



**CULINARY EPISTEMOLOGY AND CULTURAL MNEMONICS IN
STEPHEN CHBOSKY’S NONNAS (2025)**

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ABSTRACT

This paper “Culinary Epistemology and Cultural Mnemonics in Stephen Chbosky’s *Nonnas* (2025)” explores how the embodied practice of culinary epistemology function as a counter hegemonic archive in reclaiming the past and the formation of a cultural identity against the homogenizing forces of assimilation in America. Directed by Stephen Chbosky, *Nonnas* is a culinary narrative in which food surpasses its role as a spectacle and becomes the medium through which intergenerational memory, grief and cultural identity are mediated. This paper analyses how the culinary memory of the nonnas (real-life Italian grandmothers) who are the custodians of cultural knowledge – ethnic Italian recipes help the protagonist Joe Scaravella in establishing an Italian restaurant “Enoteca Maria” in memory of his late mother at Staten Island in New York. Drawing on the theoretical framework of David E. Sutton (*Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*) this study exposes the relationship between culinary memory and cultural identity. In locating *Nonnas* within the broader framework of culinary cinema, this article presents the movie as a cultural text in which the embodied culinary practice is directly linked with reclaiming the past as well as the cultural identity of the protagonist.

Introduction

Culinary cinema has emerged as a distinct genre over the past few decades with significant contributions to world cinema. It is Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) that created one of cinema's most famous culinary moments – making a soup out of his own boiled shoe. As time progressed, movies began to view food and dining more seriously and symbolically in relation with art, religion and politics. The 1970s and 1980s emerged as a fertile ground for the culinary films with explorations in the field of memory, individuality and cultural belonging. Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) was a disruption of traditional wisdom around eating and life. *Tampopo* (1985) directed by Juzo Itami put sex, birth, death and love – all intertwined around the central theme of cooking and eating. *Babette's Feast* (1987) by Gabriel Axel portrayed cooking as an act of sacrifice and self-expression, showcasing how a carefully prepared meal can heal and transform a community.

The 1990's embraced culinary act as a powerful bridge that connects generations and cultures. Films like *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) by Wayne Wang and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) by Ang Lee delineated on screen the ups and downs of family, tradition and modernity through cooking which acts as the central force that unites various lives. *Big Night* (1996) by Campbell Scott and Stanley Tucci captures the struggle between authentic Italian heritage and the demands of American customers. The twenty first century is noted for its obsession with the inner workings of professional kitchens. Lasse Hallstrom's *Chocolate* (2000) operates on the Proustian madeleine-logic and Brad Bird's *Ratatouille* (2007) is all about embracing one's passions and challenging traditional expectations. *Julie and Julia* (2007) by Nora Ephron deals with self-discovery and empowerment through culinary practice. If Jon Favreau's *Chef* (2014) portrays how the chef Roshan Karla sets out to find the true source of happiness and reignite his passion for food *The Menu* (2022) by Mark Mylod is all about the commodification of culinary art. *The Hunger* (2023), a Thai drama reveals the socio-economic kitchen hierarchies in a very intense way. Stephen Chbosky's, *Nonnas* (2025) is a culinary narrative where a restaurant-kitchen is staffed not by professional chefs but by real life nonnas or Italian grandmothers who prepare ethnic Italian food from memory.

Culinary narrative refers to a mode of storytelling where food preparation and consumption are not images employed metaphorically but constitute the symbolic framework through which characters and their identities are continuously evolved and negotiated. Preparation and sharing of food has been used in culinary movies variously across the world exploring themes of cultural transmission, integration and assimilation. Stephen Chbosky's, *Nonnas* belongs to this tradition where the practice of cooking; an “embodied practice” (Sutton 17) acts as a means of recovering cultural identity. *Nonnas*, a feel-good comedy drama based on real life written by Liz Maccie, is released on Netflix in 2025. It is based on the life of Mr. Jody Scaravella, the owner of the Italian restaurant ‘Enoteca Maria’ opened on Staten Island in New York in 2007 in memory of his late mother and grandmother. Scaravella staffed ‘Enoteca Maria’ with a group of Italian American grandmothers or nonnas from different cities of Italy to serve as culinary instructors. “‘Enoteca’ translates to ‘wine shop’. It's used to describe a restaurant where familial merriment typically will include wine. In *Nonnas*, it's one half of Joey's prized establishment's name: Enoteca Maria” observes Brookie McIlvaine in the news “*Nonnas: Everything to Know about the Feel- Good Movie Based on a True story.*”

