

CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
ISTITUZIONE CULTURALE DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA
FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI

www.accademia1953.it

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

FEBRUARY 2024 / N. 367

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MONTHLY MAGAZINE
REG. N. 4049 - 29-5-1956
TRIBUNALE DI MILANO

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Rivista associata
all'Unione Stampa
Periodica Italiana



L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI
E DA LUIGI BERTETT, DINO BUZZATI TRAVERSO,
CESARE CHIODI, GIANNINO CRITERIO, ERNESTO DONÀ
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ARTURO ORVIETO, SEVERINO PAGANI, ALDO PASSANTE,
GIAN LUIGI PONTI, GIÒ PONTI, DINO VILLANI,
EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: graphic elaboration of *Allegory of Simulation (or Woman with Mask and Pomegranate)* by Lorenzo Lippi, circa 1650; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers, France

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The 'tractor revolt' inflaming European and Italian politics has distant roots

An intricate web of problems involving European laws, national tax systems and world commerce.

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

Returning to our Seventieth Anniversary Manifesto, we recall its point 6, discussed last month in conjunction with food waste. This important article declares that "It is necessary to respect our planet and its ecosystems through sustainable agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing." It proceeds by affirming: "Though transport and food preservation systems have significantly reduced seasonality, we should favour products available during their natural harvest period, which are higher in quality and more affordable." **Such concepts appear to be particularly relevant these days, brought to the fore by the so-called 'tractor revolt'**. Starting in Germany and spreading to France, it has now overrun Italy too. All newspapers and television channels have much to say about blocked roads but less about the farmers' demands, because they are multifarious, difficult to articulate and raised by several organisations and associations. In reality, this is an intricate web of problems involving European laws, national tax systems and world commerce: a complex chimaera which includes political interests and sometimes provocations.

The salient points of these demands concern the 'European Green Deal'

The salient points of these demands concern the 'European Green Deal', **namely a European policy viewed as too environmentalist and unfavourable to agriculture**, inter alia through its pesticide stance. These include calls to block imports from countries without the same stringent production and hygiene regulations as the EU; opposition to the requirement that farmers leave 4% of their land fallow; and the plea for a ceiling price on agricultural fuel and VAT reduction or elimination on certain primary goods: practically a dream catalogue. Something will certainly be done and **there will be some victories**, on both national and European levels; but not all these wishes will be granted, not least because **there are insufficient resources to grant them**.



The problem of the excessively long supply chain, which can quadruplicate the cost of a vegetable picked in the neighbouring field before it reaches the supermarket, has long been noted, and it is very true that in some cases, production costs outweigh sales costs: recall the destruction, by the tonne, of tomatoes in fields, because harvesting them would have been too onerous and not offset by sale profits, and the similar problem afflicting Sardinian *pecorino* cheese.

The chickens come home to roost

The chickens are now coming home to roost. Problems proliferate, but above all, **we fear a globalised future** once greeted by thunderous applause (let us help the poor Chilean farmer, and now, the devastated Ukrainian economy), but which now **threatens those who work the land**, whose bargaining position is weak. Because at the end of every production chain lurks large-scale distribution, with its logic and its politicking. What do we, the consumers, expect? For our excellent products to retain their quality at a fair price which allows their producers a dignified standard of life. Certain imbalances must be eliminated.



The intense fragrance of bergamot

by **Attilio Borda Bossana**

Messina Academician

Its aroma lends distinction to haute-cuisine and pastry recipes.

Bergamots are citrus fruits, rather smaller than oranges, growing on medium-sized trees cultivated since the early 18th century, **mostly for extracting their essence**, on a strip of Ionian coast about 100 km wide **near Reggio di Calabria**. PDO bergamot essential oil is used in the cosmetic industry not only to fix the aromatic bouquet of perfumes, but also to harmonise with other essences they contain. Bergamot fixes the bouquet persistently, for over 24 hours, compared to the 3-4 hours for perfumes with synthetic oils. This fruit is amply employed for preparing fresh, citrusy scents, and in the pharmaceutical industry, for its **antiseptic, antibacterial properties; in cuisine and pastry making it suits both sweet and savoury recipes**.

Despite its excellent virtues, **bergamot production and sale were hindered** since the 1960s by a **series of pseudo-scientific prejudices** accompanying a disinformation campaign about bergamot essence being carcinogenic. It was proven harmless by scientists conducting studies for the internationally based Comité International de Défense de la Bergamote, established in Paris in 1985. Three groups of scholars demonstrated in July 1988 that perfumes containing bergamot essential oil are not dangerous, and are qualitatively superior to synthetic equivalents.

