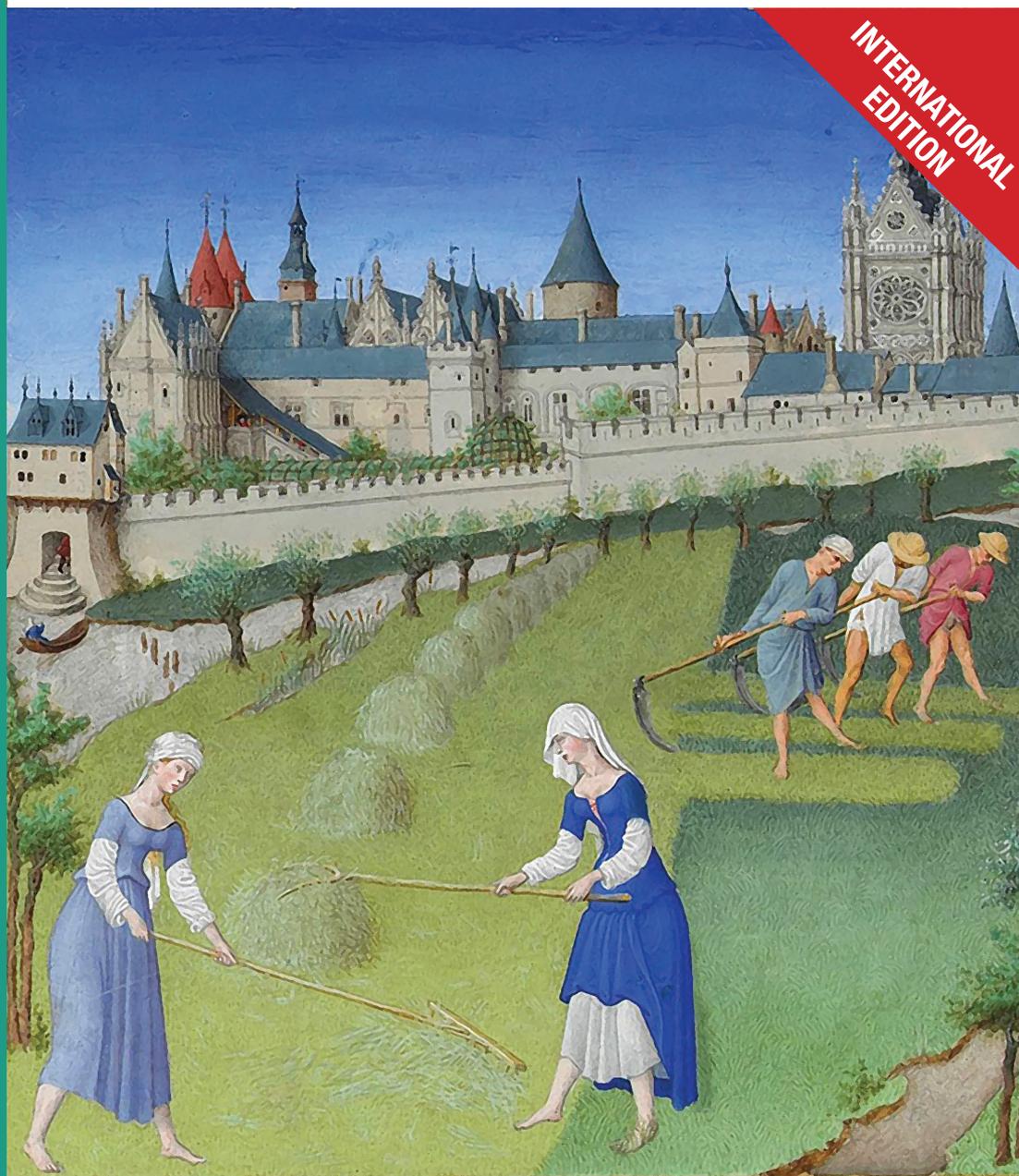


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L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI
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GIAN LUIGI PONTI, GIÒ PONTI, DINO VILLANI,
EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: graphic elaboration of a detail from a miniature in *Le Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (month of June: stacking hay) (1412-1416); Limbourg brothers, Musée Condé, Chantilly

