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The Academy's vitality

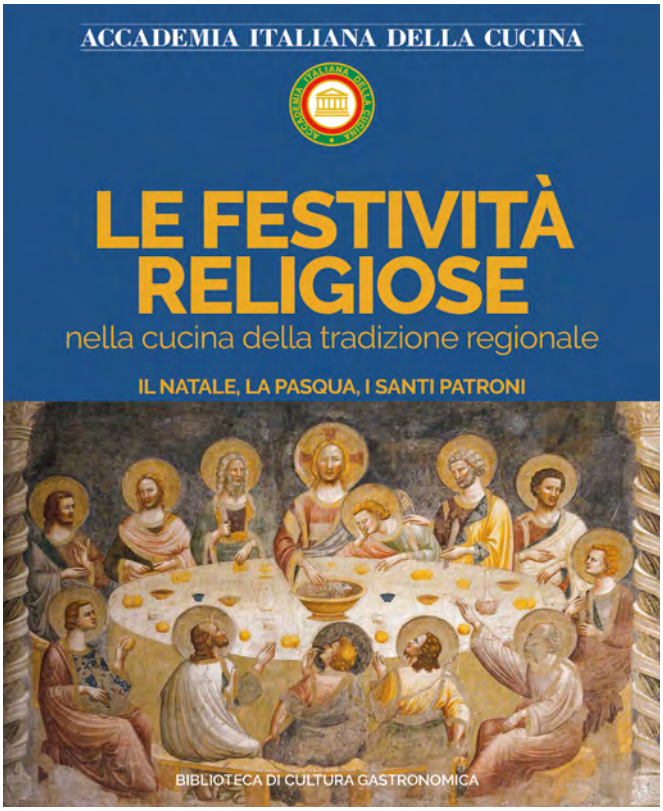
by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

Despite the difficult situation that we are living through, the Academy isn't stopping.

Thanks to the combined efforts of our editorial, graphic, secretarial and printing staff, the April issue of *Civiltà della Tavola* is also ready in a timely fashion and in complete form. The magazine's second part, dedicated to Academic life, describes events from January and February when normal activities were still occurring. Obviously, beginning with the next issue, that section will be much reduced; however, **we invite you all to tell the Editorial Office about any initiatives implemented by the Delegations**, which will be published as usual.

Worldwide, we live day by day, awaiting a vaccine or the virus's demise

With the situation changing rapidly and convulsively, predictions are difficult if not impossible. We are all overwhelmed by the **proliferation of contradictory laws, decrees and ordinances spewed forth by national and local governments**. We are likewise amazed by the nothingness, though expressed with pompous authority, emanating from virologists, immunologists and other sundry scientists boasting mile-long academic résumés, who can essentially only say "blockade yourselves at home and wash your hands". Hence the general fatigue produced by the entirely useless talk shows broadcast nationwide from dawn to dusk. Masks don't help! Counterorder: masks are mandatory! Social distancing: one metre! Counterorder: 1.8 metres! But why 1.8 rather than 2? Because the directive comes from the ineffable WHO, who uses yards, and mandates 2 yards! Restaurant and bar tables will be that distance apart, but will we be seated alone? With spouses? With children? Perhaps other relatives? A mystery. We'll see: predictions are futile; all round the world we live day by day, waiting for big pharma to rescue us with drugs and vaccines or for the virus to wear itself out.



A new volume for the Food Culture Library

Meanwhile, we have almost finished the new volume of the ***Food Culture Library***, dedicated to **Religious Festival Cuisine**. This is a wholesale rewriting of an analogous work published in 2010, made possible by **the Regional Study Centres' contributions** and the impressive editing effort of reorganising the book according to the liturgical calendar instead of regions as before. This is a sumptuous volume, also thanks to its impressive miniatures, drawings and photographs and a **Prologue** written with evident conviction by **His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Comastri, Vicar General of His Holiness for the Vatican City**. Special thanks are also due to our **Legate for the Stato della Città del Vaticano, Mons. Giovanni Lo Giudice**, author of the book's **Introduction**, who also held an excellent conference on the same theme. I asked the printing office for a delay to facilitate the work's distribution to all Academicians once restrictions are eased. Soon, we hope.

#stayhomeandcook

by Elisabetta Cocito
Turin Academician

In these dramatic times, we find comfort in rediscovering the pleasure of preparing simple recipes, formerly forgotten or dormant in some corner of our memory.

