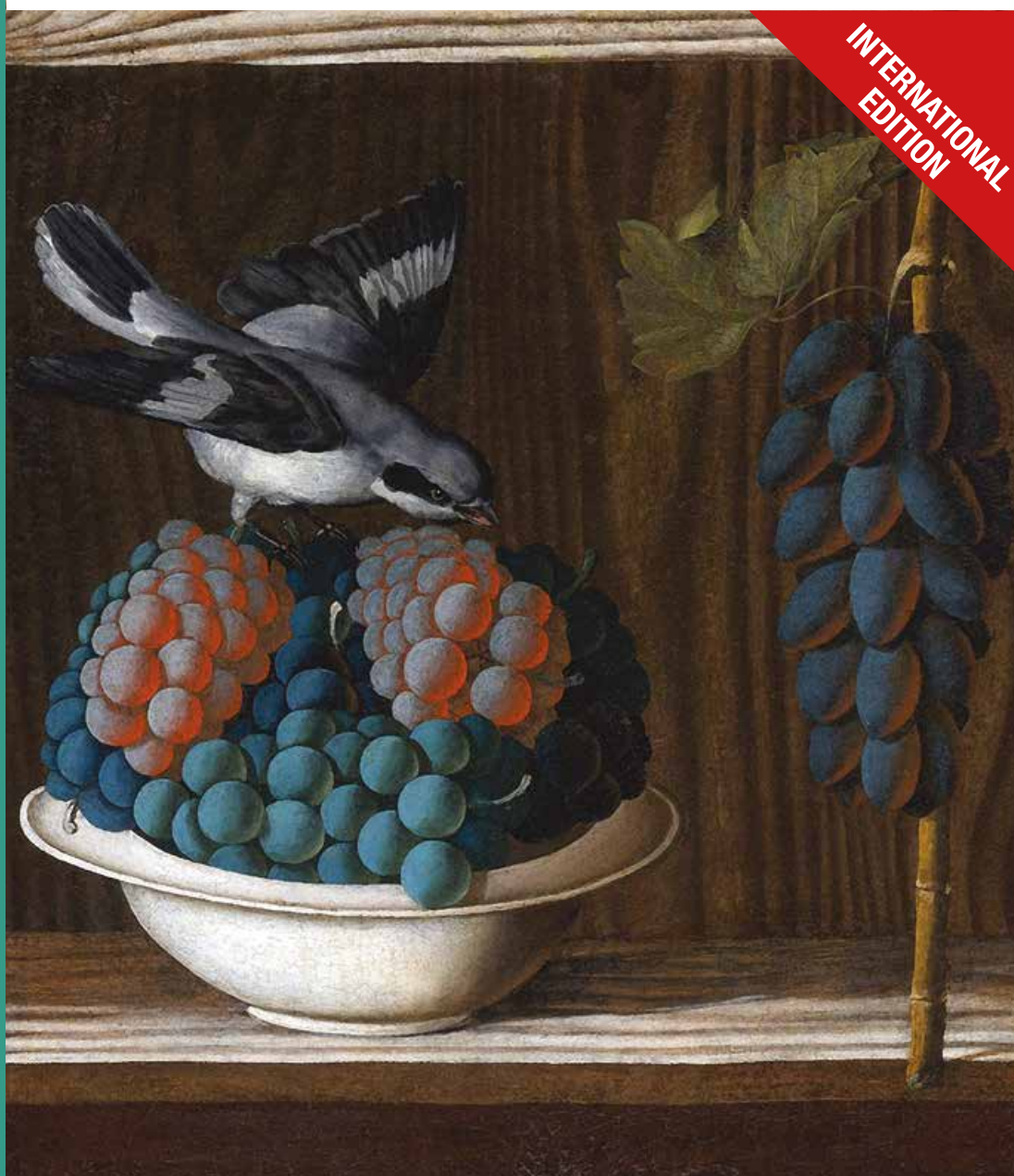


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**On the cover:** graphic elaboration of *Still Life with Grapes and a Shrike* by Antonio Leonelli, known as Antonio da Crevalcore (circa 1500); private collection