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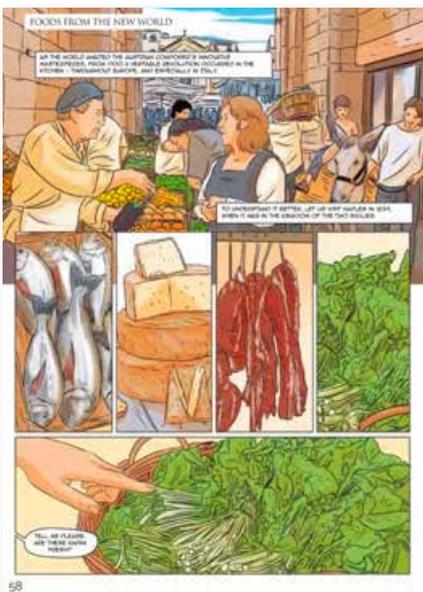
Defending and improving our cuisine

We are honoured to be passionate stewards of its traditions.

In 2018 the Mondadori publishing house published the bestseller **Denominazione di Origine Inventata** (*Invented Denomination of Origin* - a play on the 'Controlled Denomination of Origin' food label) by **Alberto Grandi**, Associate Professor of Food History at the University of Parma. With his captivating, well-documented prose, the author demolished certain beliefs about the nature and origin of some of our foremost food products. Now the same publisher and author, in league with **Daniele Soffiati**, have ventured onwards by publishing the dramatically titled **La cucina italiana non esiste** (*Italian cuisine does not exist*). Its essential message is that "Italian cuisine was invented fifty years ago by the food industry and cleverly narrated by our gastronationalists". Bam! Besides deploring the horrendous echoes of other nationalisms in living memory, we take pride in being passionate stewards of our cuisine and its traditions.

Claims that our traditions don't exist are missing the point

This clearly isn't the place to refute the authors' worldview, but maintaining that our best recipes were invented by emigrants to America and made famous by the food industry



by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

truly seems based on unsubstantiated personal opinions. Claims that **Michelangelo** can't have eaten Colonnata lard because it's a recent invention, and that Pachino tomatoes were unknown in Pachino until Israeli researchers developed them only decades ago, are correct; but these aren't secrets and have been documented by many authors for quite some time. To extrapolate that there's no such thing as tradition because food was different in Roman and mediaeval times entirely misses the point.

Our **History of Italian Cuisine in Comics** traces the origins and manifold variations of our best-loved recipes, acknowledging Arab influence and especially ingredients from the Americas, and explaining the food industry's role in facilitating and sometimes improving our cuisine. This does not negate our food culture, but instead reinforces it.

Local cuisines, like a mosaic, form a composite national whole

When **Orio Vergani** founded our Academy in 1953, he and its other founders pondered how to name the association. Finally they chose 'Italian Academy of Cuisine' rather than 'Academy of Italian Cuisine', because Italian cuisine encompasses the totality of diverse local cuisines which,

like a mosaic, form a composite national whole. Personally, like many Academicians, I have lived through a glorious time for our cuisine, appreciably improved since the days of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Better ingredients (oil, wine and cheese are examples) and better cooking and preparation methods developed in part by our cooks in the Eighties and Nineties, but also, undeniably, the work of **Artusi** and **Ada Boni**, have laid the foundations for our current cookery. If our cuisine has little or nothing to do with Renaissance banquets, that matters not at all. Finally, to clarify: we are not asserting that our cuisine is the best in the world. We dislike rankings; many other cuisines are amazing. Simply, **our dishes have distinctive features that identify us**, and we must not only defend them but also improve them. Always.



Storming the buffet

by **Attilio Borda Bossana**
Messina Academician

This food service format grants diners maximum freedom, but must not be a 'free-for-all'.

Buffets conveniently provide main dishes, pastries, fruit and beverages to guests during ceremonies, parties, receptions and other gatherings. Cutlery, crockery, glasses, napkins and savouries must be laid out from the beginning, while sweets are set apart, as are wine and other drinks. **Organising a buffet requires adherence to certain rules:** participants must observe basic etiquette, since they are sharing food

just as tablemates would. For example, they must not lean over the serving dishes to get a better look, touch the serving dishes with hands, or take food from them with personal cutlery, but only with serving cutlery; they must not waste food, only taking what they shall eat. They must not inelegantly swarm the serving tables when dessert arrives, and must, above all, **remember that abundance is not licence to gorge.**

