3 Food for Thought

The first episode for season 6 of *The Sopranos*—the second-to-last season—had Tony and Carmela obsessed with sushi. They devoured it greedily, spoke of little else, and, when Tony snuck out surreptitiously to ingest more of it, it almost aroused as much jealousy in Carmela as had Tony's various mistresses. Where, the spectator could well wonder, might this be going? As an example of serial television, the first installment of season 6 might be expected to pick up the memories of narratives long in abeyance and reveal new, satisfying developments out of them. As an instance of episodic television, the first show of the new season could teasingly have stand-alone elements that might turn out to connect up to nothing before or after. In the immediate unfolding of the moment, it would be hard to say what was what.

In fact, as a blend of episodic and serial forms of television, *The Sopranos* delivers a complex, if not weird, version of historical memory for its spectators. On the one hand, there are some details that the show "remembers" across vast expanses of time, and the spectator is encouraged to keep up with the references and the returns to previous narrative motifs. For example, when, in season 3, Tony's mistress Gloria Trillo (Annabella Sciorra) responds to his expressions of dismay at the difficulties of his life with an unsympathetic "Poor you," it matters that this was the exact phrase Tony's cold and callous mother had been saying to him throughout his life (and up to her death earlier in the season), and it matters that Tony winces when Gloria says it, showing us that he well remembers the original sting. On the other hand, over the course of the seasons, the viewer may build up knowledge about the narrative

world of *The Sopranos* that the show then doesn't logically follow up on, either by contradicting it in some respect (to cite a minor version of this, both Drea de Matteo and Joseph Gannascoli were each cast across episodes as two different characters, while a different actor plays Father Phil in the pilot than in later episodes) or by simply abandoning one of its narratives or dropping a character one assumed was being prepped for a major plot line. In this vein, the sushi obsession, as it unfolded, could have gone in any number of directions, narrative and not.

In this respect, the opening episode for season 6 serves as an ironic commentary on the very role of memory across the seasons of a show where the hiatus between those seasons had gotten bigger and bigger.

Perhaps, the viewer might assume, there was something resonant in Tony and Carmela's newfound passion for sushi, a raw food embued, in season 1, with *negative* associations of potentially pungent impropriety when Tony wanted to assail his Uncle Junior's masculinity by referencing his famed skills at cunnilingus. Sushi would contrast then with rich Italian food, so beloved in earlier seasons but now itself given less than positive connotations. Indeed, in this first episode of season 6, the newfound affirmation of sushi ran alongside skepticism about Italian cuisine: Artie Bucco's restaurant, Vesuvio, which Tony and his family or his minions had often consumed memorable meals at in the past, was now said to lack excitement and innovation (with ennui, the mobsters declared they could recite the menu by heart), and the only figure who lusted after saucy Italian fare was the less-than-respected representative of law and order, FBI Agent Harris (Matt Servitto), who had come back from the Middle East with a parasite and was obsessed with thick hoagies from Satriale's Pork Store restaurant. Maybe, then, the show was saying something about the loss of a cuisine tied to tradition in a new America increasingly open—at the culinary level at the very least—to multicultural experience.

Or maybe the show was just playing at meanings, all the better to play with its regular viewers.

For all the consequential narrative threads that the viewer knew were hanging over from the previous season—and even from earlier ones—the opening episode's own obsession with depicting an obsession with sushi seemed perversely antinarrative, an irrelevant and perhaps irrev-

erent distraction by the little things of everyday life. Season 6 had been announced as the penultimate season for the hit show; given the big narrative questions that the expectant fan would be posing as the program began inexorably to wind down—such as Tony's very fate as his New Jersey crew prepared for war with their counterparts across the river in New York—the concern with what the narrative's characters were eating as they moved toward the (their?) end might not perhaps have seemed that important. Indeed, by the last scene of that first episode from season 6, Tony was close to dead after being shot unexpectedly by his seemingly senile uncle. This in itself was a very big surprise: it had seemed from the previous season that the big question would now be the war with New York and how Tony would (or wouldn't) survive that, and now that plot line was being put on hold for a wounding that seemed to come out of nowhere. But even as it played with expectations about where season 6 might be going, the shooting of Tony by his uncle also had the effect of disrupting the everydayness of life on the show (which itself had disrupted what the viewer assumed would be the more monumental concerns of this new season).