# Awaiting Italian cuisine's UNESCO *intangible heritage recognition*

*The dossier promoted by our Academy  
and others is to be deliberated  
upon by year's end.*

**N**ext December, Italian cuisine's UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage candidacy will be evaluated in New Delhi. Its dossier was officially submitted by our Foreign Ministry after a press conference at the Ministry of Culture's headquarters on 23 March 2023 wherein the Italian government presented the project in the presence of the Minister of Agriculture **Francesco Lollobrigida**, the Minister of Culture **Gennaro Sangiuliano**, and **Gianmarco Mazzi**, Undersecretary for Culture with UNESCO responsibilities. But though governments may present UNESCO proposals, they cannot submit them directly. In our case, the official nomination had as its **promoting body** a specially assembled **Committee** formed by the **Italian Academy of Cuisine**, the **Casa Artusi Foundation** and a magazine founded in 1929, **La Cucina Italiana**.

*The candidacy is based on the value  
of Italian cooking as a form of identity*

Defining Italian cuisine has not been easy, as Intangible Heritage includes all the expressions and habits which constitute a community's culture. The candidature therefore **cannot involve tangible products, ingredients or recipes**, but the actions inherent in cooking, ways of perceiving and relating to food, and the value of Italian cooking as a form of identity. We tend, often, to confuse the **'material'** heritage list, containing so-called **'sites'** which each have an individual physical presence, and the **'intangible'** heritage list, whose entries are 'elements' such as 'the Mediterranean Diet', 'the art of the Neapolitan pizzaiuolo' or 'truffle hunting and extraction'. Of 629 elements, in 139 countries, placed on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage list thus far, 15 are in Italy. For a tradition to be on that list, it must be shared by many people and serve as an identity catalyst for the community that it represents. The elements already on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage list include typical Mexican cuisine, the French Sunday lunch, and Korean and Japanese cuisines. Our candidate is Italian cuisine,

**by Paolo Petroni**  
*President of the Accademia*



understood as all the social, ritual and gestural customs based on the perception that moments associated with meals represent an opportunity for **sharing and conversation**. In Italy, cooking is a way of caring for one's family and friends within a continuous exchange of connexions: from family meals to restaurant tables, from one generation to the next.

*A plethora of diverse elements unite  
into an easily recognisable whole*

Cooking is a manifestation of creativity, with many apparently disparate elements uniting into an easily recognisable whole identifiable as Italian cuisine. It is, furthermore, **sustainable** (an indispensable feature nowadays), because it is rooted in reuse. Iconic traditional dishes are often based on reusing leftovers and on seasonal raw materials. In essence, this is the final definition submitted for UNESCO to evaluate: **"Italian cuisine, between sustainability and biocultural diversity"**. Nine member states are on the intergovernmental committee, officially selected in Paris during the last General Assembly, that will vote on Italian cuisine's UNESCO candidature. They are: **France, Spain, Ukraine, China, the UAE, Nigeria, Zambia, Haiti and Barbados**. Good luck, Italy!





# The elder: *a generous plant*

by **Morello Pecchioli**

*Honorary Academician for Verona*

*Elderberries yield excellent jams, sweets and syrups.*

**S**eptember is the month for jams and preserves of all kinds: made from figs, peaches, plums, but especially, at least in the days when the makers of jams would set off and forage for them along streams or country paths, blackberries from bramble bushes. To DIY jam enthusiasts we suggest a **very particular**

jam, distinguished from the others for its flavour, fragrance, abundance of vitamins A and C and health benefits: **elderberry jam**. It must be carefully prepared by macerating the black berries and cooking them thoroughly to deactivate the toxins in their seeds.

We must specify that the elder of which we speak is the **black or European elder**, *Sambucus nigra*, commonly found in uncultivated fields, on the edges of headlands, in thickets and along waterways. This beautiful plant stands out in late spring for its white, umbrella-shaped inflorescences. These are both beautiful and culinarily appreciated in popular cuisine, carefully washed, breaded and fried. In his book *Mia nonna mangiava i fiori* (*My Grandmother Ate Flowers*),

**Giacomo Danesi**, a journalist from Brescia, writes that they are also delicious in salads and fruit salads. Better still, in scrumptious fritters.