The film, released on Netflix on 9th May 2025, received wide critical acclaim from various parts of the world. *The Guardian* rates it as “a simple yet satisfying fact-based crowd pleaser.” Film critic Ashley Hajimirsadeghi describes it as “a mass appeal movie, which is fine at the end of the day.” N M Miller reviews it as “a pure comfort meal” that “honours those we have lost” and celebrates “the wisdom of our elders.” Sherin Nicole of Roger Ebert review observes: “It's the kind of story that reminds us we can heal through connections to the past and each other.” Dr. Thomas J West of *Omnivorous* observes it as a film that is “about the healing power of food.” “It is just one of those films that you find yourself willing to lose yourself in.” Carlos Aguilar of *Variety* calls it “a pleasant cooking comedy” where “the unifying force of a home cooked meal” functions as “an embodiment of community.”

The film opens with a flashback sequence forty years before in Brooklyn where Joe's younger self orders bread and zeppole (deep-fried treats) but he finishes the zeppole before he reaches home.

Then it shifts to a culinary scene in the kitchen where his mother and grandmother do the cooking: chopping, stirring and tasting in a pleasant manner while little Joe observes them curiously from the doorway. The scene is warm, golden-lit to convey the feeling of nostalgia. The women express their love to the boy through the dishes they make, especially the Sunday gravy made by the grandmother. The women exchange culinary knowledge through bodily practice, reminding us of what David E. Sutton observed in his *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*: “Cooking could be spoken of as an ‘embodied apprenticeship’ in contrast to a formal learning mediated through cookbooks and written recipes” (125). Soon the camera shifts to the present when everyone has left the funeral of his mother, it’s the dishes they prepared for him that remain “edible manifestations of their affection”, observes Aguilar in his review on *Nonnas*. Joe misses his late mother and grandmother but what he misses more is the synesthesia of the Sunday Gravy made with love by his grandmother for him. He feels himself alienated and in an effort to reconnect with his roots – his past – he resorts to cooking as a means to escape from his grief or to heal himself with generations-old recipes, but still he fails to replicate the dishes perfectly. He visits his mother’s best friend Roberta in her care home and she hands him a letter from his mother that he refuses to open till he’s prepared to do so.

While visiting a childhood market on Staten Island, Joe meets with his old friend Olivia and her neighbour Antonella, who was choosing ripe tomatoes from the local vendor, and they renew their old ties. He decides to open a restaurant with the inheritance his mother has left behind and to staff the kitchen with grandmothers who are from different parts of Italy. He buys an old restaurant space on Staten Island and renovates it with the help of his friend Bruno and his wife Stella. He convinces Roberta to be one of the chefs in the restaurant which he names as ‘Enoteca Maria’ in memory of his late mother. Olivia forces Antonella to join the restaurant crew and later Gia, a hair dresser and Teresa, a former nun join the squad voluntarily. The women brought with them a living cultural archive of their culinary knowledge. They represent various parts of Italy – Roberta, a proud Sicilian, is from Sicily, Antonella, feisty about her Bolognian roots, is from Bologna and Teresa from Bronx. They work together in the kitchen as a family with occasional quarrels and shouts of joy. Joe has risked his job as an MTA mechanic and the restaurant fails to bring customers as he had expected. Joe finally decides to quit the business and they throw a large party with all the available food in the kitchen. The restaurant gets a glowing review from the critic Edward Durant that makes the restaurant a great success. Joe and Olivia joins as a couple and the film ends on notes of love and cultural wisdom.