Early traces of its culinary use are found in a volume by Bartolomeo Scappi

Some scholars identify the first written evidence of bergamot's culinary use in the cookbook *Dell'arte del cucinare, con la quale si può ammaestrare qual si voglia cuoco, scalco, trinciante o maestro di casa* (*On the Art of Cooking, wherewith to train any cook, steward, carver or majordomo*), published in 1570 but completed years before by **Bartolomeo Scappi**, personal cook to Pope Pius V. The text mentions six pounds of "**bergamini confetti**" (candied *bergamini*, identified by historians as **candied bergamot zest**), prepared in 1536 for a Roman banquet offered to the Emperor **Charles V**, passing through Rome and hosted by Cardinal **Lorenzo Campeggi**. The menu had twelve *servizi* (courses): five on the sideboard and seven from the kitchen; as it occurred "in

giorno Quadragesimale" (on a Lenten day), the banquet was awash in fish and crustaceans.

Better documented is the invention, in 1680, of **bergamot-scented water** by **Giovanni Paolo Feminis** (1666-1736), a perfumier from a hamlet in today's province of Verbania, who emigrated to Cologne, in Germany. No source, however, has him travelling through Calabria or through the Straits of Messina to demonstrate a link between his perfume and the areas which, as far back as the second half of the 18th century, produced a bergamot liqueur (*spirito di bergamotto*) with properties found nowhere else in the world.

One who did cross the Straits of Messina was **Francesco Procopio**, from Aci Trezza near Catania, in the first half of the 17th century. He **developed a fragrant golden liquid** in which the properties of bergamot were concentrated. After some time in Palermo, then the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, he arrived in France,





presenting himself at the court of **Louis XIV**, amid the pomp of Versailles, bearing several copper containers of bergamot water. The palace was at the centre of political power in France, and its population of court nobles, gentlemen, ladies and servants admired the hygienic properties of that liquid: it alleviated the effects of the ban on water, which physicians at the time held responsible for spreading the plague and many other infections. Bergamot water made the regal quarters fresh and bracing, swiftly replacing the strong, spiced scents used previously. Procopio relocated to Paris where in 1686 he opened what many consider the world's oldest café: **the Café Le Procope**, which won over the most refined palates thanks to a special royal licence from Louis XIV to sell **the novel 'frozen waters'** (iced beverages) flavoured with aniseed or cinnamon flowers, frangipane, or orange or lemon juice, as well as **fruit ice creams and strawberry and bergamot sorbet**. The *Comédie Française*, Molière's celebrated theatre company, soon opened a theatre across the street, and success ensued. The restaurant and café remains at the same address: 13 rue de l'Ancienne Comédie in the 6th *arrondissement* of Paris.

Citrus can unite sweet and sour, mitigate strong flavours and introduce new pairings

The culinary use of bergamot has received the imprimatur of modern cuisine, which has discovered the delights of blending sweet and sour and the captivating aroma of this fruit, ideal for cutting through the often heavy flavours of traditional recipes. As an ingredient it can also intro-



Onofrio Garufi's factory in Messina at the beginning of the 1900s

duce new pairings, such as **sardella - Calabrian caviar - prepared with anchovy whitebait and a few drops of bergamot; bergamot-infused 'nduja** to spice up *crostini* or Tropea onion risotto; or **anchovies au gratin, whose bitter notes are softened by bergamot**. Citrus flavour creates a contrast with sweetness, and therefore **combines well with crustaceans** (lobsters, prawn, scampi, crayfish etc), blending well in "swordfish rolls with spicy clams flavoured with bergamot". It also **mitigates gaminess**, as in wild boar, hare and pigeon. Exalted, classic dishes can also profit from its presence: an example is **duck with bergamot**, a 'twist' on the original duck à l'orange. Bergamot performs excellently in any dish that calls for citrus fruit, such as veal escalopes, pork, chicken or baked fish, but also to flavour salads and many sauces. **Bergamot-infused extra-virgin olive oil** also lends a delicate aroma to many dishes.