**The small, ink-black berries appear in clusters between August and October.**

They should be gathered when fully ripened, around mid-September, and besides the aforementioned wondrous jam, they can **also yield juices, jellies, sweets and syrups** with which to prepare delicious, thirst-quenching beverages. **It's crucial to dilute them with abundant water** and not overindulge in the jam, a strong diuretic and laxative.

**Elderberry risotto is delightfully distinctive.** The same tiny black pearls, with cane sugar, can yield **non-alcoholic elderberry wine**, so called for its dark hue. What is alcoholic, instead, is **the far-famed sambuca**, a liqueur that competes with grappa as a post-coffee *am-mazzacaffè* (literally 'coffee killer'). "Lo gradite un sambuchino?" ('would you like a little sambuca?') remains a frequent question in *trattorie* after the bill is paid. Although its fragrance and flavour derive mainly for star anise, sambuca is named after a distillate of *Sambucus nigra* included in the essential oil mixture.

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*A compelling and magical history*

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The elder is no ordinary plant. It is legendary, epic. So compelling and magical is its history that in comparison, the **Harry Potter** saga is a children's novella. Throughout that momentous history, **the elder has played a plethora of**



**roles.** For the Sabines and Samnites, ancient Italic peoples, it had the sacred function of **marking and guarding borders. It was a totemic tree.** Everyone respected its role as guardian of the *limes* (limit, boundary). In classical antiquity it was considered **thaumaturgical**, a sort of **St Anthony** among trees. Merely touching it, some believed, would send one's ailment into the tree. No cure? The fault lay not with the tree but the patient for doubting its power.

Twigs hollowed of their elastic, pliant, easily removed pith could be made into **musical instruments**, such as the flute and the *sambykè*, a sort of small harp attributed to **Ibycus**, a Greek lyric poet who lived 2600 years ago. Did the plant lend its name to the instrument or vice versa? **Pliny** supported the second hypothesis.

With flutes ringing in our ears, we move **to the ancient Germans**, for whom that sound **banished evil influences and spells.** Flutes must be carved far from roosters, however, lest their crowing render them hoarse, nullifying their magical powers. Replace the rooster with a birdcatcher covered in colourful parrot feathers, Papageno, and we have the immortal masterpiece of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *The Magic Flute*.**

In Germany the elder is called *holunder*, associated with Holda or Holle, **a goddess or fairy with long blonde hair** who, according to legend, **lived in elder trees** near springs and rivers. Peasants respected the tree so much that they doffed their hats when passing it, and if necessity compelled them to cut any branch thereof, they knelt in apology. To enjoy the protection of Holda (also invoked for curing toothache), they planted elder trees near their homes, thus keeping hexes, daemons and even flies and harmful insects at bay.

A people originating around Bavaria, **the Cimbri**, settled in Lessinia (between Verona and Vicenza) between the years 1000 and 1300. They retained the custom of **planting elders by mountain pastures.** Notably, **the tradition persists:** many mountain farmhouses have *Sam-bucus nigra* nearby to shield them against



curses and the evil eye. For the same apotropaic reason, mountain people traditionally kept elder twigs in their pockets. Touching elder trees not only brought good luck, but in case of illness transferred it, as above, into the plant. Contrariwise, beware of burning elder trees, thereby risking death or even attracting the devil into one's home.

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*Not everyone considers  
it beneficial*

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Not only did the Cimbri believe in the elder's protective magic, but according to the Italian anthropologist **Giuseppe Pitrè** (1841-1916), who studied Sicilian folk customs, in Trinacria elderberries were held capable of killing snakes.

Yet not everyone considers elders beneficial. For the sociologist **Maria Immacolata Maciotti**, the elder is **an ambiguous plant** categorised in her book *Miti e magie delle erbe (Herbal Magic and Myths; 1993)* under 'trees never to underestimate': "A wary person keeps children far from elder trees: indeed, rather than trees they might be disguised witches. At a minimum, children sleeping in elderwood cradles risk being unpleasantly pinched and left with dark, painful bruises".