An award-winning short film depicts a grotesque, farcical assault on a buffet

These few guidelines aim to avoid the veritable assaults on the buffet 'exalted' by an eponymous short film from 2016 by **Santa De Santis** and **Alessandro d'Ambrosi**, winners of the Best Short Film award in 2018 from *DOC Wine Trav-*

el Food® and in 2019 at the *Cineciok* short film competition held in Modica, the city of chocolate. The brief film is a parodic representation of a refined high-society vernissage which devolves into a farcical, grotesque assault on the buffet. **Buffet, available on YouTube, displays the participants' insatiable hunger in an epic, merciless, tragicomic battle:** a metaphor which surreally comments upon human barbarity, hypocrisy and individualism. **An onslaught with no quarter given,** where staff brace for the worst while the vernissage guests maniacally storm the appetiser platter. The scene is not quite so surreal after all, as any of us will have at one time or another found ourselves ensnared among elbows and armpits en route to a tray of tempura or *maccheroncini alla Norma*. The historian **Massimo Montanari** perceives the buffet as "rather subversive, transcending structure and rules, granting maximum freedom to diners. It is dynamic, creative, unpredictable. It apotheoses the interactive essence of convivial gatherings."

Indeed, the buffet 'reinvents' what is termed *service à la russe*, the 'Russian-style' food service which emerged in Russian diplomatic circles a couple of centuries ago in Paris, otherwise known as *gueridon* service after the food-serving cart used for it, which is often decorated in a refined, elegant and even sophisticated manner.

The widespread buffet-storming phenomenon therefore seems incomprehensible, and may be due to pent-up emotions, the 'motifemes' of narratologists and 'archetypes' of psychoanalysts, presumably seeded by postwar food short-



Painting by Jean Louis Forain: The Buffet (1884)

A British buffet from the 1970s



vent of nineteenth-century bourgeois cuisine, only to disappear definitively in the second half of that century as lifestyles, habits and food customs radically changed, and food was displayed for diners to choose.

*Food culture sets rules
that circumscribe
the freedom of the table*

Today's buffet dynamism relegates the conservative cuisine and opulent banquets of the Renaissance and Baroque eras to history. **Meals become social acts** taking whatever form each diner desires, and can even become vehicles for individualism, revealing the metaphor for life wherein ravenous revellers reveal their shoddy upbringing by piling their plates high as if this were their last chance to eat. Buffets, like regattas, even feature **placement strategies** to ensure **a head start in grabbing plates and piling them up**. So we must not set aside or even jettison basic norms of courtesy, taking refuge in **the dignity which prevents us from behaving like famished beasts. The standard should be the same as in restaurants:** a taste of the appetisers, a first and second course, maybe some vegetables. Plates should contain 3 or 4 things and not be more than 70% full.

Wait before 'plunging' into the buffet crowd, and then take only a little, returning for more later; respect earlier arrivals, rather than 'boxing out' some hapless old lady as in a basketball game; be sparing with knife use; keep a napkin under your plate; and, for dessert, avoid seconds, but choose two or three small samples on the same plate. **Few rules, because a buffet, like life, must be savoured;** and, as Fred informs his wife Wilma in the 1994 *Flintstones* comedy film directed by **Brian Levant:** "In the buffet of life there are no second helpings. You gotta fill up your plate, top off your cup, and stuff a few rolls in your pocket."

Attilio Borda Bossana

ages. An extract from a censored letter sent by **Arturo Valdemeri** to **Lisetta Formenti** in autumn 1944 documents the paucity of staples in Milan over four years after the war had begun: "Daily meals consist only of soup, cooked apples, rice or pasta and a little cheese, while wine, meat and eggs have become luxuries whose prices are arbitrarily raised by speculators".

*Buffets are said to be named
after the cook Pierre Buffet*

John Dickie, a professor at University College London, is the author of *Con Gusto. Storia degli italiani a tavola (Con Gusto: History of Italians at the Table)*, published by Laterza in 2007, which **traces the origins of the buffet, leading us on a journey through time and Italian culinary traditions**, from the Romans' Lucullian banquets to their opulent Renaissance descendants, through the Risorgimento (Italian unification), the Great War and the culinary traditions of the twentieth century. "Italian food at its best", he writes, "has the charisma which derives from an almost poetic rapport with place and identity. The main reason why Italians in general eat so well is simply that cuisine reinforces their sense of origin and identity". The buffet was and remains food culture's way of permitting freedom at the table, that is, **freely choosing what to eat and how and when to serve oneself**.

