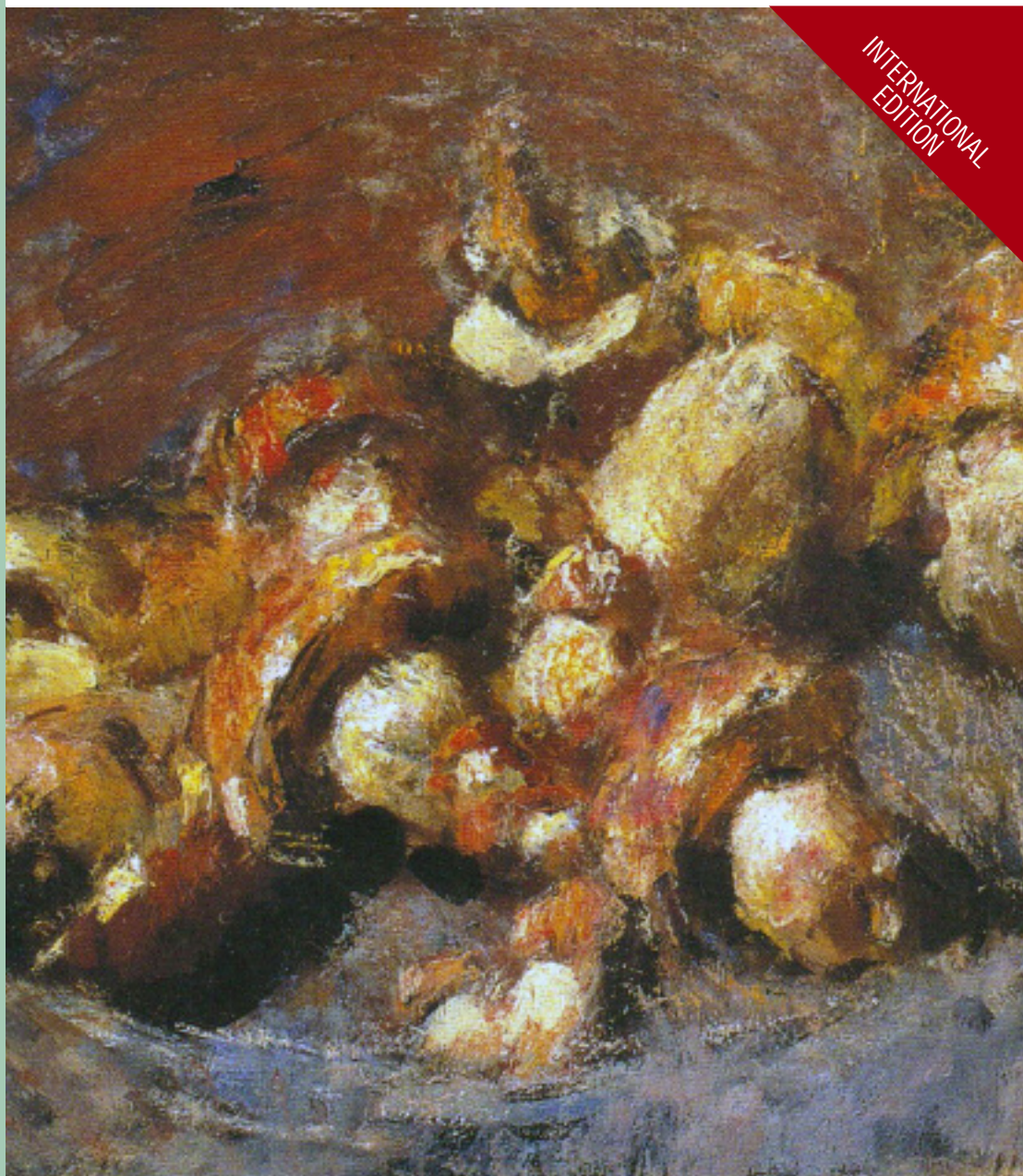


# CIVILTÀ TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL  
EDITION



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WHIT MASSIMO ALBERINI AND VINCENZO BUONASSISI.

## CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

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**On the cover:** detail from *Mushrooms* (oil on canvas, 1900-1905, from the Züst Gallery in Rancate) by the painter Adolfo Feragutti Visconti (1850-1924) from the Ticino. The exhibition *The Freedom of Painting*, dedicated to Visconti will be open through June 16 at the Villa dei Cedri Civic Museum in Bellinzona (Switzerland). The exhibition represents one of the stops along a descriptive journey that the museum has dedicated to the understanding and appreciation of the paintings bridging the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Feragutti Visconti (who became an Italian citizen in 1888) is considered to be one of the greatest Ticinese artists working at the turn of the century and this anthological exhibition represents a broad examination of his extraordinary artistic gifts as well as his poetry. The exhibit contains a selection of more than 80 works (30 of which have only recently come to light) documenting excellent examples of the artist's work, whose breadth is especially evident in a series of still lifes. The piece chosen for the cover is one such example. Within this particular genre one of Feragutti's favorite subjects were grapes, an iconographic theme that would recur in various versions over at least two decades. Some outstanding examples include *Grapes for Vin Santo*, presented in Venice in 1887, and the splendid diptych *White Grapes and Black Grapes*, both of which are included in the exposition.

# Fear of Food

**BY GIOVANNI BALLARINI**  
*President of the Academy*

*The table has been transformed from a place of joy to a place of fear. It is the Academy's job to bring confidence, joy, and celebration back to the table.*

According to legend, one evening many centuries ago Dante Alighieri was strolling through the main square of Florence when a young man asked him what he thought was the best food. "The egg", the great poet replied without hesitation. A year passed and Dante was once again walking in the same piazza, when the same young man approached him, and with no preamble said to him, "With what?" Demonstrating an incredible memory, the poet immediately replied "With salt."

In Dante's time, and for many centuries if not millennia, eggs and salt were considered not only delicious foods, but to some extent, indispensable ones. Many symbols have been attributed to eggs and hundreds, perhaps thousands of ways to prepare them have been invented; in all civilizations eggs became an indispensable element of gastronomy. Science has deemed the egg's protein to be the paragon of ideal nutritious food. Man cannot survive without salt and owing to its nutritional importance wars have been fought over it, commerce has flourished, and it has been subject to taxation.

Today speaking of eggs and salt is akin to speaking of the devil.

After the discovery of cholesterol and blood pressure, eggs and salt were no longer considered to be beneficial, but instead were deemed to be dangerous foods that inspired health-related fears. The same is true for many other foods, and the list grows longer every day.

Not a day goes by that this food or that food is not criminalized; the list of healthy foods has grown shorter

and now we don't know what to eat anymore. Since we began to test it, even our drinking water inspires fear, not to mention wine and many other beverages.

We have entered the era of nutritional fear, which paradoxically coincides with an era of nutritional abundance and variety. The more foods we have and the more varied they are, the more widespread and intense our fear.

It is not only chemicals that frighten us, but the chemists themselves, who find chemicals everywhere and in everything, even in infinitesimal and therefore insignificant amounts. If we dispassionately examine our present day nutrition, we must recognize that the food we eat today is safer than ever, yet we are more afraid of it than ever!

Are these fears legitimate nutritional concerns or urban legends? Fear about food itself or the amount of it we consume? Fears owing to our ignorance in understanding and interpreting scientific data? Fears about the use of foods or about our lifestyles? Or fears that simply arose as a part of an irrational refusal to accept new things?

Many food-related concerns are the stuff of urban legends, and are a consequence of our having forgotten what the appropriate quantities are, and that any food can be dangerous when consumed in excess. The ancients told us "It's the dosage that determines the poison"! Other fears derive from the uncertainty we face when confronted by the loss of our traditions that, for better or worse, confidently told us what and how much to eat.

In many cases our fears are caused

by not understanding how badly we use otherwise healthy foods! It is not fat and sugar, especially since today their production is carefully controlled, that are dangerous in and of themselves, but the amounts and ways in which we use them.

In industrialized countries such as ours, what should concern us is the

excessive consumption of healthy foods that makes us gain weight, particularly those among us who do not exercise.

Many health problems could be resolved by a return to a nutritional style and recipes that promote moderation, less time spent in front of the televisions or in cars, more physical

activity and maybe even a little bit of hunger.

As Academicians, a better understanding of our traditions and actual nutritional conditions could bring us back to a table that is a place not of fear, but of confidence, joy, and celebration.