So are elder trees good or bad? For the French psychoanalyst **Jacques Brosse**,

who studied plant-related myths and religions, elder trees were originally good and helpful to humans, until the moment when **Judas** hanged himself on one after betraying **Jesus**, lending it an evil, disquieting air. Harry Potter readers know that an elder wand is among the most powerful objects when wielded by great sorcerers. Mediaeval Christians viewed elders, with perfumed flowers and bitter leaves, as representing the separation between Christians and Jews: deriving from the same root, but the former emanating sanctity and the latter exuding malevolence.

Ambiguous it may be, but **the elder is undoubtedly generous:** not only in cooking and baking, as above, but also in herbal medicine, where its flowers and berries are hard at work in tisanes, poultices and infusions. **They cure colds and the 'flu and lower fevers.** They fight infections and nasal congestion. The anthocyanins in the berries also have **antioxidant powers:** they benefit the skin by slowing tissue ageing. A few pages after the above quote, Maciotti herself acknowledges the merits of elder against the common cold: "Use half a handful of elder flowers, the same of lime flowers and violets, and a few basil and origano leaves. Pulverise them and steep them into a hot infusion to be drunk morning and evening, or place in a steeping capsule."

**Morello Pecchioli**





# Flowers on a plate

by Eleonora Cannatelli

Vibo Valentia Delegate

*Edible flowers occupy increasing space in today's restaurant world.*

In Roman history, the cultivation, sale and use of flowers were important in different aspects of social, economic and religious life. The *Cataloghi regiona-*

*ri* (The *Regionaries*: two versions of a fourth-century survey document) and **Polemius Silvius** (a fifth-century Roman writer and official) mention **the Basilica Floscellaria** (built between 313 and 337 AD under the emperor **Constantine**), a **building where the ancient Roman flower market was held**, presided over by a statue of the goddess Flora, credited in myth with allowing flowers to open in spring. The Basilica boasted walls with floral and plant-themed ornaments, frescoes, and marble and other stone bas-reliefs. Flowers displayed were grown outside the city with help from slaves, due to high demand. The gardens

of any Roman *domus* (house), and the small-windowed balconies on their first or second floors, were adorned with beautiful, prized flowers. In Greece, for eight days during midsummer, women grew sprouts in flowerpots and placed them on the altar of the goddess. This may be considered the earliest known flowerpot cultivation. The custom spread from Greece to Rome and was used for decorating roads, gates, bannisters, fountains, temples and statues. **On the Palatine Hill, the emperor Domitian had a courtyard adorned with flowerpots throughout its colonnade.** Similar uses were found in Pompeii.





*A rose petal gives food a different and more intense flavour*

**The Romans used flowers in medicine** and for making **perfumes and cosmetic creams**. Floral wreaths adorned clothing and table settings, and Roman culinary use of flowers is intriguing. During banquets, flowers were given to the most important guests: a politician might receive a crown of helichrysum flowers, representing the sun and success; a military officer, a laurel crown, symbolising glory. Mallo flowers and leaves were placed under the abdomens of those giving birth, to facilitate the process.

The most important and famous cooks of the past, the Roman gastronomist and writer **Marcus Gavius Apicius** and, far later, **Bartolomeo Scappi**, the secret cook to pope Pius V, and **Martino of Como**, cook to **Francesco Sforza**, who subsequently worked in the Vatican kitchens, described the use of flowers in both aristocratic and peasant cuisine. A rose petal can provide a different, more intense flavour, can interestingly season a dish and can liven up the grim fare of dieters. **Over 1500 flowers are edible**, whether wild or cultivated. Among the first is **the elder**, found in many savoury and sweet recipes as well as festive bre-

ads. Then there are **snapdragons**, which can even be stuffed.

It is clearly impossible to eat whatever wild and comestible plants we find in fields without first letting them wilt or preparing them for cooking. As they are often delicate, particular care must be paid to their presentation, **avoiding the loss of colour and beneficial properties while washing them** before their arrival at the table. Edible flowers are increasingly visible in today's restaurants. Frequently imitated are the fruit salads of Queen **Elizabeth I**, who loved having them flavoured and garnished **with primroses**, while Queen **Victoria** was partial to **candied violets** dusted with icing sugar and served in jewelled boxes. **The Celts enjoyed borage wine. In the Orient**, flowers had and retain a central role at the table, as testified by ancient religious texts. In China and Japan, **lotus, lily and chrysanthemum** flowers were used for flavour, decoration and medicinal purposes.