Food in the time of Covid-19. Our lives have temporarily been upended at the level of daily habits, plunging us into a sudden new paradigm; all at once, most of us have more time in our hands than, perhaps, we have ever had. **So what should we do now? Our overall relationships with our homes have also been overhauled**, in every sense from the emotional to the practical.
Likewise, our approach to food acquires different nuances and accents. The order to "stay home" triggered a stockpiling rush. A clear-headed reading of statistics will show that our pantries are always overstuffed, and to a large extent filled with 'convenience foods' chosen on our behalf by others whose tastes become our own: the multinationals who decide for us. Hence the increasing incidence of 'collective cooking' (developed by the food industry following our demand for pre-cooked food), including the expanding, certainly convenient, but impersonal 'food delivery services'.
This is all devastatingly linked to the prevalence of obesity and food waste. Indeed, the data provided by the pertinent or-

ganisations show that haphazard food accumulation also creates disorder in our bodies and our fridges: we discard food at a rate which remains too high. To eliminate both obesity and waste, we would have to reclaim our relationship with food, thereby, where possible (and it is possible, with a smidgen of willpower and organisation), regaining control over our meals by the simple expedient of making them ourselves. We would learn to choose ingredients, shop more carefully, and rediscover the fact that cooking requires time, thought and love - and therefore we'd think twice before discarding food.

On the first day of 'house arrest', my oven exuded the aroma of fragrant bread

On the first day of 'house arrest', I instinctively entered my kitchen and instinctively prepared a savoury *focaccia* flatbread using a flour-and-potato dough. Only when my oven exuded the aroma of fragrant bread, which gradually filled the environs and eventually my entire home, I realised that I had baked my *madeleine de Proust*. This was my childhood *focaccia*, made by my grandmother, who had learnt its preparation during hard times, when flour was scarce and she supplemented the dough with potato. A forgotten delight, my 'comfort food' - and since then, I've baked one each day.

This little personal anecdote can exemplify how in these difficult times, when we cannot escape our own company and that of our immediate families, we might indeed derive comfort by rediscovering the joy of preparing simple foods which may have been forgotten or lain dormant in some corner of our minds, realising that dedicating some time to cooking, and therefore to our physical and psychological well-being, is not so laborious, time-consuming and fraught after all.

An additional benefit is the learning experience for our children, who are stuck at home with us: a cooking lesson, both culturally and socially. They may

discover foods of long ago, which in future, as happened to me, could become their personal *madeleine*, their own comforting little refuge.

All this provides a link to an article published in the daily paper *Il Sole 24 Ore* before the coronavirus-related restrictions; that is, when lifestyles were normal. Describing and sympathising with the anguish expressed by rapidly depopulating villages found all over Italy, the article suggested that government bodies provide economic aid or any other type of possible and feasible support for anyone opening restaurants in these locations, thereby attracting residents and reviving the towns. This would facilitate the **rediscovery of local specialities and ingredients** as well as these little-known or forgotten areas' natural beauty and, where applicable, architectural and historic landmarks.

Long ago, in times which I nevertheless imagine will be analogous to those awaiting us after the coronavirus battle ends, Mario Soldati declared that in order to find genuine foods and products one would have to venture forth, meaning outside the big cities. By travelling to small towns, one could sample and discover culinary gems, in which we are indeed one of the world's richest nations, if not the richest of all. **Starting to cook traditional meals at home could be one way of repairing the thread of memory** and concretising this dream, thereby contributing to our well-being and, importantly, to local economies.

Kneading dough anew to recover forgotten emotions

Likewise before the current difficulties which now practically monopolise media attention, an authoritative daily publication dedicated an entire page to a Piedmontese cook, recently awarded two Michelin stars, an innovator, an experimenter always on the lookout for new combinations. When interviewed, the chef described consultations with a psychologist in order to transform dishes from simple foods to vehicles for emotions and states of mind, by harnessing, I imagine, our senses' perceptive capacities.

I think a dish can certainly inspire emotions with new colours, textures, fragrances, and mingling or contrasting flavours, and even amaze us with special effects; but in times like these, I favour the inspiration produced by memories, by sinking one's hands into dough once again, feeling this familiar yet ancient sensation in one's fingers, and observing one's creation rising and growing in tandem with one's recollection thereof. In times like these, I believe more in the value and potency of my *focaccia* than in expertly manufactured emotions.