**GIOVANNI BALLARINI**

**FOCUS** DI PAOLO PETRONI

## WHEN OUR RAGÙ STUMBLES OVER A HORSE

Every day there are more laws to protect us, more labels to inform us, more brand names that make guarantees - and yet we are increasingly duped. With alarming frequency we are bombarded by disturbing news about what we find at the market and in the foods that we are served. We have published a very successful book on the subject of *Falsification on the Table*: therein we listed numerous instances and many problems, but the reality exceeds even our wildest imaginations. Today we are injured, one might say, to counterfeit oils, mozzarella, wine, fish, and various cheeses; and to the scandals associated with the perverse dramas linked to mad cow disease and bird flu. And now we have the so-called "horse-gate". At one time the sale of horsemeat in equine butcher shops was common. Horsemeat was well regarded nutritionally; it was considered healthy for those suffering from anemia and for pregnant women. Later however, such butcher shops disappeared and the consumption of horsemeat became infrequent, almost vanishing completely except in some parts of the south. Or so it seemed. Instead we have discovered that 25 million kilos (55 million pounds) of horsemeat are produced in Italy each year, and that we are its major importer in Europe; in fact we import that same amount (primarily from Poland, Spain, France, Romania, Canada and Argentina) for a total consumption of almost 50 million kilos (110 million pounds). In practice this amounts to more than one kilo per person annually! All of this emerged after traces, but also often large amounts, of horsemeat were found in processed meat sauces, ravioli and meatballs. And when we say meat sauces, ravioli and meatballs it is the equivalent of saying "Italy", at least in gastronomic terms. It is important to clarify that in addition to this issue's potential health problems (the possible use of anti-inflammatory and unregulated doping medicines given to horses not destined to be butchered) we are faced with the very real nutritional fraud known as "falsification", which consists in the substitution of one product by a low-

er cost product. Evidently horsemeat is a good bargain, especially since in some countries there is little or no regulation associated with it. Naturally the buck-passing starts immediately: the large brand names blame the producer; who blames the raw material importer; who blames the slaughterhouse located who knows where. Current regulations require horse owners to choose whether their animal is "Destined for Alimentary Production" (DPA) or "Not Destined for Alimentary Production" (non-DPA). Declaring a horse to be non-DPA allows for much more freedom in the use of drugs like phenylbutazone. But it can - and does - happen that an animal that is no longer suited to the racecourse may be butchered and used for meat. To this issue we must add an ethical dilemma: Is a horse (or even a mule or donkey) today considered a domestic animal? An affectionate animal to be cherished like a dog or cat? The answer is a definitive "yes" according to animal welfare and environmental organizations. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but there is no doubt that we are surrounded by images of horses starting in childhood, first in fairy tales where the prince is mounted on his white horse, then in comic books and cowboys and Indians movies, in art, through paintings and equestrian monuments, and in sports and professional life. A relationship of devotion and understanding that was magnificently portrayed in *Warhorse*, a recent Spielberg film. A horse can be everything to us - except a meatball or a steak. But returning to our mission, can we hope to rescue ourselves from fraudulent foods? Unfortunately no. Certainly new laws will be imposed, and some loopholes will be plugged. Additional labeling will be required, and distribution will be more controlled. But there is nothing we can actually do about fraud - the industry is global and even the major brand names are not in a position to do anything. Their script will always contain the same old lines: "We are the first victims" and "There are no health risks". And so our fear of food will continue.

# The Refined Palate of Gabriel D'Annunzio

BY **LUISA BENEDETTI**  
*Academician, Biella Delegation*

*The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the poet who loved to say: "food contributes to peace of mind."*

The "art of cuisine" was the expression used by Gabriele D'Annunzio to describe his feelings before a table loaded with gorgeous foods, with high quality dishes that invited him to jot down his thoughts on small sheets of paper. The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great poet creates the opportunity for exhibitions, conferences, books and films to be presented in his birthplace, Pescara, and in those places that were dear to him. An important collection of the writer's works is kept in Biella, in the Caraccio Family Foundation at the City of Studies. The City of Biella will celebrate the anniversary through a series of special events. D'Annunzio was often and deliberately ignored in modern times, as he was considered out of fashion because of his complex personality and the politically difficult circumstances in which he lived. He was re-

cently rediscovered in all his various aspects, from his standing as a poet and essayist, to his role as a man of unquestionable value, unmitigated seducer and appreciator of all life's pleasures, including the genuine cuisine of his native land, the beloved region of Abruzzo that he extolled in his poems ("Ah, why am I not with my shepherds?").

