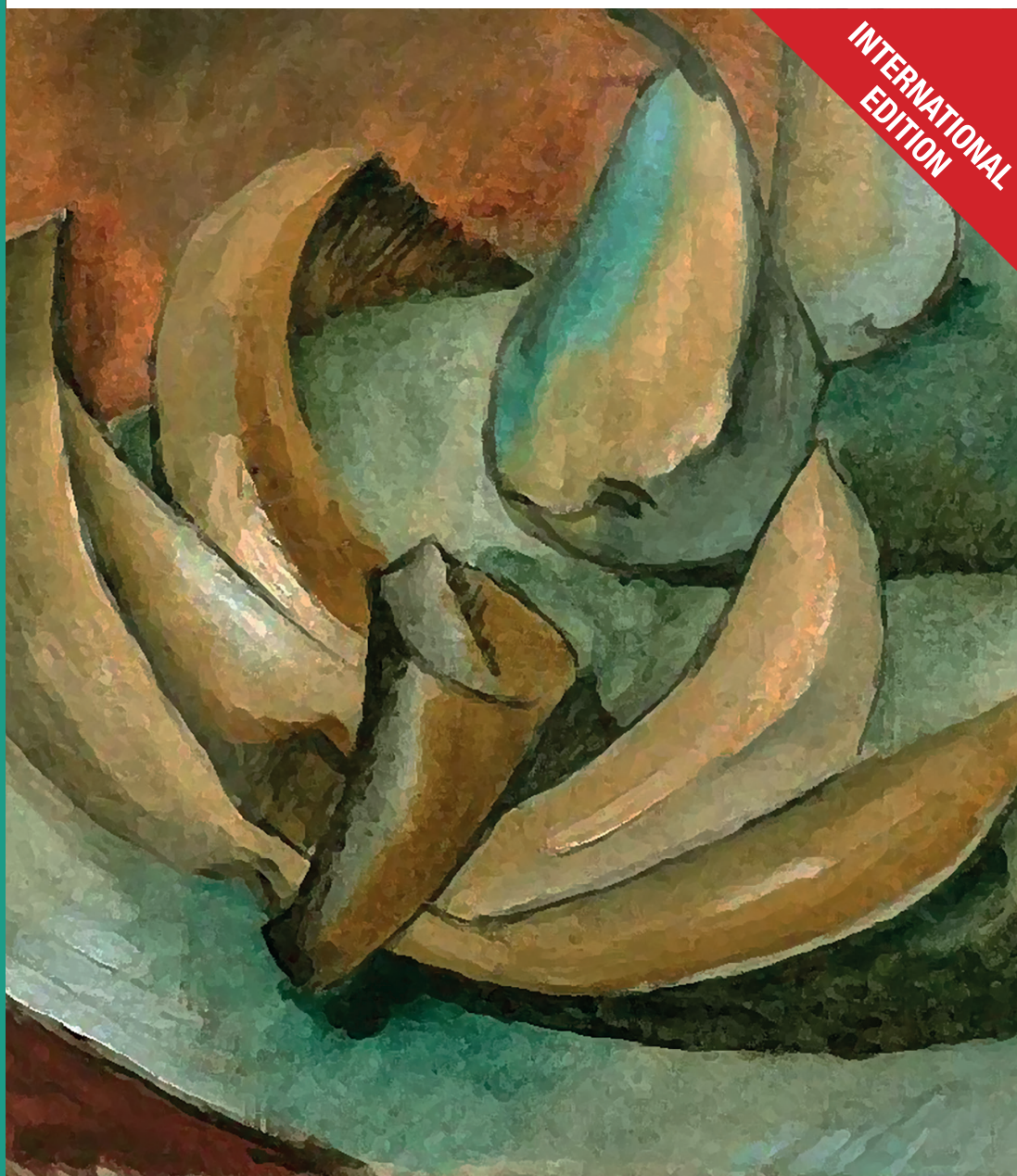


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EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: graphic elaboration of *Five bananas and two Pears* (1908) by Georges Braque; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Center Pompidou, Paris

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The new phenomenon of the 'false trattoria'