Numerous creations from the high art of pastrymaking in Reggio

Bergamot also has varied uses in desserts and pastrymaking; besides the beloved bergamot sorbet which marks the passage from savoury dishes to sweet, the high pastry art of Reggio has numerous

recipes associated with domestic traditions, including **torta Nosside**, a sponge cake bathed in bergamot liqueur, filled with bergamot cream and adorned with curls of bergamot zest. Bergamot zest can also be candied or used in aromatic sweets. Infused in ethanol, bergamot can be the base for **delicious local liqueurs** including **Bergamino** or **Bergamello** - recognised as a Traditional Agrifood Product - and **prized digestives**, with aromatic herbs and a low alcohol content. Bergamot can also be used in **fruit juice** or to **flavour tea** in lieu of lemon.

To promote and champion bergamot, the Reggio Calabria Chamber of Commerce has collaborated with the Reggio Calabria Municipality, the Bergamot Consortium and various associations of entrepreneurs and sector operators to **organise the bergamot fair BergaRè, held in late October** for the past two years. Its pastrymaking demonstrations, workshops with expert perfumiers and tastings with award-winning Calabrese chefs showcase the **fragrances and emotions of local food culture** with such dishes as *pasta e patate* (pasta and potato soup) with bergamot, flying squid (*totano*), wild fennel and cuttlefish ink; cuttlefish with bergamot, pistachio and *puntarelle* chicory; and *parfaits* of chicken livers, crunchy biscuit, hazelnuts, bergamot and Tropea onion.

Attilio Borda Bossana



The fruit which took over *the world*

by Roberto Mirandola
Padua Academician

Bananas: a brief history and some curiosities.

The banana (most commonly *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*) originated in south-eastern Asia and remains a staple food in many parts of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, but it also represents a snack, a fruity dessert, an ice cream flavour and a cooking ingredient in Europe and North America (where banana bread is popular). It is **the world's most cultivated and con-**

sumed fruit (found in over a hundred countries) **and is economically the fourth most important food after wheat, rice and maize.**

Botanically, the banana is a seedless berry. It grows in clusters that can weigh up to 40 kilogrammes and originate from large, tear-shaped red and purple flowers. Banana leaves are large and flat, and in some areas are used for making blinds or thatching roofs. The edible fruits grow not from the trunk of banana plants, but from pseudostems; the banana is thus a herbaceous plant, though the largest one. The word '**banana**' has uncertain origins; the Arabic *banan*, 'fingertip', is a candidate, but a sub-Saharan origin is considered more likely, perhaps from the Wolof word *banaana*.

*Bananas arrived in Europe
with the Portuguese
in the 16th century*

Bananas probably originated in an area between India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Thence they spread widely in other parts of Asia and, around 1000 BC, to Madagascar, and thereafter in Africa. They may have crossed the Pacific, reaching South America around 200 BC. In China, organised banana cultivation was already present around 200 AD, but bananas were almost unknown in mediaeval Europe, though plants of this nature existed in Sicily: such fruits were only heard about through the tales of merchants, pilgrims and crusaders. Bananas were transported commercially to Africa by the Arabs, but their arrival in Europe is due to the Portuguese: from the 16th century, traders with the Indies were **attracted by the fragrance and flavour of these odd 'figs', whose cultivation soon began in the Canary Islands.** It is believed that after contact with the New World, **a Spanish monk - Thomas de Berlaga - introduced bananas from Africa to the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo in 1516.** After becoming an established crop in Central and South America, banana plants not only provided affordable, convenient food for slaves, but also protected other colonial crops including cocoa and coffee. **In the twentieth century, the advent of refrigerated shipping allowed bananas to travel the world,** guaranteeing their diffusion.