The writings and documents of that epoch reveal two aspects of the poet from Pescara at the dinner table, as an inexhaustible glutton and for his great disposition to fasting. D'Annunzio distinguished himself on those two counts: he appreciated and remembered, with agonizing nostalgia, the endearing regional cuisine of his mother, Donna Luisa de Benedictis, but at the same time he insisted on fasting regularly for 48 hours, and even more, a habit that he displayed with unexpected endurance and



*D'Annunzio's and Carducci's love of fine dining as illustrated in a 1901 drawing by Nasica.*

method which stupefied the physicians who were treating him for stomach problems. "This is the way we cure ourselves in Abruzzo - he repeated with great conviction - allowing us to live one hundred years".

The years that he spent at the Vittoriale of Gardone Riviera, in the absolute beauty of a place that he had transformed into a royal palace and refuge, surrounded by an incredible wealth of souvenirs and precious antiquarian pieces that he collected around the world, were warmed, however, by the food stuffs that friends sent to him from his native Abruzzo: small hot sausages, the famous pecorino cheese with the black crust "that can roll along a boulevard in the playful fashion of a barrel"; the celebrated *Parrozzo*, a dessert that he named and publicized together with his pastry chef friend Luigi D'Amico ("sweeter than any sweet thing") and a pork roast that must have been exceptional since the Pope asked for it from Rome in spite of the availability of a similar pork roast from the Lazio region. All these foods inspired the poet when he wrote a few sonnets in his dialect, loaded with nostalgia: "I cannot say why my heart cries as I eat".

His personal cook, Albina Becevello, affectionately known as "suor Intingola" (Sister Gravy) or "Santa Cuciniera" (Saint Kitchener), tried to make him happy by accommodating his gastronomic memory. He sent her messages of thanks with writings such as "You will have a marble kitchen and a throne of fire". With special devotion, she served the courses that he preferred, mostly *frittatas* of all kinds. Eggs were an ap-

preciated food by the *Vate* (or Prophet, as D'Annunzio was known). He ate three or four of them when he broke his famous fast. The tradition of *frittata* is very much alive in Abruzzo today, especially in the famous crepes in broth (called "*scrippelle 'mbusse*" or in the style of Teramo) and in the delicious layered *pasticcio* with ragù.

Among the cherished foods of his mother's kitchen D'Annunzio will always remember the stewed fish and eel, the homemade cream and the almond crunch. And then there is famous pasta shaped by the "guitar" where the mass of dough is pressed through a harp, back and forth, by means of the rolling pin, and served with a mixed ragout or tiny meat balls; the small roasts of mutton, done on a grill, and baked lamb. To be sure, each meal was completed by fruit or dessert that the poet consumed with great relish; fruit salads of every type, stewed fruits, *marrons glacés* (candied chestnuts), pralines, ice cream (he was so crazy for ice cream that he once ate ten portions, one after the other); and Abruzzese crepes, a kind of soft wafer made with a hot iron mold. At midnight, the poet was fond of retiring to his study to read or write, and asked for stewed apples, English biscuits and milk.

On his desk a bowl full of chocolates was always present as he loved to offer them to his female guests. During dinners held at the Vittoriale, D'Annunzio offered "the most exquisite trifles", refined products indeed: asparagus, Grado's shrimps, venison, every kind of citrus, melon, berries and sweets. His taste for wines was lukewarm, if not hostile,

as little can be found about his consumption of wine. Only at the time of his residence in France that lasted two years he did not object to tasting Bordeaux and champagne and was even persuaded to take a few bottles back to Italy. Many witnesses claim that he was a teetotaler and a fierce defender of water whose virtues he proudly proclaimed: on the walls of his bathroom in the Vittoriale, a verse by Pyndarus declaimed in very large letters "Water is optima". He loved to drink water in any place and at any time, and knew how to appreciate the differences in its taste.

