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On the cover: Graphic reproduction of the painting
Still Life with Fruit by Jan van Huysum, on exhibi-
tion at the Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery.

The case of palm oil

The fickleness of dieticians and nutritionists confounds our currently held notions.

BY PAOLO PETRONI
President of the Academy

A huge recent advertising campaign financed by the AIDEPI (Italian Association of Dessert and Pasta Industries) has raised a hue and cry among consumers and nutritionists because it is aimed at rehabilitating the use of palm oil. They say that palm oil is a “naturally sourced product” that “does not pose any health risks and is an excellent food that can be safely integrated into a balanced diet”. We not doubt that palm oil is a legitimate fat or that it is not harmful by itself, but on the other hand we are not nutritional experts, and so far many important professors have said otherwise. In particular, the “Journal of Culinary Nutrition”, which recently dealt with the subject of vegetable oils, and palm oil in particular, affirmed that even if it is a vegetable product, it certainly cannot be considered to be one of positive health benefits owing to its high saturated fat content. In general, the acids present in saturated fats contribute to increase blood cholesterol and to the formation of arterial plaque that causes arterial sclerosis.

Palm oil, and to an even greater extent coconut oil and other fats of tropical origin, are very rich in saturated fats - the same ones contained in butter. But palm oil is cheap and is ideal for industrial food production (it adds taste, softness, texture, has a long shelf life, it is solid and it can be used at high temperatures). Palm and coconut oils are used in many products: toasts, crackers, cookies and sweets, ice cream, breadsticks, ready-to-eat meals, filled pastas, instant soup, candy and baby formula.

The scientific world is fickle, and we just need to look at the chaos that sur-



rounds our diets. Every dietician has his or her favorite diet and they assure us that all the others are harmful. Nowadays cholesterol is considered less of a threat, and butter isn't so bad for you, but we should go easy on extra virgin olive oil because it also contains palmitic acid. Last year, “Time” magazine's cover page read: “Eat butter”. The subtitle: “Scientists labeled butter as the enemy. Why they were wrong”. A major Italian publishing house recently published the great chef of “Miramonti l'Altro” Philippe Léveillé, entitled *My Life With Butter*. In addition to health issues we also have the problem of environmental sustainability. The extensive cultivation of the plant that provides the fruit from which palm oil is extracted is considered to be a primary cause of deforestation in Southeast Asia (Malaysia is the world's second largest producer of palm oil). Some people have advanced the notion that all this clamor is the result of a declaration by the French environmental Minister, Ségolène Royal, who pointed out that Nutella (which for years has been made with palm oil rather than cocoa butter) is responsible for defore-

station. But then the Minister apologized and the head of the WWF issued assurances that Ferrero uses only palm oil that is 100% certified as sustainable, i.e., it has nothing to do with the deforestation. Perhaps Mrs. Royal should start casting aspersions at home and consider the torture inflicted on tens of thousands of geese in order to produce *foie gras*, which is now banned everywhere in Europe except France (in addition to Hungary and Bulgaria). Thus there is a great deal of confusion. But there is also a strong impression that the academic world is highly concerned with industrial interests (of food and pharmaceutical and politics). We are waiting new studies and reports in international publications which are more reliable. To start with, it would be helpful if all products displayed detailed labels (not merely stating that vegetable oils are present): we would like to know exactly what (and how much) there is in a product. By itself this might not constitute a health guarantee, but at least we would be aware of what we are eating. Thus everyone is free to make his or her own choice.



A Food Act for Italian Cuisine

A pact between institutions and the world of high quality cuisine to enhance Italy and attract tourist flows.