Nonnas is a film that places food preparation at the intersection of grief, memory and cultural belonging. This study intends to analyse the movie using the theoretical framework put forward by the anthropologist David E. Sutton as expressed in his *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Sutton’s interest is in the study of relation between food and memories which are “more embodied than verbal or textual” (12). His anthropological framework argues that food is not merely a sustenance but a powerful mnemonics capable of reflecting one’s identity, class distinction and, culture. He observes:

Food in the view of both Mary Douglas and those working on ethnicity, is a particularly good ‘boundary marker’ perhaps because it provides a potent symbol of the ability to transform the outside into the inside. In more current terminology food is about identity creation and maintenance, whether that identity be national, ethnic, class or gender-based. (5)

“Food can hide powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian” (3). He continues:

Unlike other cultural domains, such as kinship, ritual and religion, exchange or politics, food doesn’t have its own well developed specialist terminology and tools of analysis. The uses and meanings of food can on the one hand seem trivial to those who live by the maxim “food as fuel,” while on the other hand it seems a topic where “native exegesis” can be as perceptive as specialist knowledge. (3) He argues that food is a powerful vehicle for memory – both individual and collective – operating through embodied, multi-sensory and structural ways. In his “Introduction: A Proustian Anthropology” he surveys the studies on food carried out by various scholars including Mary Douglas, Sidney Mintz, Jack Goody among others in relation to identity, class, gender and ethnicity

but they neglected its historical consciousness or its relation to memory. He traces the anthropological studies on memory carried out by Maurice Halbwachs (Collective Memory), Paul Connerton (How Societies Remember), Pierre Nora ('spaces of memory'), Lambek and Antze etc. but identifies neither of them has successfully associated food with memory. He argues:

The ability of food to both generate subjective commentary and encode powerful meanings would seemingly make it ideal to wed to the topic of memory. Memory and its oft forgotten alter-ego "forgetting" generate popular interest and commentary while simultaneously encoding hidden meanings. Like food, memory is clearly linked to issues of identity: gender, class and other. (6)

Sutton draws on Connerton's distinction between "inscribing practices" (written or textual) and "incorporating practices" (bodily, performative) to argue that food memory belongs to incorporating practices. Sutton insists that food memories are "sedimented in the body" through practices of preparation, consumption and exchange of food. He says:

Connerton draws our attention to the importance of these other types of memories that can be found "sedimented in the body" in a way similar to what Bourdieu, always cryptically, refers to as "bodily hexis" or the work of culture through time on posture, gesture and other bodily practices. (12)

Paul Connerton in his *How Societies Remember* (1989), a monumental work in the field of cultural memory/collective memory, insists that societies remember through bodily practices. He coins the term 'habit memory' for a more "embodied view of ritual performance" which is transmitted through repetition and performance (Sutton 12). The nonnas' culinary knowledge is embodied – transmitted through bodily practices, postures and gestures. They work in the kitchen rhythmically with their hands, memorising what they have learned from their mothers and grandmothers. They are passing down generations of cultural wisdom through their measured movements in the kitchen. Their embodied expertise is clearly visible even when they knead the dough, chop vegetables or stir the sauce in the kitchen of Enoteca Maria. In "Doing/Reading Cooking" he discusses culinary epistemology as a form of embodied memory practice and cooking as "cultural reproduction" (125).

Sutton draws on Luce Giard's phenomenology of cooking:

Giard writes of the gestures of cooking as mobilizing the resources of the body as well as of the mind. Cooking requires the knacks both of doing and of planning. It calls on bodily rhythms: "Whether it is done with a tool (chopping an onion with a small knife) or with the bare hand (kneading bread dough), the technical gestures call for an entire mobilization of the body, translated by the moving of the hand, of the arm, sometimes of the entire body swinging in cadence to the rhythm of successive efforts demanded by the task at hand" (Giard 202). (127)

The transmission of culinary epistemology is possible only through bodily practices; not through any cook books or written recipes. The nonnas quarrel, they resolve, they encourage one another, they taste the food they make – all these interactions fall under the embodied practice of a culinary epistemology. They are recreating their traditional culture through the ethnic recipes. They are living archives – repositories of embodied knowledge that can be transmitted only through a direct bodily performance. The food they make is a mnemonics of culture – a reminder of the culture they belong to. The restaurant kitchen is not only a site of "cultural reproduction" but a site of cultural preservation (Sutton 125).