As one can imagine, D'Annunzio was proud of his well stocked table that reflected his keen personality and his taste, slightly excessive as it may have been: refined and expensive table linens tending to red and golden tones, hand blown glasses, lacquered and decorated, embossed silver plates, rare porcelain ("fitting for the foods") and in the center of the table, sumptuous sculptures mostly portraying turtles and stone festooned pheasants. He wanted the dining room to be exceedingly luminous. "I certainly do not think that it should be a convent refectory", he told the architect. At the completion of the work, he stated with satisfaction: "It is the only room devoid of sadness".

When he was not served promptly upon taking his seat at the table, his humor became foul. He did not enjoy going to restaurants, only the most typical and genuine *trattorias*, where he appreciated "the family spirit in which dishes were prepared". It was a special feature of a personality that hid a sensitive and sincere soul.

**LUISA BENEDETTI**

# The Garfagnana “Locals”

BY ALBAROSA LUCCHESI MOCCI  
Academician, Garfagnana-Val di  
Serchio Delegation

*In 2009, 2010 and 2012  
the “Dino Villani” prize  
was awarded to these  
three niche products  
from Garfagnana.*

**T***uada* is a hard artisanal pecorino, seasoned over six months on a beech board. It is produced exclusively in the alpine location of Soraggio, high in the Garfagnana valley, and its maturation takes place in an underground cellar, called a *tuada*, that gives the cheese its name. During the maturing phase, the cheese is wrapped in a cloth, or shirt, that protects it and allows humidity to caress it without damaging it. The forming containers are in the shape of high rimmed cylinders. The cheese releases a “wild” taste that is associated with sheep’s milk but little by little milder aromas emerge redolent of pressed grass, walnut and wood. The melting paste envelops the palate with a strong sapidity with-

out overcoming other flavors while adding a slightly pungent residue at the tail end of tasting. Like all pecorinos, it is relatively easy to slice with a thick blade. It makes a great impression when served on a board with salami, savory vegetable cream and slices of bread. It is also excellent grated, both served over pasta or used as filling for ravioli. For a very different and unique taste, it can be served with sweet orange preserves.

*Biroldo*, the product of a centuries old butchering tradition in the Garfagnana, a pristine mountainous region in the province of Lucca, is the only locally produced salami that is made exclusively from the head of the pig, whose meat is very lean and endows the final product with softness and delicacy. The spices used to season the stuffing made of meat and blood may vary, but never include the pine nuts which are typical of the *biroldo* of Lucca. The recipe is not a difficult one but it requires great dexterity and skillful care to produce the correct final product. The pig’s head is boiled for about three hours then carefully deboned. One then adds a small amount of blood, pieces of heart and tongue, small cubes of lard and spices: wild fennel is never absent, but cloves, cinnamon, coriander, and star anise may also be used, depending on the place of production. The stuffing is then placed into the pig’s stomach or bladder (in the shape of the letter “C” in the first instance or a round loaf in the second), and the *biroldo* is immersed in the cooking broth and simmered for another three hours. The product is totally made by hand, and is sewn up with a needle. Once cooked, the *biroldo* takes on a dark brown color. It is allowed to “rest” on a rack made

of chestnut wood under a weight so it can cool, drain and lose some of the grease. It can be eaten hot or cold, and has a shelf life of about a month. In the past when it was stored covered with suet, or in modern times vacuum sealed, it can keep for up to six months. Its weight can vary from 1.2 to 1.5 kilos (2.5 - 3 lbs.). It is a very aromatic salami that leaves an intense taste in the mouth.

The history of *mondiola* goes back to ancient times. In fact, this salami has been produced since peasant families first began to raise and butcher pork. In those times it was common practice to dry the salami close to the large hearths of peasant houses. *Mondiola* is made in the shape of a “U”, and is tied with a piece of laurel in the center where the product is folded, and at the ends. The filling has a soft consistency, medium graininess and an intense red color. The aroma is spicy but pleasant. The rear parts of the pig are used in its production because they have the highest concentration of blood, which gives the salami its characteristic bright red color. The lean parts come primarily from the pork neck, and to a lesser extent the shoulder, while the fatty pieces come from the cheek and belly. The filling is made with a medium grind of meat, mixed with salt and pepper, local spices and cloves. After it has been well blended the meat is stuffed in pork gut, the so-called “*crespone*” or crispy part derived from the animal’s large intestine. During the folding process unique protuberances can form owing to the consistency of the walls of the pork gut. *Mondiola* should be eaten within four to five months in order to best appreciate its organoleptic properties.