*Any dish can become a delicious little garden*

**If tradition teaches, innovation considers flowers indispensable for 'natural cuisine' and 'experiential gastronomy'.** It is important, therefore, to

recognise toxic flowers and acquire only certifiably edible ones, and **know their provenance, seasonality and storage methods** (in the fridge, in well ventilated containers and/or on absorbent paper). **In cuisine, flowers can be used in various ways:** fresh, dried, raw, cooked, in sweets or in savoury dishes. They can also be **transformed** into syrups, jellies, infusions, aromatic vinegars or liqueurs. We may conclude by affirming that flowers in general are **ideal in sweets or drinks** while **herbs and vegetable blooms**, such as courgette, borage or nasturtium flowers, **better complement savoury recipes**. They can be added into dishes directly, mixed into creams, battered and fried, frozen into ice cubes, or immersed in oil, vinegar or alcohol to extract their fragrances and flavours. Using edible flowers in cuisine is a highly refined choice, as it combines aesthetics, culture and nature. Each dish can become a delicious little garden, a dainty work of art which narrates the philosophy of a place, or a seasonally varied multisensory experience.

**Eleonora Cannatelli**







# Star dust: *gold for the palate!*

by **Tiziana Marconi Martino de Carles**  
*Roma EUR-Ostiense Academician*

*Letting a precious metal melt in one's mouth makes a moment magical.*

**T**he most famous metal on the periodic table, with atomic number 79 and symbol AU, present on all continents in rocks or waterways, **originated in stars through nuclear fusion and later arrived on Earth borne by meteors and asteroids**, after the collision of neutron stars. How many of us know this? Gold has long symbolised power, wealth, authority, opulence, refinement, prosperity, wise administration of goods and status, but also greed, perdition and corruption.

*Gold has been associated not only with power but also divinity and immortality*

**Since the dawn of human history, in the collective imagination** gold has been associated not only with power but also with the divine and immortality. This 'golden thread' **connects ancient civilisations**: consider the thunderbolts of the Olympian Zeus, the Golden Fleece, the sarcophagi and accoutrements in Egyptian pharaohs' tombs, the jewels of Greek goddesses and noblewomen of the classical world, and the gold of the Maya and Aztecs and that found in China, India and Japan, to cite some examples.

**Gold has maintained its irresistible allure** and is an index of luxury and economic success. Thanks to its inalterability, **its value has been the basis of many monetary systems**, and this has combined with its aesthetic features to render it suitable, over the centuries, for ornamental use in jewellery and other objects, cloth, furnishings, royal palaces and other decorative purposes, including culinary ones.

*Edible gold makes any dish more precious*

Edible gold, namely pure 24/23 carat gold, is currently defined as 'food colouring' **E175** (similarly, silver is E174 at a millesimal fineness of 999/1000) by the European Parliament and Council Directive 94/36/EC. It must be **processed**





in facilities authorised from a hygienic standpoint for producing and selling food additives. It is **non-toxic, hypoallergenic and inert**, not interacting with the human body if ingested in modest quantities; it is odourless, tasteless and imperceptible on the palate, as it is very finely pounded or pulverised. **It doesn't change the flavour of drinks or food**, but **the sensation** of melting this precious metal in one's mouth **makes the moment magical**.

It renders any food or drink more precious, from starters to desserts, from spring water to cocktails, sparkling wines or liqueurs.

**In the 1980s**, thanks to what had become an iconic dish worldwide, namely his 'gold and saffron risotto', the undisputed innovator and pioneer **Gualtiero Marchesi**, often considered the father of modern Italian cuisine, reintroduced **the use of edible gold**, which had ceased after the Renaissance. As requested by a client who made edible gold and wanted to mark his uncle's birthday, he created the golden risotto in 1981, adapting the traditional Milanese saffron risotto; but its fame arrived four years later when in 1985 a photographer emphasised it in a piece on the culinary use of saffron and the colour yellow, referring to the mediaeval practice of representing gold, which was difficult to source, with the also very costly saffron, conferring a similar hue to food. Served on a black plate, it created a perfect union of Italian tradition and Japanese aesthetics, partially through the contrast between a circle and a square and its glistening heart of gold.