There are about
500 varieties of banana

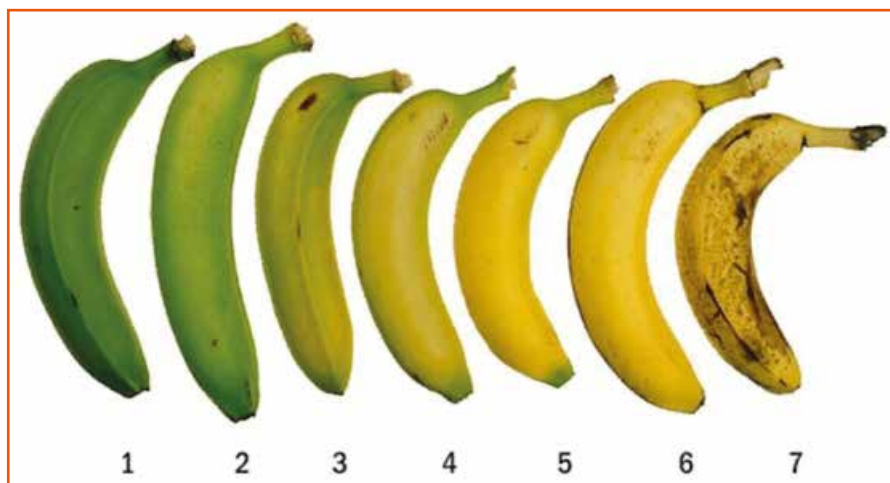
Though there are around 500 varieties of banana (some say even a thousand), **currently the main cultivar is the Cavendish Grande Naine**, named after the Englishman **William Cavendish** (1790 - 1858), sixth Duke of Devonshire, who in the 19th century successfully cultivated bananas imported from Mauritius in the greenhouses of his estate, Chatsworth House. The most widely cultivated and consumed commercial banana cultivar was once the sweeter, more 'banana-flavoured' Gros Michel; then in the 1950s it was decimated by Panama disease, caused by a parasitic fungus, and was replaced by the currently dominant Cavendish variants, accounting for 47% of world production.

Bananas usually weigh 90-200 grammes (of which 20% is the skin), but this varies considerably between cultivars. **Besides traditional yellow bananas, red bananas are also commercially available** (their skin is generally maroon, often with areas varying from purple to brown depending on ripeness); besides their different skin colour, they are also distinguished by their ivory-hued flesh and **a faint raspberry flavour. A particular blue variety, known as Blue Java, is common in Central America, South-east Asia, Fiji and Hawaii.** Also known as 'ice cream banana', it has a creamy pulp reminiscent of ice cream, and is particularly sweet, with a flavour similar to vanilla.

Bananas are harvested at the so-called 'three-quarters full' stage, when they are still green and continue ripening after being picked. Bananas take 2-3 weeks to travel from South America (principally Ecuador) to the Euro Fruit Ports at Antwerp in Belgium. They are packed in special refrigerated containers at a temperature of 13-13.5°C, which causes their fragrance and flavour to lose intensity.

Supermarkets purchase only bananas between colour stages 1 (totally green)

BANANA RIPENING TABLE



and 3 (green with yellow areas) from importers.

In 2023, the four major banana producers were, in descending order, **India, China, Indonesia and Brazil.** The highest banana consumer is Ecuador, with 101.5 kilos per capita. **In Italy bananas are grown on land spanning tens of hectares in the Conca d'Oro area in Sicily**, yielding only a few hundred tonnes a year of the *Musa capriciosa* and *Musa paradisiaca* varieties, not *Musa acuminata* to which the Cavendish cultivar belongs. The first is longer and stouter than the more common Cavendish, while the second is plumper and rounder, with a pleasant straw yellow colour, a sweet, aromatic, fleshy pulp and a slight cinnamon aftertaste.

There are many curious facts
about bananas

Banana republic. This expression denotes a politically unstable country whose economy largely depends on exporting a single commodity, such as fruit or minerals. It was coined by the **American writer O. Henry** (1862-1910) to describe the imaginary Republic of Anchuria in his 1904 book *Cabbages and Kings*, a collection of interlinked stories inspired by his experiences in Honduras in 1896-1897. The term 'banana republic' has been widely employed in Central America, but in the strictly economic

sense it has been applicable only to Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama, which have effectively been banana republics, with economies dependent on banana exports.

Banana skin. It is rich in potassium, dietary fibre, unsaturated fats and essential amino acids. A recent study has discovered that banana skin, especially if not yet ripe, is rich in antioxidants. It can be incorporated into smoothies and even pan-fried with a result resembling the texture and flavour of bacon.

World Banana Day. As with many other foods, objects or events, the banana has a special day: the third Wednesday of April each year.

Banana flour. Principally produced and consumed in certain African countries and Jamaica, it is made, in most cases, from **green bananas**, which are thus not fully ripe. It is a valid alternative to grain flours, and **contains no trace of gluten.** It is also low in fat and high in fibre and antioxidants; it helps to maintain blood cholesterol and sugar within safe limits, alleviates stomach pain and can even be consumed by diabetics.