# Precious Balsamic Vinegar

BY SANDRO BELLEI  
*Academician, Modena Delegation*

*It was one of the most  
coveted of legacies left  
in testaments.*

The history of traditional balsamic vinegar is possibly the most important element of Modena's gastronomy during the time of the Dukes, of their customs as gourmards and protectors of the people, of their refined habits and their boast of imparting the fragrant seal of nobility upon their tables. Just mentioning balsamic vinegar conjures visions of the roofs, the facades and the gates of the old houses of nobility in the heart of the town emanating a perfumed sap, glittering, dense, viscous, dark reddish brown, almost black and similar to the dye that can be extracted from walnut hulls.

Just like those stories that portray human predilections, the one about traditional balsamic vinegar features savory, unexpected and amusing episodes. Wonderment was expressed in olden times when certain wills were opened while the prospective heirs waited hopefully, looking contrite and even teary eyed following the premature passing of their relative, while in their hearts they were burning to find out who was the selected recipient of the legacy. It happened that the reading of the hand written testament would dispose as the first item the ancient barrels of balsamic vinegar that were kept in the well aired loft.

Quite often the recipient of the larger part of the inheritance would receive the sacred remnants of the vinegar, wonderfully destined to dress the house salads with its extraordinarily tasty quality. Whoever received it could enjoy it fully as the elixir was deemed to be precious and valuable just like money.

As the years went by, notwithstanding the fact that balsamic vinegar requires constant and costly paraphernalia and a perennial loving zeal, it still has legions of worshippers and the reverence that it surrounds it has not diminished.

From the testaments of Modena in the times of King Umberto and post-Umberto, when the city was encircled by meadows and vineyards that are now growing more and more distant, we can jump ahead to an episode in 1944 when the sirens situated on top of the Ghirlandina were ululating day and night to warn the countrymen of Ludovico Antonio Muratori that the Constellations were on their way. The heavy bombing raid was announced by a gloomy noise like an unstoppable avalanche and a strong echo that gave the impression of something rolling across the sky. People escaped in fear to the countryside along dusty roads at the outskirts of town, carrying with them the most precious possessions that could be transported from the house. During one precipitous exodus a young chemist was drawn along by that swarm of humanity that was seeking safety in the country among the elms and the grape vines. All were running or bicycling with fury hoping to reach a safe place before looking up to the sky to see if the Constellations had passed. Many in the escaping crowd had filled suitcases and large bags with their most important possessions: gold, jewels, money, and documents. The young chemist thought about what was dearest to him and ran up to the loft to grab the most precious of the little



barrels filled with balsamic vinegar. He kept it close to his chest and rushed to safety in the countryside.

While one may smile recounting the rather comical aspect of the story about such a desperate effort to save the vinegar, some sympathy is due for the young man who was carrying to safety a worm-eaten and rather sticky barrel containing a dense and exceptionally perfumed liquid.

Traditional balsamic vinegar is extracted from the must of a special grape, Trebbiano, cultivated particularly in the province of Modena, that has been boiled for a long time. Boiling it reduces it by half. The concentrated and sugary liquid is poured into the larger barrel of the battery, destined to receive the youngest vinegar. The expert in charge of maturing and seasoning the traditional balsamic vinegar will have taken out of the barrel an equivalent quantity of one year old vinegar and poured it into a slightly smaller barrel bearing the number 2. The content of this barrel will then strengthen barrel number 3 and so on, up to the last barrel, the smallest of the lot, and also the most precious and the noblest, containing the vinegar that has aged for several decades.

In addition to the long process required to condense and sweeten the product over a period of time, special barrels are needed to obtain true balsamic vinegar. The most apt barrels are made with pleasant smelling juniper wood. In order to augment the aroma of the "mother", comparable to a placenta that must nourish and keep alive the vinegar with its microorganisms, some people add berries from the same juniper. Others prefer to use different barrels in the battery, introducing "vessels" of odd numbers made with different kinds of wood, such as chestnut, cherry, mulberry or more often than not, oak.