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### *Its culinary use goes back millennia*

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The culinary use of gold goes back millennia: **in ancient Egypt** it was considered **a sacred food**, consumed to gain divine favour or acquire immortality, and used especially **in powdered form to stuff bread**. **The imperial Romans** used thin gold sheets **as a garnish**, but often, to impress guests, it was unfortunately



replaced by harmful substances to 'varnish' fish or game. **In Japan**, it appeared in the form of **gold flakes in saké** or decorated serving dishes, probably during tea ceremonies.

**In the Middle Ages**, as the classical world re-emerged in Europe, gold appeared **in the kitchens of nobles and magnates** to be used in preparing **exclusive dishes** testifying to the chasm between the opulence of the wealthy few and the abject poverty of the rest.

**Ostentation peaked in the Renaissance**, as demonstrated by some anecdotes. At the wedding of his daughter **Violante, Galeazzo Visconti** amazed guests with gold-covered sturgeon, carp, ducks, quails, pike and more. A century later, **for the wedding of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabella of Aragon**, exceptional masters of ceremonies prepared stupendous dishes including **silvered veal and gilded kid**; in 1561, bread and oysters were gilded for a banquet honouring the Prince of Bisignano.

**In Venice, nuns** from the Santa Maria Celeste convent **kneaded edible gold into the dough for bussolai**, typical biscuits of the Veneto region. Gold-covered food was often served at the European courts of that era. The court of **Elizabeth I** had **sparkling fruit**: gold-dusted figs, dates, pomegranates, oranges and grapes, which also symbolised fortune and prosperity.

**To curb this excessive ostentation**, in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century **many town councils imposed simpler fare** for private gatherings, or limited the number of gilded courses, excluding the highest

social strata from such restrictions, thus preserving their privilege.

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### *From imaginary curative properties to household use*

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For many years, **gold was credited with healing properties**, considered a miraculous cure for certain serious maladies. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, alchemists exerted themselves mightily to transform base metals into gold, sometimes for medicinal purposes, leading to the European **custom of eating a gold-covered sugared almond** to guard against heart disease. Apothecaries followed suit, **gilding medicines to make them easier to swallow**; hence an Italian idiom similar to 'sugarcoating': '**gilding the pill**' (*indorare la pillola*).

Some chefs now use gold as a signature decoration for first courses, pizza, steaks, chips, bread, *panettone*, eggs, ice cream, jams, cakes, cappuccino, mineral water, cocktails or liqueurs. **Some high-end pasta makers use gold-plated pasta dies**. **Gold for home use can also be purchased** in specialised shops or online in various formats: **powder, crumbs, flakes, leaf, sheets, spirals or wire**, depending on the desired effect. Some such companies have been processing gold for centuries.

**Its average cost** is similar to that of other luxury foods and refined condiments: **high but not prohibitive**. So, we can all gild our mouths at least once in our lives!

**Tiziana Marconi Martino de Carles**



# A culinary dilemma

by Stefania Mazzitelli

Amsterdam-Leiden Academician

*If women have always cooked, why are great chefs mostly men?*

**S**ome point out that **the work of a chef**, similarly to that of a builder, technician, lorry driver or politician, **is extremely hard**, requiring ded-

ication, sacrifice, physical exertion and discipline. Others emphasise that anyone building a culinary career must give up other things, often in the realm of the family and child-rearing. Yet **many male chefs declare that they learned how to cook from the women in their families**, often the true custodians of culinary traditions.

Which sounds more familiar: 'granny's recipe' or 'grandpa's recipe'? We grow up with many 'granny recipes', vehicles of love and attentiveness often associated with tradition and home cooking, because historically grannies were indeed the main home cooks.

**Cuisine has been a female domain for centuries**, as women were often forbidden many other activities and work

leading to economic independence (and thence freedom and self-determination). For centuries, housekeeping was an obligation, not a choice. Even if women worked outside the home, they must still also be 'angels at the hearth'.