In "The Ritual and the Everyday" Sutton introduces the concept of 'prospective memory' a culturally elaborated notion of memories in association with food as he observes:

Food structures temporal rhythms not just objectively, by placing constraints on people's lives, but also subjectively, as people actively look forward to meals while at the same time looking backward to past meals and "prospectively remembering" the special meals, the Easter feast in the midst of the Lenten fast. (16)

He observes that every meal is constructed as an 'event' – part of a cultural process where one meal recalls the other and the role of analogy and memory are the very basis of this cultural process. People remember meals as whole events and each meal is remembered in terms of its repetition and novelty. Joe misses the Sunday gravy, the past meal he cherishes in his mind and tries to recreate it from memory, though he fails. He says: "Lately I have been going through all my mom and nonna's dishes – the ones I remember and just making them one by one. I have gotten close to a few, but it's my nonna's Sunday gravy; I really wish I could figure that one out" (1:40:45 – 1:40:34). Each

meal is at once a new event and a repetition of the past in the restaurant of Joe. The restaurant emerges as a space where multiple temporalities converge and clash. We can call it a heterotopia of compensation with heterochronies in the Foucauldian phenomenology. The past, present and future exist in the restaurant kitchen: the individual pasts of the nonnas and Joe, the collective cultural past of ethnic Italian recipes, the immediate present at the restaurant and the future is in the food they are making for the customers. To compensate the loss of 'home', Joe plans to start a restaurant – the nonnas in the kitchen with their traditional Italian recipes function as mnemonics of a lost past rooted in Italian tradition. He says: "I want the entire place to feel more like someone's house than a restaurant" (1:31:57 – 1:31:55).

The opening of the restaurant itself is a prospective memory act for the future using past knowledge. It's the place where Joe actively look forward to producing meals: the recreation of authentic Italian recipes. Simultaneously Joe wishes a re-enactment of his domestic kitchen with a recreation of Sunday gravy. The past meals that are already forgotten in the immigrant kitchen finds a space of its own in Jo's restaurant kitchen. The capuzzelle – a Sicilian speciality made from either lamb or sheep's head with the intention that no part of the animal goes to waste is one such dish that nonna Roberta introduces from her memory to Enoteca Maria and while at first it causes an oven fire, it ends up being a crowd favourite. Though at first the nonnas and Joe were sceptical in adding the dish to the menu, Roberta was very adamant in preparing and presenting it as she was very proud of her culinary tradition. She wants to uphold her cultural identity through the dish when she fiercely claims, "Capuzzelle is from my family village. Capuzzelle is my identity" (1:14:04 – 1:14:00). Each dish they prepare carry the burden of the cultural past. They carry the prospective memories of the past as well as future.

In "Sensory Memory and the Construction of 'Worlds'" Sutton claims food as a cultural site. The quality that makes food a powerful medium for memory is nothing other than 'synesthesia'. He identifies 'synesthesia' as the key aspect of the embodied practice of eating. He says: "I argue that food's memory power derives in part from synesthesia, which I take to mean the synthesis or crossing of experiences from different sensory registers (i.e., taste, smell, hearing)" (17). It's the synthesis of the senses one experiences while eating. He develops this through James Fernandez's theory of "returning to the whole." He argues:

But the union of the senses is not only a metaphor for social wholeness, as this last quotation suggests (cf. Fernandez 1988); it is an embodied aspect of creating the experience of the whole. Food is not a random part that recalls the whole to memory. Its synesthetic qualities, when culturally elaborated as they are in Greece, are an essential ingredient in ritual and everyday experiences of totality. (98)

Food not only symbolizes social bonds and divisions but participates in their creation and recreation as well. The union of the senses in synesthesia has a powerful impact as they do not merely recall the past moment but reconstitute an entire field of social experience. He says:

There is no need to counterpoise the senses in this way, since I have argued that the experience of food in Greece is cultivated synesthetically and emotionally, so that eating food from home becomes a particularly marked cultural site for the re-imagining of "worlds" displaced in space and/or time. (102)

In the flashback kitchen scene of the movie, the young Joe watches curiously the cooking of his mother and nonna. When his nonna was making the Sunday gravy, little Joe joins her and asks her about the quantity of ingredients used to which she replies, "You feel in your heart, you put in your heart" (1:50:40 – 1:50:35). She gives him a basil leaf, a common kitchen staple, to smell before it is put into the gravy. His nonna's Sunday gravy is perfect as it appeals to the senses: sight, smell and taste. When Jo recreates it from his memory years after her death what he misses is the synesthesia; the synthesis of sensory registers associated with it. Sutton remarks:

I would suggest that taste- and smell-scapes, what Rozin and Rozin describe as the different "flavor principles" that go into making up different cuisines, present the mental "images" of desired outcomes with which a cook works in making constant adjustments in the process of cooking. (130)

When he brings the nonnas to the restaurant kitchen he intends to bring back the synesthetic experience of ethnic Italian recipes. Sutton is of the opinion that cooking could be seen as the type

of ‘practical knowledge’ that draws upon “repertoires of memories and imaginations” (127). As it relies on tradition, it is a “balancing of memories and expectations” (127). Jo fails to recover the Sunday gravy though he eventually discovers it from his mother’s written recipes at the end. But the taste it produced is not identical with the one he had experienced in the past not because of the proportion of the ingredients he put in it but because of the lack of synesthesia: the synthesis of the senses and the memory associated with it. The nonnas offer him not a recovery of the past as a whole but a comfort that can sustain his present.

Connerton points us to ritual actions that reminds the past by celebrating a pattern, expressing “a wish to repeat the past consciously, to find significance in celebrated recurrence” (63). Sutton identifies ritual as “the key site where food and memory come together” (19). Sunday meal is almost like a ritual that is part of their routine as it recurs every Sunday. It is made during the family gatherings they organise. It’s a meal around which their Italian-American identity has been created. This ritualistic chain is broken when his mother is dead. All the din and bustle in the kitchen are stopped. Joe misses the rhythm of cooking and it is to reproduce the ritualistic memory of the Sunday Gravy he hires the nonnas in the kitchen of his restaurant. It’s an attempt to regain the lost rhythm of cooking: an attempt to fill the gaps and silences in his life – an attempt to find the anchor to his decentralised life. It’s an effort to find his space in the cultural continuum – finding spaces for collective memory. In “Remembered Gifts, Forgotten Commodities?” Sutton argues: “For the moment we can turn to the Greek materials to develop these points in examining the dual attention to the preparation and giving of food, specifically because they are seen as potential sites for the promotion of memory” (47).

Joe wishes to recreate the lost feeling of joy and comfort of his mother’s kitchen in the restaurant in its original form with the culinary expertise of the nonnas: a ‘restorative nostalgia’ as Svetlana Boym puts forward in her *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). He tells the nonnas before they are introduced to the restaurant kitchen, “Just have fun and cook like you are cooking for your own family, all right? The kitchen is yours” (1:21:07 – 1:21:04). The restaurant acts as a nostalgic reclamation of the comfort of the lost ‘home’ when Joe says:

I am going through my mom and Nonna’s recipes and I am like “what is going on here? Why am I searching so hard? And then I realised that food is love. As long as I have their food, I’m gonna have them. I really do want the place to be about more than just serving someone dinner. I really, really want this place to feel like family” (1:31:42 – 1:31:25).