With the shooting, a narrative occurrence of major import had intervened into the daily routines of consumption and into the apparently endless discussions of those acts of consumption. The shooting interrupted the seeming inconsequentiality of the scenes around food. Soon, in critical condition in his hospital bed, Tony would go off in his imagination into the alternate universe of a conference hotel in Orange County, California, where he had a different identity and where the only sustenance seemed to be the endless freebie drinks offered him by a bartender sympathetic to his dilemma. Sushi dropped away and was not mentioned thereafter. It appeared to be one more blind alley that the series threw in the path of the spectator eager to resolve the show's narrative points but finding that in bold defiance of expectations the show would, in fact, go where it wanted: whether into a nonplot about sushi, or into an unexpected new narrative line about Tony's shooting by his uncle, or even into an alternate universe in which Tony became someone else. With such a topsy-turvy challenge to expectation and narrative logic, it was ultimately both surprising and not so surprising, then, that the show soon dropped the alternate-universe subplot

and never returned to it, but for a rare mention here or there, just as it dropped so many other tantalizing threads.

The extent to which the sushi motif disappeared so quickly (though who knew at the time if it would figure in the narrative later on? After all, there was still that unresolved question from season 3 of the wounded but resilient Russian last seen in the Pine Barrens) could seem a confirmation of its relative triviality, one more comic element thrown up for quick delectation along the path of the show's breathless move toward its finale. But, conversely, the very fact that it came up so pointedly in the first episode might also indicate its importance as both narrative and antinarrative device. Maybe the sushi motif had its job to perform for the season opener; having performed it, it could retire from the scene.

I watched this opening episode for season 6 at a friend's house in Los Angeles, one of the world capitals of a rarified cuisine in which sushi has been a key player. For upscale urbanites, L.A. is very much the site for the meal as aesthetic tableau marked by the separation of delicate items and often laced by light traces of sauces that interweave on the plate like so many dainty brush strokes. But this night, in honor of the show and in keeping with long-running ritual, we were going for classic, rich Italian food: pasta with bolognese sauce, rounds of buffalo mozzarella, thick slices of salami and prosciutto, and so on. Like many other faithful viewers, I suppose, I and my friends would celebrate each new season by the self-consciously corny consumption of precisely the sort of hearty food that we associated with the *Sopranos* world, and in this we could find inspiration in such commodity tie-ins as the best seller, *The Sopranos Family Cookbook*.

But our playing with *The Sopranos* didn't anticipate all the ways it could play with us. In this respect, then, while the season 6 opener's emphasis on sushi may have had something to do with a theme of tradition versus modernity, it also took on the quality of a joke—one that moved outward from the fictional world within the series itself, as when Tony referenced sushi to mock Uncle Junior, to take in the show's viewers as themselves targets of a comic setup. As the urban and suburban professionals who form HBO's privileged audience base gave up their typical and often Asian-inflected takeout or delivery food and opted instead for the downscale cheesy richness of the heavy Mediterranean

cuisine they would cook and consume in ironic honor of season debuts, *The Sopranos* itself in the season 6 opener had its characters turning their backs on Italian comfort food and preferring precisely the sort of exotic fare that typical viewers might have renounced for the night. Over the course of its run, *The Sopranos* received endless accolades for its innovativeness, and here a seemingly throwaway plot thread reiterates just how the show's inventiveness is one that directly incorporated awareness of the audience into its very structure. The joke on Japanese/Italian cuisines, then, is only one exemplary moment from a duel/duet between a channel and series looking for distinction *and* spectators who are themselves looking for distinction in their lifestyle choices, one sign of which included subscribing to HBO and watching, and talking about, *The Sopranos*.

Willingness to play along and participate in the meanderings of the moments accounts for much of the inventive pleasure of *The Sopranos*, but it is a pleasure in which the viewer's own values and expectations are played with. *The Sopranos* is an endlessly citable work, and each of the moments from it can open up multiple avenues of resonant thematics and sumptuous delight.

Take, for example, another complicated food reference from the show, a passing moment—virtually a throwaway one—from the third season of the show: Tony has been explaining to Jennifer Melfi how he's had some memories of an early childhood antecedence to the panic attacks and fainting spells he's been experiencing from time to time as an adult. In particular, while looking at some old, wrapped-up cold cuts still in the refrigerator of his recently deceased mother, Livia, Tony flashed back to the time his small-time gangster dad used a meat cleaver to chop a finger off of the local butcher, Mr. Satriale, who was behind on his protection-money payments. As the flashback went on to reveal, young Tony had had his first fainting spell a little later when his mom put out for her family a roast that Mr. Satriale provided as a tribute offering to Tony's dad.

Working with Tony to get him to understand how his panic attacks tie in to a quite fraught family dynamic (to say the least!), Melfi makes an allusion that falls flat: meats, she tries to explain to Tony, are for him what the eating of a madeleine meant to Proust. When that name

garners no recognition from Tony, she explains that he was a French author who wrote a multivolume classic centered on the ways (in Melfi's words) "that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately of his entire life." Tony's reply: "This sounds very gay."