The simultaneous display of dishes accentuates - almost paradoxically - the collective nature of the meal, **emphasising the sharing principle**. It is an 'experiential buffet', then, as the Academy's Honorary President **Giovanni Ballarini** wrote, because **with buffets "much is changing in the traditional roles of the various foods, dishes and preparations but especially in food-related behaviour"**. Ballarini also noted the buffet's **naming legend**: though not its origin or invention, at least its organisation and codification are credited to **Pierre Buffet**, a cook for the French king **Francis I of Valois** (1494-1547), who brought a large chest containing food and costly dishes on a military campaign to Italy. Once opened, this chest became a sideboard on which to display viands for the French king to choose from. In Italy, Pierre Buffet passed into the service of **Gian Matteo Giberti**, Bishop of Verona, whose secretary **Francesco Berni** he also befriended. That mobile chest, which formed part of the royal kitchen's equipment, **became the model for sideboards with storage areas** for displaying cold savouries, desserts and beverages, known as 'buffet', **later associated with similar sideboards called contro-buffet with glass doors for glassware storage**. While ready-made food and drink was offered on buffets, the table remained the place for hot food served in the mediaeval, Renaissance and then Baroque food service styles. Furniture such as these buffets and 'counter-buffets' **survived the ad-**



Puccini: musician and gourmet

by **Maurizio Fazzari**, *London Delegate*
and **Etta Carnelli De Benedetti**, *London Academician*

100 years after his death, a portrait of the Maestro with a passion for fine dining.

2024 marks a century since the death of the Maestro who raised Italian music to a level of excellence which ushered it into the world's most important theatres.

During his youth in the Milan Conservatory, the Maestro developed an immense passion for fine food, and would end his working days sharing dinner with his friend **Mascagni** according to their finan-

cial means. It is reported that if his appetite far outstripped his finances, Puccini **amused himself by inventing delicious but affordable recipes** such as **pasta with eels or herring and radishes**.

His discussions with Mascagni continued through the years, and their debate about the relative merits of *cacciucco* seafood soup from Livorno and Lucca-style roast coot has remained famous!

His love of Torre del Lago pervaded his life

What pervaded the Maestro's life was his love of Torre del Lago (literally 'Tower of the Lake'), where he composed some of his most important operas. **This love lasted over thirty years** and con-

tinued with his burial in that beloved land, as he **rests in a chapel belonging to the old lake house**, built on his son's initiative, and the notes of his compositions waft over him each year during the Puccini Festival.

This is how Puccini described the discovery of the village on Lake Massaciucoli in a letter sent from London in July 1900 to **Alfredo Caselli** in Lucca: "Torre del Lago, supreme joy, paradise, Elysian Eden, *torris eburnea, vas spirituale*, royal palace... inhabitants: 120; 12 houses... A tranquil town with splendid woods reaching towards the sea, populated by fallow deer, wild boar, hares, rabbits, pheasants, woodcocks... there are also abundant coots, wigeons, little grebes and shovellers..."

Arriving in Torre del Lago in the late 19th century, he was greeted at the small station by a welcome party of young artists with whom he later **founded the Bohème Club**.

Puccini's two great passions were music and hunting, such that he often mentioned his two familiar instruments: the piano and the rifle. For him, Lake Massaciucoli was the ideal place to cultivate both passions. When he was able to buy and restructure the Tower that gave the town its name, he could exit it directly on to the pier and set off on hunting expeditions with his friends, especially to hunt coots, snipes, tufted ducks and teals.

"Coots must not be plucked, but entirely skinned and soaked in red wine and vinegar for two hours." These were the **Maestro's instructions for preparing his beloved 'coot risotto'** written to the Viareggio hotelier **Piero Malfatti**, who was hosting several singers, including the then-famous **Hariclea Darclée**, invited to Torre del Lago to prepare and rehearse *Tosca*.



Giacomo Puccini

The Maestro had a daily dialogue with his cook

As an avid hunter surrounded by his Bohème Club crew, he was always eager for boisterous gatherings featuring authentic Tuscan fare and, especially, game recipes.

Perhaps the Puccini home's lead character was the cook, **Isola Nencetti Valini**, with whom the Maestro had a daily dialogue, especially after extensive hunting expeditions resulted in a splendid supply of snipes and coots.

Isola was also loved by the author of the libretto for **Gianni Schicchi**, **Giovacchino Forzano**, who cheekily scribbled the following in the opera's manuscript: "When Gianni Schicchi went to bed/ you wanted poetry, you said./ As tribute for this verse of mine,/ on snipe tomorrow night we'll dine!"