*Evocative traditional names,
but standardised cuisine.*

Counterfeit Italian food, known as '**Italian-sounding**', is widespread. This phenomenon involves the use of words, images, colour combinations (such as the Italian flag), and/or geographical references to promote and sell products which are not 'Made in Italy' at all. But **another phenomenon** is emerging, not only abroad but in Italy too: the **false trattoria** (rustic restaurant). Evocative traditional-sounding names, chequered tablecloths, celebrity photos on the walls, old newspaper cuttings, paintings and flasks of wine strewn about. Signs recall times past by referring to mothers, grandmothers, aunts or uncles, or such products as Grana cheese or truffles, or display typical names: *Bacaro, Masseria, Caprese, Antica Roma, Palio, Trabocco* and the like. Obviously a *Volare* restaurant here and there is inevitable. **There is a striking example in San Francisco**, where the well-known restaurant '**Milano**' specialises in Roman fare served in a typical Roman *hostaria* ambience. The specialities include *fettuccine* with tomato, sausage and cream. Italian cities are knee-deep in tourists craving not Michelin-starred restaurants but traditional, authentic local cuisine; they often end up disappointed. Having sniffed the air, savvy investors have snapped up venues once at the forefront of excellent local cuisine, turning them into financial cornucopias. They have preserved or improved upon their aesthetics, but their food has become standardised and flattened, focussing on the emblematic dishes demanded by the hungry hordes.

*Social media and restaurant apps have aided
and abetted this phenomenon*

Social media and restaurant apps have aided and abetted this phenomenon. Reviews and ratings on Facebook, Tripadvisor and similar platforms often push one venue over another. Consequently, **trendy trattorie are full to bursting**, with tables being turned over even thrice per service. **A recent experience** in an old Milanese *trattoria* provides a **classic example of this new tendency**. Outside, nothing has changed: same sign, same unassuming entrance leading to the old bar. Past the threshold, however, we notice a bracing change: an efficient, smiling receptionist greets us, confirms our booking, escorts us to our table, and vanishes into thin air (or back to the entrance for the next greeting). Next, a waitress arrives,

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia



armed with a tablet: convenient for the staff, but uncomfortably rigid for customers, who **can only choose from a multiple-choice menu without variations** (no mixed starters, no scant or abundant portions, no 'al dente' specifications and so on). The food is 'correct' overall - sometimes more, sometimes less. Having taken our order, the waitress flits away, radio-controlled by an earphone and a wristband microphone, like a bodyguard. The true *trattorie* (the plural) that we know and love are managed with simplicity, grace and professionalism. And, above all, with soul. Fortunately, these familiar *trattorie* have not entirely disappeared: some remain. It is our role as Academicians to discover and honour them.





White or green, pink or purple: a rainbow of asparagus

by **Morello Pecchioli**

Honorary Academician for Verona

They must go from farm to table as quickly as possible to maintain their amazing virtues.

Let us begin with good manners. How should we eat asparagus: with fingers or a fork and knife? Advice from Donna Letizia (Lady Letizia), the *nom de plume* of the journalist and writer **Colette Rosselli**, second wife of the journalist, historian and writer **Indro Montanelli** and author of *Il saper vivere di Donna Letizia (Lady Letizia's Art of Living)*, published in 1960 by Mondadori: "As for asparagus, at home or with friends eating them with fingers is acceptable, but a fork is best for formal dinners unless the hostess leads

by choosing another method". The book is rather old, but Lady Letizia's advice remains valid. Personally, we follow this rule: if the turions are stiff, as in white Verona or Bassano asparagus, we can use fingers to dip them into *pinzimonio* (seasoned oil); if they are soft, as with green asparagus, chasing the tip with our open mouths as it flops hither and thither seems indecent. Better to use a fork and knife, or, if you are in a refined restaurant, the tongs provided on your right.