After being in service many years, the wood of the barrels decays due to the acidity of the content. A liquid that is sticky and lumpy seeps through the slots endangering the

"vessel" that would become unusable unless the owner of the "acetaia", the vinegar battery, well aware of the value of that line of barrels, were not to undertake quick and continuous restoration work. The endangered barrels are bound and strengthened with new staves, new bottoms and new circles, an intervention similar to that required for a building threatened with collapse.

All things considered, one can easily understand the solemn character of traditional balsamic vinegar. Our fathers' fathers, when they gave it that name, were obviously thinking back to the ancient balsams for unguents that had the uncommon virtue of maintaining meats uncorrupted. They were thinking of that balsam from Mecca or Judea that joined its perfume with the magic of the Orient.

The devotees of Modena's vinegar attribute benefits for the stomach and other therapeutic virtues to the thick elixir in their barrels. The families that produce vinegar are declining in numbers. What one finds on the market can be traditional balsamic or simple balsamic vinegar produced

commercially, a distant cousin of the vinegar that matured for decades in the barrels of fortunate families or even the product made by producers who are well aware of vinegar's great gastronomic value. They produce their vinegar by applying the same rules followed for small family batteries but in large quantities. They obtain a thick, sugary, aromatic liquid that enhances meats and vegetables by exalting their natural flavors. It is a product that has been acclaimed by the gourmards of the entire world and has found extraordinary applications in the kitchen. Unfortunately, as happens to many excellent products of Italian gastronomy, balsamic vinegar is imitated by products that have no relationship with the original creation. Thus, be careful. When a bottle of balsamic vinegar is sold at a low price that means that it is not produced with the well tested methods of the tradition. Just like the "parmesean" and the "reggianito" that try to imitate, unsuccessfully, the incomparable parmigiano-reggiano, the champion of the world among hard cheeses.

**SANDRO BELLEI**

## 2013 ECUMENICAL DINNER



*The 2012 ecumenical dinner based on the cuisine of herbs and spices once again brought Academicians in Italy and around the world together at the virtual table. Next year the convivial ecumenical dinner will take place October 17 at 8:30 pm, and its theme will be The Cuisine of Unforgettable Meat. The theme, chosen by the Franco Marengi Research Center and approved by the President's Council, includes the cuisine of the "fifth quarter", but also other meats and animal products that have always had a place in popular cuisine but that are seldom used today because we are no longer subject to a "cuisine of poverty". The objective for 2013 therefore will be to rediscover traditional dishes that use offal - giblets, organ meats and tripe - that can still have a place in frugal modern Italian cuisine. Delegates will be charged with ensuring that the ecumenical dinner is accompanied by an appropriate cultural presentation that discusses the proposed theme and that the dishes chosen reflect the foods that have been selected by the Council.*

# Economical Soup

**BY GLORIA PERIA**

*Director of the Historical Archives  
of the towns of Elba*

*A subject inherent  
to the Napoleonic period  
on Elba that was dealt with  
at a public conference  
in Portoferraio.*

The concept that the history of every civilization is reflected in the kitchen is supported in an exemplary fashion by innovations in the realm of foods introduced in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. During this time, marked by demographic expansion and productive insufficiency, a deep malaise spread within the European population; the historians termed it “a state of permanent under nutrition”. In a climate of scientific experimental fervor, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany met the challenge by extending its cultivations, reclaiming land and with new productive techniques. The conditions of the farmers, however, did not improve. In fact, the reforms ended up worsening the already miserable conditions of the population while at the same time increasing the profits of the great land owners.

In Florence, starting in 1791, the Academy of the Georgophiles published the scientific contributions coming from the best Italian researchers - among them Manetti and Targioni Tozzetti - quickly becoming the focal point for studies concerning agriculture. Thanks to this initiative, the cultivation of “save them from hunger” plants, such as maize and potatos, spread rapidly while impacting adversely the cultivation of other summer vegetables, most of all legumes. Soon enough, due to the excessive consumption of corn since polenta had become a basic staple among the poorest farmers of Tuscany, pellagra made its appearance.

