in his success as an *engagé* chef, as genuinely passionate in his efforts at improving eating and cooking habits in the public sphere.

In his turn, Jamie's groundbreaking character has influenced Italian TV food show semiotics, with his personality traits selectively appropriated by Italian TV chef Simone Rugiati, who has used them to emerge as unconventional within the Italian TV food scene. Yet through these, and thanks to the different values attributed to the selected provenance in the Italian culture, Rugiati has developed a character shaped towards sophistication vis-à-vis Jamie's authenticity, thus constructing an ideologically

⁵⁷ Scarpatò 2010.

opposite discursive identity, rooted in sophisticated consumerism and mainstream glamour.

The here-examined process of semiosis involves a parallel and consecutive shift in the system of reference; Italian food and cooking are turned into a point of reference for British food semiotics, which turns away from the traditional reference to French cuisine. Then British food semiotics is turned into a point of reference for Italian food semiotics, shifting away once again from the traditional model of the French grammar of food. A ceaseless process of remediation, signification and re-signification turns Italian food and cooking into a sign inserted into a narrative and as an element of a character, as a branding device; then in turn, the character and brand become a major (life)style that is imported into/imitated/appropriated by Italian food shows.

As in all glocalising processes, transformation occurs in each single passage of the process. An examination of these transformations can assess what is gained and what is lost in the process of food being turned into a sign, in the latter being turned into a brand, later turned into a borrowing adapted to the local context.

Notwithstanding the same appropriation process enacted both by Oliver and by Rugiati, and the de-materializing dynamics of food turned into a spectacle (which is however not unique to the two chefs), differences can be traced which do not hold merely for aesthetic values, but can lend to reflections on the overall ethics of the appropriated product. So, a mythical presentation of Italian food as authentic in Jamie's signification has empowered Oliver's credibility in his (spectacle of his) social campaigns aimed at improving the quality of school meals and effecting the public's eating and cooking habits. Not exempt from criticisms⁵⁸, in his mythical appropriation of Italy, Oliver

suggests that the problems of the British working-class diet can be solved by adopting the recipes of those more «authentic» and less industrialized people who respect their own traditions. It is the Italian working classes who «appear to offer 'magical solutions' to the problem of modern life in Britain» and who produce «'real' home cooking that speaks of family and community».⁵⁹

In so doing, Oliver has certainly mystified the Italian contemporary cooking and eating situation, sadly saturated by discount supermarkets and

⁵⁸ For example Vander Schee - Kline 2013.

⁵⁹ Hollows - Jones 2010, 312.

scandals about contaminated processed-food, and affected by increasing obesity; nevertheless this has enabled him to attract considerable attention to the contemporary health-related problems provoked by the food industry, pushing the British government to address the issue⁶⁰. So, for example, as a part of the «Feed me Better» campaign, *Jamie's School Dinners*

and the campaign behind it, generated mostly sympathetic coverage, and demands for the government to intervene to arrest the health «time-bomb» predicted by Oliver and others. Audiences were able to follow how the celebrity cook and new political activist presented a petition of 300,000 signatures to the Prime Minister Tony Blair, who committed a budget of £280 million to the improvement for better ingredients and training.⁶¹

The effects of Oliver's latest evolution contrast sharply with Simone Rugiati's use of Jamie's appropriated signifiers, which are employed to shape distinctively a rather sophisticated character, rooted in mainstream and commercial ideologies. Italian food borrowed transformatively to mean authenticity and simplicity is used by Oliver to ground the motives and possibilities for social change in food and cooking habits. In contrast, out of the complexity of Oliver's semiotics, Rugiati has selectively borrowed his spontaneity, youthful passion and non-staged trendiness, while turning the former's Italian signifier (originally associated to authenticity) into a fashionable taste for exotic and fusion cuisine, conceived as sophisticated and glamorous, thus framing the character discursively into a completely opposite lifestyle.

Transformation (like all forms of translation) is never faithful to the original; this holds for Oliver's resignification of Italy as authentic, as much as for Rugiati's glamorous recontextualization of Jamie's spontaneity. In tracing the paths of transformation, however, it seems legitimate to assess which of the two has produced more desirable outcomes, not only for TV food shows or of the image of the Mediterranean in it, but also, and arguably more importantly, for everyday food production, shopping, cooking, feeding and eating practices, as well as for their related public policies.

⁶⁰ Parsons 2011.

⁶¹ Leggott - Hochscherf 2010, 47.

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