One must absolutely avoid the behaviour of the Persian king **Naser al-Din Shah Qajar** when he visited **Queen Victoria** in London in 1889. During a banquet offered by **Edward**, Prince of Wales, trays piled with asparagus were brought for the shah, who was known to love them. Ignoring court etiquette and the silver tongs on his right, the shah began eating them as he'd been taught since childhood: he grabbed one with his fingers,

bit off the end and threw the rest over his shoulder. He repeated this with a second asparagus, a third, and so on, as did his small undignified retinue. After a moment of general embarrassment, Edward, not wanting his royal guest to realise that his hosts perceived him as a royal mess, very diplomatically imitated him. With typical British aplomb, the other guests felt authorised to proceed similarly. Thus, after ten minutes of transgressions against manners, the banqueting hall's magnificent Esfahan and Kerman carpets were obscured by a layer of decapitated asparagus: a princely midden.

The asparagus has a long history to tell

The asparagus, a herbaceous plant in the order *Asparagales* which also includes onions, garlic and lilies, has a long history to tell, **beginning with its health benefits**. The Swedish botanist **Linnaeus**, father of binomial nomenclature, called it *Asparagus officinalis*, where *officinalis* means 'medicinal', for its properties known since antiquity: it detoxifies, favours diuresis, and is rich in fibre, vitamins A, B1, B6 and C, carotenoids and minerals including calcium, phosphorus and potassium. Asparagus are particularly **suitable for a low-calorie diet**: they contain only 25 calories per 100 grammes and no cholesterol. They are low in sodium, stimulate appetite, and reduce liquid retention in tissues, thus combating cellulite. Beware: sufferers from urinary tract problems must not overeat asparagus, as they may promote kidney stones. The asparagus plant originated in an area of Mesopotamia in present-day Iraq. Thence





it reached Egypt, Greece (the philosopher **Theophrastus** fulsomely praised it around 300 BC) and Rome. **Cato the Elder** discusses asparagus in *De agricultura*; **Martial** sings the praise of Ravenna asparagus in his epigrams; **Pliny the Elder** mentions asparagus in his *Naturalis historia*. **Suetonius**, in his *The Twelve Caesars*, recounts that **Augustus** was asparagus-crazy and had them delivered from anywhere in the empire. He would order messengers to carry out his orders *velociter quam asparagi coquantur*: faster than boiling asparagus. They cook in approximately five minutes: Augustus and **the ancient Romans clearly appreciated light cooking to maintain fragrance**.

Asparagus cultivation in France began in the 16th century

Asparagus cultivation in France began in the 16th century. This beneficial, delicious vegetable **reached peak popularity in the 17th century at the court of Louis XIV**. The celebrated gardener **La Quintinye** even succeeded in serving the gourmet Sun King hothouse asparagus in December. The king rewarded him by erecting a giant marble asparagus at Versailles: an obelisk in his honour. Our transalpine cousins consider asparagus a philosophical food, as two 18th-century philosophers were famed both for their thoughts and their asparagus-lust: **Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle** and **Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes**. Malesherbes was particularly prone to losing his head over a plate of asparagus, until, accused of conspiracy during the Terror, he lost it in the literal sense to Madame Guillotine.

Another asparagus glutton was Cardinal **Guillaume Dubois** who **enjoyed them with hot melted butter**. The exalted prelate often quibbled with **Fontenelle**, who maintained that their only suitable

condiment was oil. Knowing their preferences, their mutual friend **Madame de Tencin** invited them to a meal of asparagus received fresh from Marseilles. She ordered the cook to adorn half of them with oil and half with melted butter. Fontenelle arrived punctually; the cardinal did not. In his place, a flustered secretary announced with horror that his master had just died of heart failure. As the grieving hostess gave way to sobbing, Fontenelle was observed sprinting towards the kitchen, shouting "Only oil for all the asparagus! Only oil!" He lived a hundred years, which suggests that he may have been right about the right condiment for asparagus.

Many considered asparagus an aphrodisiac

One could write a treatise on the aphrodisiacal reputation of asparagus. It is due, firstly, to its long, turgid form, and secondly to the precipitous growth of its sprouts (turions), which spring from a horizontal subterranean rhizome, attaining a height of 25cm in a couple of days. In antiquity, a suggested remedy for female frigidity was asparagus tips wrapped in rose petals, to be swallowed as pills. Until a few years ago, in Bassano del Grappa where very... 'well-endowed' asparagus are cultivated, it was de rigueur for plump and auspicious asparagus to be served at wedding luncheons. One firm believer in asparagus as aphrodisiacs was **Madame de Pompadour**, mistress to **Louis XV**, who, as **Renzo Pellati** recounts in *Storia di ciò che mangiamo (A History of What We Eat)*, "had the water from boiling asparagus brought in tankards, and quaffed it with high hopes".