As I say, this is just a passing moment pulled from the many episodes that make up the experience of *The Sopranos*. It's even a relatively minor one. Elsewhere, Tony somehow stores up other bits of higher knowledge that Melfi imparts to him in order to employ them tactically, if somewhat distortedly, in other contexts of his daily life (as when he turned Melfi's mention of Cap d'Antibes into a reference to "Captain Teebs"), but the Proust reference is never touched on again. True, Mafia homophobia becomes a central motif in season 6 when one underling, the aforementioned Vito, is discovered to be gay and eventually is killed brutally for that seeming affront to Mafia codes. But while Tony's response to Melfi is in keeping with a distrust of supposedly aberrant masculinities expressed across the show's seasons by the macho men of the Mafia, it doesn't contribute in any stated way to a further articulation of that distrust. Melfi's learned allusion and Tony's disdainful response flit up and float away in relative insignificance, and the show moves on.

Even if the interchange in Melfi's office doesn't do anything for the show's narratives, it is in keeping with motifs that float through *The Sopranos*, season after season. For example, the very fact that Tony's panic attacks are linked to meat fits with the series' constant concern with food and acts of eating. For all its emphasis on men going about their cold business of crime and killing, *The Sopranos* is also very much about the moments when even hardened tough guys (as well as others in their world) pause for consumption of comestibles and frequently comment at length on their gustatory likes and dislikes. The gang members of *The Sopranos* eat meals together *a lot*. *The Godfather* famously includes a scene where, with the Corleone family at war, one Mafia soldier, Clemenza, showed his confreres the best way to make a pasta sauce; the implication was that this was a special occurrence, and that the man's presence in the kitchen was legitimated by the particular fact of the family being at war. In *The Sopranos*, in contrast, food is everywhere, and even the nastiest of tough guys can find time to enjoy culinary delights from preparation to consumption. Thus, in season 3, it seems a

Masculine metrosexuality? Aprons, pasta, and a good gun.

veritable comment on the ways cooking has been naturalized as a man's activity in our metrosexual times when the unbelievably vicious Ralph Cifaretto (Joe Pantoliano) is seen in an apron in the kitchen making pasta. The comic incongruity of the scene is all the more intensified when a young would-be hood, Jackie Aprile Jr. (Jason Cerbone), comes to ask Ralph (who is dating Jackie's mom) for a gun, and the two men discuss the relative merit of various pistols while Ralph, in apron, continues preparing the evening's dinner.

Even as it doesn't make a major contribution to the ongoing progression of the show's narrative (or multiplicity of narratives), the Proust moment qua moment does seem representative of the particular experience of *The Sopranos* as a television show. At the very least, we might want to note how the scene embodies many of the aesthetic virtues on display through the many seasons of the series. In fact, my quoting of the dialogue can't convey the qualities of acting, pacing, and composition that pervade this scene, like others from the show, but which are difficult to distill using our available vocabularies of aesthetic discernment. There is, for instance, a seeming rightness of acting style of a sort that makes *The Sopranos* stand out—a rightness in timing, in emotional

control and range, in the way one actor plays off against another, and so on. Interestingly, while the acting on *The Sopranos* probably most approximates what we might think of as a realist mode, with some debt to the repressed emotionalism and stumbling expressiveness of method acting (a debt referred to explicitly in an episode in season 2 when Christopher takes an acting class and performs the final scene from James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause*), the acting styles in *The Sopranos* can be broader than that and include performances at the limit of caricature and the grotesque. For example, Silvio Dante and Paulie Walnuts are played as cartoon figures almost, joke versions of the gangster cliché. Revealingly, though, the intrusions of unrealism that these characters bring to the show never seem damaging and themselves become delectable moments, throwaway bits that bob up in the course of the show and are absorbed with the rest.

In fact, it may be an inconsistency—in acting but also in visual style, in subject, in morality, in meaning—that is more defining of the experience of *The Sopranos* than its adherence to any one particular set of virtues in these areas. Thus, as with the acting styles, we might note the show's stylistically skillful navigation of a range of temporalities in its unfolding of scenes; this is a series that cannot just luxuriate in longueurs of pacing (as in the pauses and unspoken moments of reflection and hesitation in Melfi's office) but can also master the freshness of quick repartee, the striking comeback. The Proust scene is about snappy dialogue, but at the same time it is also about the ironies of a gangster show, filled with brutal killings, taking time to have its own Proustian moment.