Radioactivity and water. Bananas are naturally radioactive, more than most fruits, because they contain a potassium isotope called potassium-40. However, for this to be harmful to our health, we'd have to eat 700 bananas a day for 80 years! Finally, though apparently dense and solid, bananas **contain a very high water percentage: 75%.**

Roberto Mirandola



Health and longevity: *the role of mushrooms*

by **Agata Grimaldi**

*Journalist expert in the field of Nutrition and Health
ANSA correspondent from Singapore*

Studies conducted in 'blue zones', containing the highest concentration of centenarians, suggest that the secret of longevity lies in daily habits, including a healthy diet.

Hands up, all those who don't want a healthy, active life past the age of 90, and perhaps even 100! No chocolate or biscuits in those hands, now! Life is too short to deny ourselves occasional treats, but remember: a smile is more dazzling with healthy teeth.

New studies on epigenetics view ageing as a disease

Recent scientific studies appear to have identified the 'longevity vitamin'. Science cannot currently provide immortality, but new studies on epigenetics view ageing as a disease caused by DNA damage. While awaiting scientific progress,

why not optimise longevity, increasing our chances to transmit experience and knowledge to future generations?

In his very interesting book *The Blue Zones*, the author and researcher **Dan Buettner**, having travelled the world meeting our planet's longest-lived people, reports his effective and simple observations about longevity, gathered in the so-called 'blue zones', namely areas with a high proportion of centenarians. They reveal that **the secret of such longevity is found in daily behaviour**, such as food habits, social life, worldview and stress containment. Some recognised blue zones include Ogliastra in Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa in Japan; Loma Linda in California; and the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica. Singapore is a new addition.

Since 2005, Buettner has closely scrutinised reality in Singapore

Since 2005, Buettner has closely scrutinised reality in Singapore, a city-state in south-eastern Asia transformed from a poor island in the 1960s to a first-rate Asian financial and investment centre. **Its government** guides citizens as a 'nanny' might, **promoting healthy lifestyles**. Not by chance, alongside economic growth, since 1960 Singaporeans' life expectancy has risen by 20 years, and **the number of centenarians among them has doubled in the past decade. Singapore has the third-highest life expectancy in the world, after Japan and Switzerland.**

Singaporeans have incentives to exercise and socialise. On the coast or in public places, it is easy to find elderly people





in white shorts and red shirts, the colours of the Singaporean flag, practising *tai chi* or *wushu* or sharing meals or a snack, such as *kaya* toast, at food courts. Recently, **the Alexandra Hospital opened a longevity centre to conduct research and help citizens to prolong their lives** through cutting-edge interventions. The government is investing heavily in 'bio-health', 'tech health' and technology, transforming Singapore into an 'engineered blue zone' whose policies about health and well-being improve ordinary people's lives.

Promoting 'healthspan' to improve quality of life

Healthy food habits remain an element common to all blue zones, which make it easy for their inhabitants to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, reduce sugar in beverages and possibly add more healthy foods to their diets. Promoting 'healthspan', that is, extending health into old age, is essential for improving

quality of life. Indeed, on the occasion of the 8th International Italian Food Week, our Academy collaborated with the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine of the National University of Singapore (NUS) to organise a seminar about "Nutrition and Brain Health", examining the scientific evidence linking food, culinary habits and mental health. Subjects discussed included food as a crucial component of cognitive capacity and resilience and the Mediterranean Diet's contribution to mitigating mental conditions, fertility problems and the discomforts of ageing.

The amino acid known as ERG, present in fungi, protects from oxidative stress

Another **element common to the various blue zones is elevated consumption of mushrooms**. These occupy a unique position in the biological realm, and are often considered as forming 'a mysterious world', because they belong neither to the animal nor the plant king-

dom. Fungi differ from fauna in their inability to move actively, and from plants because they don't contain chlorophyll or feed themselves by photosynthesis.

As hinted at the beginning, recent research has identified the 'longevity vitamin': **ergothioneine (ERG), principally found in fungi**. This compound, which is in fact not a vitamin because it does not possess all the characteristics of one, offers **noteworthy anti-ageing benefits**. With antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, it plays a fundamental role in promoting health and preventing diseases associated with ageing.

Scientific studies have also demonstrated that ERG also protects **against oxidative stress**, especially in neurodegenerative diseases. Its dietary use can significantly affect the ageing process, with evident benefits to general health. ERG not only acts as a potent antioxidant, but has been shown to combat cerebral degeneration, **contributing to neurological health maintenance**.

Agata Grimaldi