Thanks to Isola, **the typical menu of a cheerful Puccini soirée** included **risotto, snipe fricassee, sparkling wine from the Tuscan hills, and 'Portuguese milk pudding' with chopped almonds and caramelised sugar.**

Puccini and his merry Bohemian gang were dedicated gourmets, clearly. We must not forget that the composer, despite favouring Torre del Lago, **frequent-ed Parma, with its boiled meat platters**, faithfully visiting the venerable *trattoria* Fontana near the City Hall. He was also an aficionado of beans and *salamini* from Lucca, but among legumes he **preferred pan-steamed Sorana beans**, which he praised in verse: "Elusive bean, I seek you far and wide/ but only in this town can you be found./ I lift my spoon, and melodies resound:/ my stomach and my ears are satisfied".

The frolicsome Bohème Club

Puccini and his friends from the *Club della Bohème* (Bohème Club) regularly gathered in a shed by Lake Massaciucoli, which had been the workshop and

abode of the cobbler **Gragnani** (a superb cook!). Under the Maestro's direction, **club rules** were drafted:

- The Bohème Club's members, faithful interpreters of the spirit in which the club was founded, swear to drink well and eat even better;
- Sulkers, pedants, weak stomachs, the poor in spirit, the squeamish and other such wretches are banned and will be furiously driven out by the members;
- The President shall resolve disputes but may hinder the treasurer's collection of dues;
- The treasurer has licence to abscond with the club's funds;
- The club's premises feature oil lamp lighting, and members' butts' may serve in lieu;
- Lawful games are strictly prohibited;
- Silence is forbidden;
- Wisdom is not permitted even in exceptional circumstances.

In the Club we find Puccini the carefree, jovial, happy hunter and gourmet, alongside such close friends as **Alfredo Caselli** (grocer and friend of the composer Catalani), **Guido Vandini** (music teacher), **Cleto Bevilacqua** (conductor), **Luigi Illica** (his librettist), the Rev. **Pietro Panichelli**, and **Renato Fucini** (a friend of the Ginori family).

Among the dishes enjoyed by the cheery chums during their light-hearted evenings together, **coots reigned supreme, being favourites of the Maestro**, who invented recipes with flair. Let us conclude that since the great Maestro's music evokes deep and passionate emotions, his creativity admirably combined the pleasures of the palate and of the soul. Together, Giacomo Puccini's music and food are a homage to our country's passion, elegance and cultural bounty.

**Maurizio Fazzari,
Etta Carnelli De Benedetti**

GIACOMO PUCCINI'S COOT RISOTTO



Ingredients: 6 handfuls of rice, 1 coot, 50g of butter, 3 ripe San Marzano tomatoes, Cognac, red wine, garlic, sage, celery, carrot, onion, ginger, extra-virgin olive oil, stock, salt, pepper.

Preparation: skin the coot entirely (plucking is therefore unnecessary) and submerge it in wine and vinegar for 2 hours. Quarter it, brown it and baste it with Cognac. Debone the browned pieces and mince them with a mezzaluna (half-moon) knife; mince and add the herbs and vegetables; combine with the rice, pepper and salt and bring to a simmer, gradually adding the stock.



Vines of the Cinque Terre

by **Alberto Scaramuccia**

Researcher on the local history of La Spezia

A famed wine from a land as magical as it is exhausting to cultivate.

The Cinque Terre ('Five Lands'), known in earlier times as *cinque castella* (Five Castles), are villages grouped under that umbrella term due to their position perched on precipitous rocks overlooking the sea. Today they are so inundated by tourists that measures are under discussion proposing to regulate their influx and limit the resulting damage. Many years ago, however, these five villages, roosting between the coastline and the peaks which suddenly rise from the sea, inhabited a landscape which is both arid and steep: two disadvantages which vie for the title of chief inconvenience.

So vertiginous are those heights that as early as the 15th century it was written that even birds had difficulty flying up such "raw stone without a trace of mirth". Up there, the roots of plants run along the ground like "ivy clinging to a wall": the only difference being one of direction, which, for ivy, is vertical. Despite all this, however, illustrious chroniclers of yore noted that the territory produced "such a liquor that no Baron, Prince or King would fail to be greatly honoured when the wine of the Five Lands comes to the table". Even earlier, **Franco Sacchetti**, by trade a writer of tales, narrated that **Vieri de' Bardi**, wi-



shing to “pour some noble foreign wine into his own, called for *magliuoli* (vine cuttings) from the Vernaccia vines of Corniglia to be sent from Portovenere”. When, in 1966, the Vernaccia produced in San Gimignano became the first Italian wine to obtain DOC (Controlled Denomination of Origin) recognition, Vieri attained renewed fame for having introduced the cultivation of those vines to the “city of beautiful towers” from the La Spezia coast around the year 1200, according to extant sources.