For some viewers, those ironies can include the fact that Tony, who's never heard of Proust, still guesses correctly at his sexuality: Marcel Proust indeed *was* gay, and maybe liking little tea cookies and then spending a lifetime to write about the delectation of them does, in fact, fit a certain gay lifestyle. The sometimes intellectually superior Melfi name-drops a reference that goes by the brutish Tony, but he, in his naiveté, still cuts through the high-culture fancy and grabs the truth of the matter. But the ironies then would include the fact that the viewer who gets the reference—and clearly the makers of the show hoped there

would be many such viewers—can both feel superior to Tony *and* be impressed by his talent at clearing away the verbiage and getting to the core of the situation. The target viewer for *The Sopranos* is probably more like Jennifer Melfi than Tony Soprano (and like her, probably hasn't so much actually read Proust as learned the madeleine reference in passing and internalized it as cultural capital), yet this scene—like many others—shifts our admiration from the pretentious upscale urban professional to the street-smart tough guy. Like the sushi motif that opens season 6, the Proust exchange is not only about the characters in the fiction but about us as viewers—what we expect of this gangster story and what it expects of us.

Again, this scene is a minor one. But *The Sopranos* is adept at making even the most throwaway moment seem all-consuming and all-important as it passes over the television screen. In fact, the world of *The Sopranos* is one in which the ostensibly minor can turn out to be major, or vice versa. At the broadest level, the overall structure of the show, with Tony's constant moving back and forth between the consequential issues of gangster life and the fraught problems of domesticity, raises the questions of significance and insignificance. To cite two of the dilemmas from an episode in season 6, which matters more: that one of your capos has been killed by a rival, or that your son has gotten fired from his job at Blockbuster Video? But, at a more local level, individual moments of the show are themselves often about little things that turn out to be quite consequential (and vice versa). This is a world where, to take another example, a seemingly forgettable joke, made in the hazy booziness of the moment, can sink into the consciousness of an injured party and almost lead to the whacking of the jokester gangster. Likewise, this is a world in which a glance, a twitch of the eye, a turning of the corner of the mouth can seal an entire fate. And the show self-reflexively comments on this: in an episode from season 4, one of Christopher's underlings thinks he has gotten a subtle look from Chris authorizing him to steal materials from a construction site, only to be admonished by Christopher: "A look? So now you're a fucking mind reader now?" In her work as a therapist, Jennifer Melfi serves as a professional reader of people's personalities, but the gangster world of the show also asks its

mobsters to be readers who pore attentively over each little gesture and look to discern the motives and meanings of others. It likewise asks that of the viewer.

And if the show is so often about little things that turn out to have big consequences, the reverse can also be the case: something that appears initially to matter a lot can turn out to be irrelevant. In addition to plot lines that disappear (when, for instance, does Meadow actually break up with her cloying boyfriend Finn?), there are others that peter out in clearly calculated fashion. Most famously, season 3 begins with, and then devotes parts of subsequent episodes to, the FBI's attempt to install a bugged lamp in Tony Soprano's home. There are long sequences devoted to the planning of the intrusion into the house (which involves, through sequences presented by cross-cutting, the FBI's making sure that each and every member of the Soprano household is away and accounted for), to an aborted first attempt, to a successful second entry, and to the firing up of the surveillance equipment as it is put into regular operation. Along the way, it could be noted, the bugging subplot includes a strong example of something seemingly insignificant turning out to be significant: as they prepare the first time around to figure out where they will install the bugging device, the FBI agents study footage of the Soprano house that was shot clandestinely, and they laugh derisively when they notice that the water heater is rusting out and about to break down, little knowing that when this soon happens, it will cause a household emergency that will require the first attempted surveillance mission to be aborted.

But the subplot also dramatizes how the significant can turn insignificant. Suddenly, several episodes into the season, Meadow decides to take the lamp with her to her dorm room at Columbia. As the FBI buggers listen helplessly into their headphones, her seemingly innocent action terminates their surveillance. Abruptly, a narrative line that opened the season, and that has had a lot of time devoted to it, dies. Vaguely, to be sure, it feeds into a new narrative line—in which the FBI now decide to get insider information by having an FBI agent infiltrate the gangster milieu by befriending Christopher's girlfriend, Adriana—but in itself it has the quality of a prank perpetrated on viewers' investment in narrative buildup and suspense.

The joke here is both on the FBI and on viewers, who eagerly have gotten into the new season through the surveillance plot line. And, no doubt, for the time that plot line endures, it is delectable. It has humor (the FBI comes up with funny code names for each of the Soprano family members, such as "Baby Bing" for A. J. and "Princess Bing" for Meadow), it has titillation (we, along with the FBI, spy through binoculars on the comely Adriana in a skimpy tennis outfit), it has suspense, it has a seductive pacing and tonal weirdness (the intrusion and the installation of the device are scored to the "Peter Gunn" theme and the song by the Police, "Every Breath You Take"). Even as it extends over time and constitutes a self-contained comic mini-narrative with setup and punch line, a subplot such as this stands as one more discrete moment from the show, enjoyable in its own right and only moving the story forward in the most minimal of ways.