For **Isabel Allende**, in *Aphrodite*, the most aphrodisiacal asparagus are "thick-stemmed, pale, and with shoots between pink and purple. They should remain firm, and thus it's best to tie them together

and boil them upright, with tips facing upwards, so the harder bases can cook through while the tips remain crunchy". **Luigi Arnaldo Vassallo**, a Ligurian journalist, epigrammatist and writer, would agree; for him, asparagus are like epigrams: "The point is the whole point".

Marcel Proust experienced an excitement bursting with peculiar colours, flavours and odours: "What most enraptured me were the asparagus, tinged with ultramarine and pink which shaded off from their heads, finely stippled in mauve and azure, through a series of imperceptible gradations to their white feet... with an iridescence that was not of this world. I felt that these celestial hues indicated the presence of exquisite creatures who had been pleased to assume vegetable form and who, through the disguise of their firm comestible flesh, allowed me to discern in this radiance of earliest dawn, these hinted rainbows, these blue evening shades, that precious quality which I should recognise again when all night long after a dinner at which I had partaken of them, they played (lyrical and coarse in their jesting as the fairies in Shakespeare's *Dream*) at transforming my chamber pot into a vase of aromatic perfume". *Eau de toilette*.

Asparagus are particularly common in Asia, but are also cultivated throughout America and Europe. **China produces almost eight million tonnes of asparagus**, exporting 60%. How can our asparagus - Bassano whites, Verona whites and greens, pink ones from Mezzago, purple from Albenga, and the ones from Emilia, Tuscany, Trentino, Friuli - compete against Goliath? **Emidio Bedendo**, asparagus grower and president of the Verona Asparagus Consortium, replies: "With quality, local distinctiveness, freshness, deliciousness and speed. Asparagus must go from farm to table as quickly as possible. Its amazing virtues wane with every hour". From a former pro cyclist, these words are gold.

Morello Pecchioli



Wine, cheese - and earth!

by Giancarlo Burri
Padua Academician

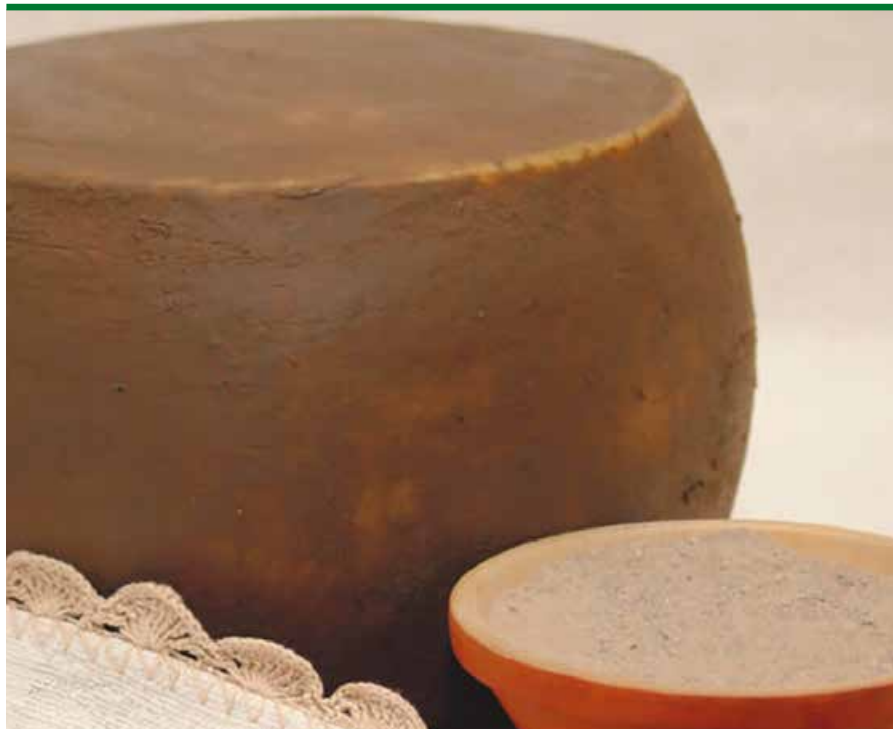
*An ancient
ageing technique.*

In Italy and beyond, the past decade has witnessed a **rediscovery of clay amphorae as winemaking vessels** for both fermenting and ageing.