Elisabetta Cocito

Easter eggs
life triumphant

by Morello Pecchioli
Honorary Academician for Verona

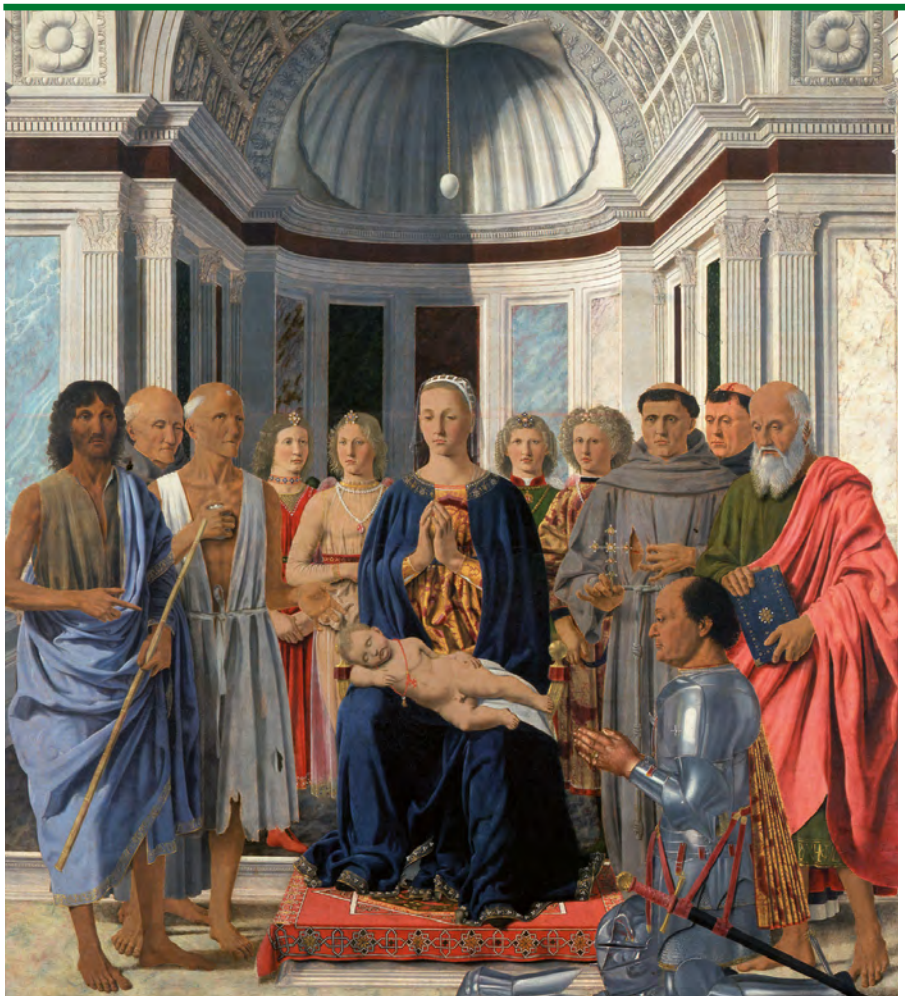
Humans have always considered far more than the egg's mere nutritional function.

Ab ovo usque ad mala: from egg to apple, soup to nuts, beginning to end. This Latin phrase was used by **Horace**, referring to Roman banquets which often began with eggs and ended with fruit, such as apples. Mindful of the sage who gave us *carpe diem*, let us begin *ab ovo*. Since the topic here is the Easter egg, we should ask: which came first, the egg or Easter? The answer is: the egg.

Humans have always considered far more than the egg's mere nutritional function. The egg is a perfect object. It has no beginning or end. Many ancient people's myths describe the universe as emerging from a cosmic egg, full of creative energy, which floated on the primordial oceans until... bang! It burst open, hurling shell fragments and spewing yolk and albumen in all directions, thereby forming the galaxies, suns, moons and planets including our own Earth. A mythical Big Bang. *Ex ovo omnia*, declared the German evolutionary scientist Ernst Haeckel. Everything starts from the egg.

A symbol of rebirth, the egg also embodies fertility

A symbol of rebirth, the egg also embodies fertility, and was **used in ancient pagan rites encouraging nature to awaken** after its winter 'death'. In ancient Rome, as spring approached, eggs were buried in fields to propitiate Mother Nature to provide fertility, in hopes of abun-



On the left: the Pala di Brera (Brera Altarpiece), by Piero della Francesca (1472); Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

dant future harvests. Pliny mentions eggs coloured red. In the springs of long ago, among the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, Persians and Greeks, but also peoples far from the Mediterranean area such as the Chinese, painted or decorated eggs were customarily given to symbolise life resuming its course, expressing hope of a good 'rebirth'. Alongside lamb, bitter herbs and unleavened bread, the seven symbolic foods used for Jewish Passover (*pesach*) meals from the time of the Second Temple include a roasted hard-boiled egg (*beitzàh*).