Sutton discusses the gendered dimensions of food memory when he says, “Women’s control of food has been claimed as a key source of female power” (25). As cooking represents control, it gives power for women. As Carol Field describes in *In Nonna’s Kitchen*, “They [the grandmothers] are the connection to a way of life that is gradually being lost in Italy, and when they are gone, that link will disappear with them” (3). Field calls these nonnas, the “keepers of memory” and “a link to an earlier time in the country’s past” (2). It’s this link that Joe can’t afford to lose and he tries to reconnect with his own past through a synesthetic re-enactment of his mother’s kitchen in *Enoteca Maria*. He says: “Nonnas, other real-life Italian grandmothers, that’s who. I want them to make dishes that were passed on from their family and I wanna share it with everybody” (1:31:12 – 1:31:04).

The four nonnas in the film: Roberta, Antonella, Teresa and Gia reclaim their lost agency through cooking in the kitchen of *Enoteca Maria*. They are part of a living cultural archive; a social framework. They are bearers of cultural knowledge that can be transmitted only through practice as they cook from memory. As the title suggests, the film posits the old women with their unparalleled culinary knowledge at its centre. Their ambivalent position – they are at once at the centre with the weight of their cultural knowledge but marginalised from the mainstream as they are aged – makes them more visible to the viewers. By placing the embodied cultural knowledge of the nonnas at the centre, it stresses on authenticity as an interesting feature of current culinary discourse.

The nonnas bring to the shared kitchen the varied culinary traditions of different Italian regions – Sicily, Bologna etc. They are different from one another and they mediate the difference through the dishes they make from memory. Roberta, a proud Sicilian is introduced as cantankerous and resistant to Joe’s idea of cooking at first. Antonella is a widow who’s in active dialogue with her late

husband. Teresa, a retired nun, is a pious woman. Gia, a hairdresser by profession is the baker among the four. The mnemonics of culture manifested through their dishes with authenticity marks their expertise in the field of culinary epistemology. Roberta's Sicilian cooking (capuzzelle) with its bold flavours, Antonella's dishes with visual appeal, Teresa's Venitian recipes and Gia's desserts encode histories of regional variation that define ethnic Italian cuisine. These women find their lost agency in life through cooking in Enoteca Maria. They assert their identity through the bodily activity of cooking. They open their heart and speak with frankness when they gather at Gia's saloon for a makeover. The stories they carry with them about their lives, desires and sorrows fade away in the kitchen when they cook.

They celebrate their knowledge that was not an apriori of knowledge till then. Antonella says: "He's not using me, he's celebrating me" (32:31). They celebrate their knowledge through mincing, chopping, stirring and baking. They motivate Joe not to give up his vision of running the restaurant: "The only thing at the end of the day that you are gonna regret is not the mistakes you make. You can make your peace and move on. You are gonna regret the moments that you did not take. And this is your moment, Joe" (31:06 – 30:56). When Antonella loses hope in the restaurant and blurts out, "No one care about us, about our cooking, about our stories, nobody cares. We are discarded old artifacts" (26:53 – 26:45), Roberta retorts, "I'm something here, this means something to me. I'm not discarded, and I don't feel discarded like you feel" (26:40 – 26:32). Teresa with her divine calmness make peace between the two by invoking nationalism: "We are not quitters. We do not walk away. We are intelligent, strong women. We are beautiful women with Italian blood in our souls. And we have been through too much together and I'm not gonna end this in anger" (26:18 – 26:09). Joe tells them to start cooking for the Sunday night as: "There's a lot of people out there waiting to experience your hearts. Ready?" (21:58 – 21:55). It's followed by scenes from the kitchen where the nonnas celebrate every act of cooking in a jovial way helping each other and tasting their dishes. They raise a toast saying: "Our nonnas would be proud. To our nonnas" (20:16). The movie ends on a positive note of the nonnas regaining their agency through cooking.

The film concludes with a documentary footage of the real Enoteca Maria and its real grandmothers from around the world. As a culinary narrative Nonnas occupies a prominent place within the genre of domestic kitchen narrative where culinary memory is directly linked with cultural identity. The embodied practice of cooking seems successful in preserving the culture and maintaining the cultural identity in an alien land. Food is encoded with cultural memories, both individual and collective. The relation between food and memory is unmistakably delineated in the movie that begins in feeding the grief and ends with feeding memories.

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