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Change looms for high-end restaurants too

Buzzwords, exotic ingredients and aesthetic flair are not enough: 'fine dining' is on the way out.

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

In dictionaries, the Italian word *impiattare* means 'hide'; the reflexive *impiattarsi* thus means 'to conceal oneself'. However, this usage has fallen into near-obsolence. Instead, **another meaning has gained a footing since the 1970s: 'carefully arranging food on a plate'**. In the wake of numerous television cooking programmes, this term **fully entered spoken vocabulary in the 2000s**, alongside its derived *impiattamento*: none other than 'plating'. It is used chiefly by cooks to describe their elaborately creative arrangements of food nestled amid green sauce commas, red full stops, yellow stars, silvery granules, pondlets, beds, edible decoration and more.

'Plating' has also birthed the horror of the *coppapasta*: the ring mould used for corralling rolled-up spaghetti into cylinders on a plate. This geometric form is immediately destroyed by diners, releasing the fragrances, colours and hidden ingredients of the food they are about to taste.

Here's the trick: amaze and raise prices

By this preamble we mean that **some aspects of so-called high-end cuisine or fine dining are tiring many passionate restaurant-goers**. Besides the overdone *décor*, we are no longer impressed by the litany of unknown exotic ingredients stashed in the prolix description of each dish. The novelty has worn off; we've discovered the 'trick': amaze and increase prices. Yet not even these exorbitant prices can make ends meet, and **high-end restaurants are undergoing a crisis**. With the end of restaurant guides that connoisseurs eagerly acquired (even two or three) yearly the moment they were published, laudatory articles have also ceased. Venues are now in the hands of press offices, bloggers, social media and other unreliable but ubiquitous and, crucially, free tools. The Miche-



lin 'red guide' survives, despite not selling as well as before; at least it makes a splash. There's also the ranking offered by *The World's 50 Best Restaurants*, but it lacks credibility and public familiarity; however, being well sponsored, it is adored by restaurateurs worldwide.

Maintaining a high rank entails massive costs nowadays

Nowadays, maintaining a high rank entails massive costs in terms of personnel (not only the chef's pay), furnishings, storage and purchasing first-rate ingredients. **This is compensated for with luxury private meals, exclusive catering, television appearances, merchandising and new branches, even in the humbler guise of bistros or informal eateries**. But this requires huge efforts and investments, leading to rampant stress which affects food quality. **Many fail, often despite their fame**. They give up or change. Everything is changing in the world, including a type of prestigious dining experience that was all the rage twenty-odd years ago and is now on the wane.





Culinary art: a voyage from the past to the present

by **Angelo Sinisi**
Bucarest Academician

Rediscovering traditional roots and embracing innovation: a way to offer a cuisine that respects the past while enthusiastically looking to the future.

Culinary art has traversed centuries of evolution, transforming itself, in response to cultural, technological and social change, from our grandmothers' traditional cookery to the sophisticated creations of modern-day prize-winning restaurants. Food has always played a central role in our lives, and in this article, we will explore the differences between the culinary art of yore and its contemporary incarnation, pointing out how its transformations reflect our continually evolving society.

Today, culinary art has embraced globalisation, technology and innovation

Today, culinary art has embraced globalisation, technology and innovation, morphing into a highly diversified, sophisticated form of expression: **modern cooks are not only artisans** but veritable artists and scientists, **able to experiment and reinvent constantly**. In recent years, the gastroverse has un-



dergone a radical transformation with the advent of live cooking shows, food bloggers and food challenges, and **cuisine has found new avenues of expression and promotion**. Food bloggers and social media platforms have revolutionised the way we perceive and consume food: **recipe videos**, restaurant reviews and **food challenges** have become commonplace. Some restaurants offer cash prizes for consuming large portions within a predetermined time limit, thereby attracting attention and a vast clientele: such practices generate visibility and engagement, but at what cost?