In Georgia, this tradition is about 5000 years old, painstakingly preserved by winemakers until the present, earning it **UNESCO Intangible Heritage** status. Large ovoid clay vessels (called *qvevri* in Georgian), with a capacity between

500 and 3,000 litres, are filled with must of red or white grapes, and buried until the following spring, bringing about spontaneous fermentation **at a stable temperature** (since the earth is a natural insulator) **favouring yeast action**. This process includes natural maceration of the skins, whose extracted organic compounds determine the wine's aromatic profile and colour intensity: an





environment higher in polyphenols reduces the risk of oxidation, increasing the wine's aromatic and structural complexity.

The jars are made of a clay which ensures better micro-oxygenation than wooden barrels, without allowing its undesirable aromatic properties to seep in; it also prevents the propagation of microbes and micro-organisms inhabiting the skins, such as *Brettanomyces* yeast, which damages the organoleptic profile of wine.

In Italy, terracotta winemaking began in 2001

In Italy, terracotta winemaking was begun in 2001 by a winemaker from Friuli, **Josko Gravner**, in his winery at Oslavia (Gorizia). Thanks to the singular combination of fermentation in Georgian amphorae and ageing in oaken barrels, his Ribolla Gialla and Gravner Rosso (Merlot with a small proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon) are considered among Italy's most iconic wines.

On this model, other winemakers have been using earthenware vessels here and there (from Trentino-Alto Adige to Sardinia) to make their complex and acclaimed wines.

Besides wine, another amphora-based alcohol manufacturer deserves a men-

tion: a Tuscan company produces gin in 300-litre *cocciopesto* earthenware jars, using three types of juniper (from Maremma, Chianti and the Valtiberina), helichrysum, angelica, dog roses (petals and rosehips), coriander, and orange and lemon peels, creating delicate floral notes and a distinctive aroma brought about by this unusual production method.

Modern cheeses aged in clay

Since antiquity, **clay has also been used for storing food**, as it creates a patina which slows down various degenerative processes. For example, a jar found in the tomb of Ptahmes, located **in the necropolis of Saqqara**, contains what has been identified as **the most ancient known solid cheese residue**. Coeval with its vessel, from the 13th century BC, the cheese contains a mixture of sheep, goat and cow milk according to proteomics analysis, as well as technically being 'aged' for 3,200 years!

Despite challenging circumstances (an alkaline environment and desert conditions), the clay has permitted the detection of an interesting level of stability in the product.

Conciato romano is an ancient cheese mentioned by **Pliny** and **Martial**, **produced in the Alto Casertano area**, aged

in earthenware jars. The cheese wheels, not very large and made of cow, sheep or goat milk and rennet, are treated (*conciate*) with water in which *pettole* (a local hand-made pasta) have been boiled, which adds a thin layer of starch, and then a mixture of oil, vinegar, herbs and chilli peppers. The almost entirely anaerobic environment of its ageing vessels produces a characteristic persistent pungency.

Cocciuto is a *caciocavallo* cheese from **Irpinia**, aged by being enclosed in clay on a potter's wheel. When the clay shell is cracked, ideally no less than three months after the clay-packing date inscribed thereon, the cheese is not particularly hard, with high elasticity and a pronounced undercrust. Its flavour is milky and sweet, with a pleasant and elegant hint of piquancy.

Prolonging shelf life allows cheeses, including those that **undergo clay *cap-patura*** (protective coating), to be organoleptically 'personalised' in distinctive ways.