The cachet of Cinque Terre wine is almost prehistoric, therefore. Its remote origin is etymologically confirmed: *vernaccia* comes from Vernazza, an oft-visited village in the Cinque Terre, and the penultimate on the journey towards Genoa.

Vineyards grow on terraces called pianelle dug into the mountain slopes

This illustrious reputation is brought about not by any miracle or secret but by the sweat of those willing to cultivate vines despite knowing that the area’s terrain will require **a constantly bent back**. It is then, when the spine is no longer straight, that work becomes exhausting, draining *travagio* - travail - which saps all strength and erases even the energy to vent one’s fatigue by cursing. Because these vine rows are grown on *pianelle*, the terraces torn out of the mountainside as if by the sheer force of teeth and nails. These heights, though not massive, nonetheless present **formidable obstacles tamed over the centuries by dry-stone walls**: a multitude of terraces where Mother Nature had created only slopes.

We should not assume that stacking stones is enough to build a wall. That requires **a technique which, over many years, has become refined enough to qualify as an art**. The area to be walled must be prepared as needed. Exits for rainwater must be provided; gravel for drainage must be laid; and finally, when the work is almost finished, one must insert the



posa: a longer stone which sticks out of the wall almost like a seat. Here, during the grape harvest, pickers will place baskets loaded with grapes; and here, on the way up to the high wine cellars, they will sit - *posarsi* - for a few moments to catch their breath.

This is the panorama, the spectacle of the terraces built into the mountain descending from the sky to the sea: the green of the mountains above the blue of the waves, interrupted by the whiteness of stones, while from on high the sun beats down relentlessly, conferring abundant sugar on each grape as it ripens: an accumulating store of riches which will be gathered at the harvest.

We must not think that grape-harvesting must have been an easy task

We must heed the historians, as we ourselves could never imagine it: “pickers must lower themselves from the heights on ropes to harvest the grapes which produce a wine so excellent that words fail to describe it”. Those who marvel at the area’s acrobatic architecture today do not remember these local traditions.

This is the reality that spawned the Dionysian myth surrounding the wine made here. D’Annunzio, in the dithyramb “Feria d’Agosto” (“August Fair”), celebrates “the Five Lands’ juicy grapes - both dark and blonde/ and *inguistare* brimming with Vernazza and Corniglia wine”. Anticipating modern advertising which communicates through images, he deploys that ancient word harkening back to an even remoter origin: the *inguistara* is the carafe, as round-bellied as it is long-necked, that protends itself in-

vingly towards the lips of the thirsty and the greedy alike.

Ever the aesthete, Gabriele does not mean to show off his erudition but merely to recall that ambrosia’s ancestral tradition. *Inguistara* is a patent of noble flavour, certifying the aristocracy of taste, the élite of the palate. It contains the myriad savoured sips taken sparingly and gratefully lest we miss a single breath of their fragrance.

Sea spray lands on the juicy grapes hanging in bunches from the rows of vines

What guarantees quality is not the cleverly obscure word but the delighted consensus that these wines have long attracted for their **singular bouquet created when the raging waves hurl sea spray into the air**. This almost blasphemous collision releases innumerable droplets into the air; weighted by salt, they obey the laws of physics by falling immediately, if gently, over the juicy grapes hanging in bunches from the vines arrayed on the slopes, **giving them a special aroma which will render their liquor precious and unique**. Its **distinctively fruity flavour** satisfies all who quaff it, whether to slake their thirst or calm their turbulent passions.

This cocktail of disparate moments has been distilled, who knows when, into an adjective which is as *recherché*, chic, sophisticated, as it is etymologically elusive: the sparkling wine so painstakingly extracted from the five villages clinging to their sea cliffs is known by the unusual term *razzese*. I’m no philologist, but I like to think that its similarity to *razza*, ‘race’ or ‘breed’, simply indicates ‘well bred’. Good breeding, to be savoured.

Alberto Scaramuccia