The spectacularisation of cooking may have negative implications

Food challenges, however amusing and spectacular, may have negative implications: **promoting excessive food consumption as entertainment** risks dismissing such serious problems as obesity and eating disorders. The spectacularisation of cooking and of food challenges partially reflects the public's demand for increasingly extreme and sensational content; however, this does not necessarily point us in the right direction. It is vital for **content creators and restaurateurs to consider their actions' effects on public health** and on perceptions of food.

Culinary art, considered a refined and creative mode of expression, risks relegation to the background: **cuisine is not merely a question of quantity but also quality, culture, passion, innovation and creativity**. Promoting gastronomy as a sensory and cultural experience, rather than mere spectacle, is essential for preserving its integrity.

To find a balance, we must change our viewpoint: restaurateurs and content creators must acknowledge their **responsibility to promote healthy and sustainable food habits**, for example by organising **events that celebrate ingredient quality, culinary traditions and gastronomic innovation**.



Guaranteeing a sustainable, respectful future for gastronomy

While the phenomena of food bloggers and food challenges reflect the evolution of our digital society, it is crucial to **examine the long-term consequences of these trends**. Cuisine, as an art, deserves to be championed and respected, not only as a means of amusement but as an expression of culture and creativity. Only in this way can we guarantee a sustainable, respectful future for gastronomy and our health. Culinary art continues evolving, juggling tradition

and innovation: the future will probably include **increasing integration of advanced technologies with a return to traditional values of sustainability and quality**. Chefs will keep exploring new techniques and flavours, maintaining the essence of culinary art alive as a form of cultural and creative expression. Despite their differences, past and present cuisine share a common thread: a passion for food and the desire to create unique experiences. Rediscovering traditional roots while embracing innovation may give rise to a cuisine that respects the past while enthusiastically looking to the future.

Angelo Sinisi





A fruity Mexican ambassador

by Giuseppe Vinelli

Foggia Academician

The prickly pear, an Aztec emblem depicted on the Mexican flag, has become equally iconic of Sicily, its second largest grower.

According to legend, after two centuries of nomadism, the **Az**tecs founded their capital, **Tenochtitlán** (on the site of today's Mexico City), around 1325, on a spot of a plateau where a golden eagle (a sacred symbol) rested on a fruit-laden prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia*, named after the Greek city of Opus where cactus-like plants grew in antiquity). Nearly two centuries later, in 1493, the seeds of that cactus reached Europe, borne by **Christopher Columbus**, convinced that he'd reached the Indies by a western route; hence the plant's name, *Opuntia ficus-indica*: 'indian fig', or *fico d'India* in Italian. That cactus became symbolic for the Aztecs, whose descendants included it in the modern Mexican coat of arms and flag. Indeed, the central white stripe of **the Mexican national flag** (a tricolour similar to the Italian flag) bears the national coat of arms: **a golden eagle perched on a fruit-laden prickly pear cactus**, holding a rattlesnake in its beak.

It rapidly spread throughout the Mediterranean basin

Being **adaptable to heat** and aridity, the prickly pear cactus rapidly spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, **particularly southern Italy**. Italy is the



second-largest prickly pear grower in the world, after Mexico.

90% of Italian prickly pears grow in Sicily, an island of which the plant has likewise become symbolic. Besides Calabria and Sardinia, it is also abundant in **Apulia**, especially in Manfredonia, on the Gargano foothills.

Describing Apulia in 1934 in *Il deserto e dopo* (*The Desert and Afterwards*), the poet **Giuseppe Ungaretti**, special correspondent of the daily *Gazzetta del Popolo*, expressed wonderment about the "prickly pear forest" around Manfredonia, which "took every beholder's breath away".

There are three cultivars, differing in **fruit colour**: yellow for *sulfarina*, the most common; white for *muscaredda*; and red for *sanguigna*.



The fruits that mature in August, known as **agostani**, are smaller, while those that ripen in autumn, **tardivi** or **bastardoni**, are **larger and more succulent**.

A curious fact: Sardinian prickly pears have no spines.