In the area of the Grappa massif, a cheese called **Morlacco increà** was once produced. It was covered with raw clay from Possagno and aged under sand. Herdsmen would keep one for Christmas night, when a precise hammer blow cracked the shell, and the fragrance of summer herbs and flowers flooded the home.

In Sardinia, in the historic Gerrei area which borders Ogliastra, a cheese is made just as the Nuragic shepherds did: **axridda**, or *su casu cun s'axridda*, recognised as a PAT (Traditional Agrifood Product). It is a high-fat semi-cooked curd cheese made with raw cow's milk and produced only in spring. Maturation is performed using the standard process of turning and cleaning the cheese; when it begins to 'sweat' it is enclosed in an emulsion of Escalaplano clay and mastic oil and aged up to two years. Its crumbly, white or straw-coloured semi-hard interior has a toasty fragrance reminiscent of dried fruit and hay; its flavour is astringent, slightly sour and salty, and faintly piquant.

Giancarlo Burri



Spirulina: *a new food frontier*

by **Flavio Dusio**
Novara Academician

Beyond academic knowledge, understanding novel nutrients like spirulina requires a flair for contemporary culinary 'cross-fertilisation' and its new flavours.

Spirulina, which is named for its spiral form, is not a true alga, but a microorganism in the phylum of unicellular photosynthetic prokaryotes called *Cyanobacteria*. The supplement called 'spirulina' generally consists of two species: *Arthrospira platensis* and *Arthrospira maxima*, whose photosynthetic activity gives them a blue-green hue. Spirulina lives in warm tropical and



subtropical lakes, and was a dietary staple for Aztecs and other Central American populations. It is now cultivated in artificial ponds that are only 40cm deep, kept at a stable temperature and stirred regularly with paddles. Once harvested, spirulina **is dried and made into powder, tablets or flakes**. Its potential for counteracting malnutrition has given it worldwide attention: it is **championed by UNESCO** and **defined by the FAO as a super food and "food of the future"**.

It is considered the best non-animal protein source

Its high nutrient density, combining proteins, vitamins, minerals, essential fats and antioxidants, makes it a **nutraceutically and functionally unique food**. Spirulina is considered a superlative non-animal protein source. Its protein content by dry weight exceeds that of meat, powdered milk, cereals and soya, thanks to its inclusion of all the essential amino acids, particularly leucine, isoleucine and valine, which are directly recruited by the musculoskeletal system. Spirulina, unlike animal products, does not need cooking to make its nutrients available. It is a raw form of complete water-soluble protein; **a gramme of spirulina is four times as easily assimilated as beef protein**.

Its most interesting components from the health perspective are phycobilins, which are photosynthetic pigments typical of cyanobacteria whose role is to absorb light, indispensable for algal growth. Their molecular structure recalls that of bile pigments such as bilirubin; they are **particularly potent antioxi-**

dants, 20 times more than vitamin C and 19 times more than vitamin E. This antioxidant effect is manifested by counteracting the oxidation of lipids in the liver. Their anti-inflammatory action is similar to that of NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), inhibiting the COX-2 enzyme as a medicine would. Spirulina's lipid component consists of mono- and polyunsaturated fats including oleic acid and alpha-linoleic acid. Spirulina ranks just after human milk and some vegetables as an **excellent source of alpha-linolenic acid (omega 3)** which is essential in infancy and reduces inflammatory prostaglandins in adulthood. Spirulina contains 10 times the iron of common vegetables; that iron is over 60% absorbable.

Today we can benefit from spirulina in our diet

Today we can benefit from spirulina in our diet by consuming a readily available, pleasantly flavoured **brown rice flour pasta containing 2% spirulina**. Within a weight-control diet, particularly for diabetics, spirulina **reduces the post-prandial glycaemic peak**. Its **absence of gluten** makes it safe for caeliac disease patients and other gluten-sensitive individuals. The presence of soluble dietary fibre in brown rice promotes propionate production, thereby controlling cholesterol synthesis. Finally, bifidobacteria combat the proliferation of potentially harmful bacteria. Making use of this information within the context of a true Mediterranean Diet, combined with whole-grain (unrefined) foods, would greatly benefit our health.