With Christianity, the egg became emblematic of the resurrection of Jesus, his exit from the sepulchre, and **the triumph of life over death**. Christ emerges from the tomb just as a chick, breaking free of the shell which confines it, emerges into life. The new symbolism, associating Easter with spring, replaced the ancestral rituals, but the egg remained a symbol of rebirth and indeed, resurrection: that of Christ and every person who, illuminated by the light of the Reborn, begins a new life. This concept was **illustrated in the Middle Ages by an ostrich egg suspended by a thread from the ceiling of some churches**. It was a sort of iconographic homily, a much more effective lesson than a long and boring sermon: the faithful, observing that egg, automatically recalled the sacrifice of Christ and the resurrection and spiritual path to follow to be reborn into a new life.

The Brera Altarpiece in Milan portrays this custom beautifully. This painting by Piero della Francesca, from the second half of the 15th century, represents a *sacra conversazione*: a 'holy conversation', or informal grouping of saints around the Virgin and Child. In the painting, the Madonna is enthroned with the infant Jesus on her lap, surrounded by a semi-circle of saints, while the work's commissioner, Federico da Montefeltro, kneels in adoration. From a marble seashell - symbolising Mary's divine motherhood - set into the coffered barrel-vaulted apse behind them, an ostrich egg, embodying divine perfection, hangs from a golden chain. Centuries later, Salvador Dalì included the symbolism of the egg in his surrealistic *Madonna of Port Lligat*.

In some countries, a red egg represents the passion of the Christ

The tradition of colouring eggs or decorating then with crosses or other symbols, which is losing currency in Italy, remains vibrant in Orthodox Christian areas. In

Greece, Russia and Romania, the red egg represents the passion of the Christ. In the Orthodox church of Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, a fresco depicts Mary Magdalene holding a red egg before the emperor Tiberius. Legend has it that following the resurrection of Jesus, the former sinner appeared before the Caesar holding an egg, declaring 'Christ is arisen'. The unbelieving emperor mocked her, asserting that such an event was as likely as the egg in her hands turning red. Shazam! The words had barely left his mouth when Magdalene's egg was incarnadined.

The egg as an Easter gift acquired increasing importance from the Middle Ages onwards. Some scholars hold that Lenten restrictions on animal products, including eggs, reinforced pious mediaeval Christians' tradition of hard-boiling eggs to make them last until Easter, colouring them, decorating them with sacred motifs and using them as symbolic gifts after having them blessed.

When did the egg turn to chocolate, and when did it begin concealing gifts?

When did the egg turn to chocolate? And when did eggs begin concealing a surprise gift, delighting children? The genesis of chocolate Easter eggs is **contested between France (Paris), Britain (Birmingham) and Italy (Turin)**. The chocolate egg idea apparently first occurred to Louis XIV, the Sun King, bright in more ways than one, who asked the royal chocolatier David Chaillou to make solid, not hollow, chocolate eggs as Easter gifts for relatives and close friends, replacing the golden eggs he gave previously.

Unlike his French colleague, **Alexander III Romanov, Tsar of all the Russias**, spared no expense. For Easter 1885 he **commissioned the court jeweller Peter Carl Fabergé to make an egg-shaped work of jewelled art** for his wife Maria Fedorovna. Fabergé fashioned a 'matryoshka' egg containing a golden yolk, itself concealing a golden hen, in turn containing two dainty surprises: a minute copy of the Imperial crown and an egg-shaped ruby. This masterpiece was followed by other jewelled eggs which Fabergé continued laying for the tsars, Easter after Easter, until the Russian Revolution put an end to his art and his dreams. Fabergé was so heartbroken that he died three years after the October Revolution.

Christian symbolism fizzled out as gifts of precious eggs became prevalent. Easter eggs became decidedly secular. It was a bearded English Quaker from Birmingham, **the chocolatier John Cadbury**, who began making **the first mass-produced chocolate eggs** during the reign of Queen Victoria (God save the chocolate). Cadbury, who had a sharp business sense, expanded the custom of **eggs with gifts inside** on an industrial scale. He even boasted of having produced the first milk chocolate eggs, a seniority contested by Swiss chocolatiers.

And Turin? **In the Piedmontese capital** nobody harbours doubts: **modern Easter eggs containing surprises were first hatched in the Savoy stronghold**. Here in the first quarter of the 18th century, maintain the scholarly citizens, the widow Giambone, a baker, displayed several chocolate eggs in her window, each consisting of two hollow shells and containing precious gifts. Again in Turin two centuries after the widowed baxter, around 1920, a small confectionery business called Sartorio patented a machine whose moulds used "the movements of rotation and revolution" to produce two perfectly aligned chocolate eggshell halves: gifts could be added before sealing them together.