Prickly pears have several culinary uses

In culinary terms, besides being eaten fresh, prickly pears are made into **juices, liqueurs, jams and jellies**, including the spiced pudding called *mostarda* in Sicily.

Must for Yuletide cartellate fritters comes from the Gargano massif and Manfredonia.

The 'cladodes' (leaflike pads) can be eaten **fresh, in brine, pickled, candied** or as jam. From insects on the cladodes, the Aztecs extracted cochineal, a distinctive red pigment.

Rich in vitamin C, prickly pears **have many therapeutic and medicinal properties**: antioxidant, astringent, anti-inflammatory, wound-healing, emollient, moisturising.

Finally, they are used in creams, lotions and shampoos **that favour hair growth**.



Legume pasta: *unknown, or nearly so!*

by **Maurizia Debiaggi**

Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Academician

*A delicious alternative
to traditional durum
wheat pasta.*

Legume pasta: unheard of. Or at least, until recently. **Like all innovations, it has tiptoed into our diets** to overcome suspicions of being a surrogate for Italy's traditional flagship dish. Its history is relatively recent, of course, compared with our customary durum wheat pasta, and it is traceable to dietary evolution and current nutritional needs.

*How and why has it landed
on our tables?*

How and why has it landed on our tables? It **left its niche in the early 2000s**, gaining popularity and becoming commonplace on supermarket shelves. Italian companies and major





international brands have now expanded their product range to include pasta made of lentils, chickpeas, peas and other legumes, contributing to its large-scale distribution.

This diffusion is due in large measure to increased interest in diets revolving around vegetable proteins and **growing awareness of legumes' nutritional benefits**: according to dietary guidelines, we should eat between two and four legume portions a week!

In a nutshell, pulse pasta is an intriguing, delicious alternative to traditional pasta. The choice, of course, depends on personal preferences in taste and consistency. On the first nibble we realise that a chickpea and a durum *fusillo* greatly differ organoleptically.

The legume version has a stronger flavour and a less elastic texture than its durum cousin; it's an entirely different experience, especially for lovers of durum pasta 'al dente', perhaps of the sophisticated bronze-drawn variety!

Comparing durum and legume pasta

Comparing durum and legume pasta **without resorting to trite, hackneyed observations may be useful** for appreciating each pasta's **particularities and benefits**.

Legume pasta, with more protein than

traditional pasta, is ideal for vegetarians and vegans; its **higher fibre content** makes it excellent for digestion and for **maintaining satiety**; its **lower glycaemic index** helps to stabilise blood sugar; and, last but not least, **it is naturally gluten-free**, providing an opportunity for those with coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity. It has a more pronounced flavour, often recalling its legume of origin, and a grainier or denser consistency. Instead, **wheat pasta is a good source of complex carbohydrates**, can be fortified with vitamins and minerals, and in its whole-grain guise offers more fibre than its refined version. It has a more neutral taste than legume pasta, and a **pleasantly elastic texture**; it is extremely versatile, **adapting well to a vast array of recipes and seasonings**. Let us not forget its excellent ability to absorb sauces, offering a greater balance between flavours.

An answer to nutritional and environmental needs

In environmental terms, an increasingly important perspective when it comes to agriculture, **legume cultivation can assuredly be more sustainable**, requiring fewer resources and contributing to nitrogen fixation in the soil. The environmental effects of wheat cultivation depend on agricultural practices: orga-

nic and integrated farming, which are well-established by now, can improve sustainability.

Concentrating on such specific aspects lets us appreciate **each variety's unique features** without reductive direct comparisons, considering legume pasta's apparently bright future. Indeed, it is a modern answer to contemporary dietary and nutritional needs, reflecting changing food preferences, especially **growing plant protein consumption**.

Legume pasta production and consumption will probably continue to increase. Research and development about legume-based foods will probably bring more innovation and variety, further improving quality and consumer acceptance.

What about recipes? My favourite is lentil pasta with capers and olives: a must-try!

Maurizia Debiaggi