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*Men remain the majority in the professional restaurant world*

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In the gastronomic panorama, **women retain supremacy in home cooking**, while men remain the majority in the professional restaurant world. **Despite signs of change**, in 2025 women are still fighting to reach positions of power, both in kitchens and in venue manage-





From the left: Eugénie Brazier and Julia Child

ment, as revealed by **sector association data and culinary prizes**.

The most prestigious gastronomic prizes, such as the Michelin stars, shed light on this gender disparity. In Michelin's latest Italian edition, out of 393 new stars only 3 were given to women, bringing **the total number of Michelin-starred female chefs to a meagre 43**. Interestingly, **Italy boasts the most female starred chefs worldwide**. There are only 134 female Michelin-starred chefs in the world: a mere 6% of the global total.

**The causes** of this underrepresentation **are manifold**. They include historical and cultural reasons and salary inequalities, with women earning 20% less than male colleagues on average.

Women, as above, have long been considered 'hearth angels'; the advent of agriculture caused men to work outside as well as hunting farther afield, thus limiting women to care exclusively for the home and the surrounding land. Over the centuries, the female role was increasingly consolidated, such that **the Church considered them only as wives and mothers**. Whoever rebelled was disparaged.

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*During the Renaissance, women began rediscovering more significant roles*

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Only during the Renaissance, as documented in several celebrated paintings of the era, women began rediscovering increasingly significant roles **in domestic and professional kitchens**. They started working in taverns and inns, but without ever obtaining justified recognition. To better understand how women in the kitchen were viewed, we can consider **an illuminating phrase written** in the *Libro Novo* (*New Book*), a cookbook of sorts, by **Cristoforo da Messisbugo**, who affirms, regarding feminine abilities: "I shall not spend time describing various vegetable or legume soups or teach how to fry tench (...) or other such things, which can be obtained from any common wench." In essence: real



cuisine is men's work; women merely boil vegetables and fry fish.

A Renaissance woman who, inter alia, stood out in the gastronomic sphere was **Caterina de' Medici**, who, upon marrying the French king **Henry II**, brought many Italian chefs to the French court. They introduced new ingredients, techniques and recipes which influenced French cuisine. A sincere food enthusiast and strong in her queenly role, she facilitated the entry of refined Italian Renaissance cuisine into France, decisively contributing to the future emergence of that country's *grande cuisine*.

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*In modern times, female culinary icons have multiplied*

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As for more modern times, female culinary icons have multiplied in Italy and beyond: in France, for instance, **Eugénie Brazier**, considered the mother of French cuisine, **was the first woman to receive 3 Michelin stars**.

In the USA, the undisputed culinary greats are mainly women. A paramount position in the 1960s was occupied by **Julia Child**, the first woman to talk about home cooking on television. At a time when Americans descended in droves upon the nascent fast food restaurants all over the country, Julia taught how easy and fun home cooking could be.

**If even Italy has had its female pioneers**, credit is due to **Pellegrino Artusi**, an early perceiver of women's abilities who attributed some recipes in his cook-



book to female acquaintances of his: 'Mrs Adele's timbale', 'Luisetta's soufflé', 'Marietta's panettone'. This concession cleared the way for many women desirous of talking about food: one example is **Ada Boni**, the foremost female cook, food writer and gastronomist of the first half of the twentieth century, whose book *Il Talismano della Felicità* (*The Talisman of Happiness*) moulded entire generations of home cooks. Her recipe book remains one of the most meticulous, precise cooking manuals, especially where culinary techniques are concerned: how to deep-fry perfectly, make jam with scrupulous attention to hygiene, or create flawlessly fluffy sponge cakes.

The feminine figures that have positively influenced gastronomic history are in truth far more numerous than we can imagine. Let us consider our childhood homes, where our mothers and, still earlier, our grandmothers lovingly passed on their recipes and passion for cooking. These precious moments, imbued with tradition and warmth, have indelibly marked our lives and culinary culture itself.

A swathe of the masculine population has long objected that professional cooking is unsuitable for ladies because it is exhausting and time-consuming and hinders the role of wife and mother within the family.

In my opinion, **a chef's work transcends gender**: it is a profession rooted in love, passion, creativity and sensitivity, qualities belonging to men and women alike.

**Stefania Mazzitelli**