The development of chemistry helped address the problem as well by opening up a debate on the properties of food stuffs and their preparation. Cheap soups, prepared with

barley and vegetables, took the lead in liberating a large part of the indigent population from diseases and hunger. The invention of the economical soups can be ascribed to the Count of Rumford, Benjamin Thomson, an American who landed in Europe following many adventures and became counselor and head of military services at the tail end of the seventeenth century at the court of the Elector of Bavaria. The Count of Rumford had many interests, including cuisine, which prompted him to write a 400 page essay on “the building of hearths and kitchen utensils with notes and observations about the processes of cuisine and proposals to improve this very noble art”. He concentrated his studies upon the techniques of cooking food and the chemical properties of nutritional substances, in order to achieve a double advantage in sustaining the poor with healthy food and doing it in an economical way. In addition, he recommended the creation of public kitchens where the indigent could procure helpful foodstuffs at a very modest price or by presenting vouchers donated by wealthy persons who had purchased them for that purpose.

France started to distribute frugal soups thanks to the efforts of Antoine Parmentier (1737-1813), a French agronomist, nutritionist and hygienist, a member of the prestigious Academy of Sciences and a fervid supporter of the production of sugar extracted from beets and grapes. The latter method was particularly encouraged by Napoleon, who believed that it could be a source of prosperity for France and all territories of the empire that were suitable for the cultivation

of grapes. The production of sugar from grapes, popularized through a pamphlet that accompanied the *Bulletin des Lois* in all countries administered by France, inspired the recipe for “*resiné*”, a sort of marmalade, whose production is now limited to the eastern part of the island of Elba. The marmalade utilizes the must of the grapes in lieu of sugar.

In his writings, Parmentier claimed that cheap soups are “a homogeneous dish, economical and more appropriate for alimentary purposes”. He advocated their expansion in all public institutions engaged in assistance to the indigent as a way to promote the production of barley, legumes and potatoes with a sharp decrease in the consumption of bread whose production is quite expensive. He stressed that nourishment prepared for a large number of people permits high savings in the cost of fuels and labor. In addition, by decreasing the consumption of

maize, the surplus of this production could be exported with good profit. The French nutritionist listed the “sea ports and prisoners’ penitentiaries” (the island of Elba would be ideal) as the principal places where the preparation of soups would be most useful; furthermore, it would replace the handing out of money that is often used by the indigents to buy alcohol or is spent on gambling, “which contributes to populating the hospitals and foments indolence thus inducing the mendicancy that is a terrible scourge in many states”.

In 1812, the Minister of Interior, applying an Imperial Decree of March 24, invited all Prefects of the Department of the Empire to announce the advantages of economical soups in all those places where children, old people and invalids were interned. On June 5 of the same year, the Prefect of the Mediterranean Department wrote to the Sub Prefect of the island of Elba stressing the need to spread

not just to the indigents but to the population as a whole, the use of cheap soups “to make up for the scarcity of bread, considering that they are used with great success in the hinterland of France where entire municipalities have been replacing the consumption of bread with the distribution of soups”. The Prefect also explains in details how to cook the “*potage*” with herbs by using “diverse herbs, wood sorrel, chervil, beets and leeks, carrots and other roots, corn or rice, bread and water”. He goes on to describe the “potage with puree” that combines “potatoes, lentils and peas with wheat, whole beans, carrots or roots, bread, water”. “Other types of soups can be made with rice, barley grains, millet or maize, celery, leeks or onions, bread, water”, he continues. The high official ends his letter by completing the recipe adding salt, pepper and fat, and advising “should any of the ingredients of the mixture be unavailable, they can be replaced with something else of the same nature that is easier to find”. In taking his leave, he recommends that the precise recipes that he described be communicated to the mayors of the various municipalities of the island of Elba so that they may invite their subjects to put them to use.

This initiative, divulged by the French government to all conquered territories, was received with success in the island of Elba, so much so that after Napoleon’s departure in 1815 and the re establishment of the Tuscan Grand Duchy, it was applied with some modifications concerning the use of pasta in the recipes intended for the troops. Since this mode of nutrition was already widespread within the population, the civic magistrates took care to base the assistance to the indigent population on the distribution of soups, relying on the lists of the poor who were entitled to coupons dispensed by a municipal commission that was created especially for that purpose.

**GLORIA PERIA**

## INTERNET, BLOGS, FACEBOOK AND THE ACCADEMIA WEBSITE

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