It was only a small step from these to the modern Easter eggs and chocolate eggs with collectible gifts, bereft of any Easter connotations.

Morello Pecchioli

The cook who became
America's most dangerous woman

by Attilio Borda Bossana
Messina Academician

The story of the Irishwoman Mary Mallon, healthy carrier of typhoid fever pathogens.

To combat and contain the spread of the virus-borne Covid-19, the Italian government has adopted national measures decreed by the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers, suspending retail activities except for food and essential goods. Bars, pubs, ice cream shops and pastry shops are temporarily shuttered. This coronavirus-induced hiatus of course also involves prize-winning chefs, as people cannot go out, and fear contagion. The FIPE (Federazione Italiana Pubblici Esercizi - Italian Federation of Public Enterprises) estimates based on current developments of the nation's health emergency that restaurants will lose 92% of their profits, by missing out on both local customers and tourists, and the crisis will continue for the coming months, encompassing Easter.

She spent 25 of her 69 years in forcible quarantine

The current contagion panic, which brings to mind the persecution of alleged plague-spreaders (*untori*, literally 'greasers') in Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, **is a modern parallel to the case of the Irish cook Mary Mallon**, a naturalised American citizen **better known as Typhoid Mary**. Born in 1869, she spent 25 of her 69 years in obligatory quarantine.

She made headlines and became (in) famous **in the early 20th century** as the healthy carrier of typhoid fever pathogens, infecting the families for whom she worked.

In1907 a public health manager, George Soper, discovered that **contagion originated in her kitchen when she prepared meals for wealthy diners, contaminating cutlery** with sweat or saliva. Describing their first meeting, he wrote: "She seized a carving fork and advanced in my direction. I passed rapidly down the long narrow hall, through the tall iron gate, out through the area and so to the sidewalk. I felt rather lucky to escape. I confessed to myself that I had made a bad start. Apparently Mary did not understand that I wanted to help her."

Once identified as an asymptomatic typhoid carrier, she was asked for medical samples of urine and faeces, and refused, **believing that she was being persecuted by the law**. She was later arrested and forcibly quarantined for three years, and freed on 19 February 1910, contingent on a promise never to work in kitchens. She initially complied, but then **changed her name to Mary Brown and resumed working as a cook**, infecting others including the noted restaurateur Simon Moledda, who soon died as a result.

In 1915 a sudden typhoid epidemic erupted in the Sloane Hospital in New York, affecting 25 people. **The description of the hospital cook matched Mary, who was arrested** and, on the 27th of March of that year, forcibly quarantined in isolation in the William Parker Hospital. In 1932 she suffered a stroke, and died of pneumonia in 1938, aged 69.


"TYPHOID MARY"

The Extraordinary Predicament of Mary Mallon, a Prisoner on New York's Quarantine Hospital

By Dr. Wm. H. Park, New York Board of Health.

MOST HARMLESS

The Extraordinary and Dis

Isolation protocols date back to the Venetian Republic

As today, quarantine has long been one of the most common methods to combat infectious diseases: there are signs of it in the Old Testament, antedating knowledge of contagion vectors. Forcible isolation was codified by the Venetian Republic, and **quarantine was first used against leprosy, also mentioned in the Bible**, as well as diseases present in ancient Greece. Isolation was used throughout the Middle Ages, but **the modern form of quarantine is attested from the 14th-century plague epidemics**.

The term 'quarantine' dates to 1403, employed in a maritime context: the Venetian government required ships arriving from areas of suspected contagion to ride at anchor for a *quarantena*, meaning 40 days (initially the 30-day *trentino* used in other ports), before docking. Before coronavirus, the most extensive quarantine was used for **SARS** from November 2002 to July 2003, and **Ebola** in 1976 and 2014.

The name of the cook Mary Mallon has become synonymous with 'plague-spreader'; in scientific parlance she was 'patient zero' for typhoid fever, provoking juristic debate on the limits of individual freedom in the face of restrictions motivated by public health.

Elisabeth Singleton Moss played the Irish immigrant Mary Mallon in the BBC America and Annapurna Television **miniseries *Fever***, directed by Phil Morrison, which ran a second season with new episodes last year.

The plot is inspired by the novel of the same name by Mary Beth Keane, named one of the '5 under 35' best American writers by the National Book Foundation. This **novelised biography of Mary Mallon emphasises the inner life of this unfortunate character**, the focus of a media frenzy in the early 20th century. In the opening of the novel we read: "Her dreams in early 20th-century New York were those of any young woman, but nobody ever asked about them. Her passion: cooking, but she was forbidden to pursue it".

Attilio Borda Bossana