BY GIGI PADOVANI

"Franco Marengi" Study Center

The cuisine, then the squares and the beaches. These are the strong points of Italy, according to tourists who chose Italy as the destination for their trips. This is the upshot of a recent analysis of comments on social media - something like 570,000 messages taken in consideration - by Sociometrica and Expert System. The success of Milan's Expo 2015, as demonstrated by mile-long lines of visitors, confirms that culture, art, food and agriculture are elements that must be approached within a single context. The French and the Spanish found that out some time ago. They use their products in the first place, and their chefs in the second place to attract tourists. An initiative that was born at the Universal Exhibition, dedicated to the agro-alimentary theme, deserves kudos insofar the Italian government was finally engaged. Following the new and trending fashion, an English name - Food Act - was chosen to christen the meeting that produced ten points - all in all a good start. The meeting that took place at the end of July brought to the discussion table three members of the Italian cabinet, the Minister for Agricultural Policies Maurizio Martina (who is technically in charge as promoter of Expo), the Minister of Cultural Assets Enrico Franceschini, and the Minister of Education Stefania Giannini. On the opposite side of the table, and this is indeed what make the event an extraordinary one, sat about forty chefs and pizza makers representing the most important establishments of

the country. Among them, Gualtiero Marchesi, Massimo Bottura, Carlo Cracco, Davide Scabin, Tonino Cannavaciolo, Niko Romito.

"Every chef must learn to govern the state": this is the impressive phase of the iconic revolutionary Vladimir Il'ič Ul'janov, better known as Lenin. The mission of the Food Act is different, as the first point declares: "Chefs as Ambassadors of Italian Cuisine in the World", with the mission of pushing agro-alimentary exports to the new level of 50 billion euro. Among the themes discussed were the Mediterranean Diet and the real "Made In Italy", the "High Level Cuisine and High Level Training"; they go hand in hand with the success of the Hotel Training Institutions that for a long time were practically ignored, deprived of resources and unable to foster practical work for the students. Finally, the will emerges to "strengthen the twin principles of tourism and quality food to promote territories". The last point is also noteworthy (the text is online on the website of the Ministry for Agricultural Policies: "Italian cuisine as culture, identity, education, inclusion". This is indeed one of the basic tenets of the Academy, the only gastronomic institution recognized by the Ministry of Cultural Assets. In spite of the protests, following two days of meetings, over the fact that other chefs and associations had not been invited, the novelty of the government's initiative is the decision to bet on Italian cuisine to enhance Italy and to attract higher tourism flows. The well known critic Piero



Camporesi made a remarkable comment: Pellegrino Artusi, author of the manual *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*, contributed more to the unification of Italy than Alessandro Manzoni, author of *The Betrothed*, “for another reason: not all people read, but all eat”. I am in complete agreement with this judgment to the point that I have inserted as an appendix in the book *Italy, a Good Country* (Italia Buon Paese) about tastes, foods and drinks in 150 years of unified national history, a book that I wrote with my wife Clara. Thus, the real issue is the following: are the chefs enough, no matter how many stars or plaudits they gather? Some of them, besides being television stars, are courted by the media and

quoted as opinion leaders. In fact, I was one of the first Italian journalists to cover, on behalf of the daily *La Stampa*, the Congress on High Cuisine *Lo Mejor de la Gastronomía*, where the Spanish chefs, gathered in San Sebastian, worked as a team and strived to spread innovation and ideas by utilizing products that were decidedly less prestigious than the Italian ones. Ferran Adrià told me: “I love the raw materials of your country and I use them quite often for my recipes”.

Ten years later, luckily, our chefs also know how to put together a team. They found a government that listens to them. But that is not enough. More culture is needed, more history, more memory. Davide Scabin, the chef of *Combal.Zero*

in Rivoli, near Turin, suggested that the first step of the Food Act should be to codify the “real” dishes of Italian cuisine. Will that be easy? Will it be necessary to read books and to analyze historical documents in order to achieve that result? And how should we account for the innovation in cooking with the new techniques, from the siphon to cooking at low temperatures that Artusi could hardly imagine? We should remember the famous saying of an illustrious gourmet from Forlìmpopoli and hope... “Cuisine is a bit of a rascal; quite often it leads us to despair and yet it gives us pleasure, for when one succeeds and overcomes the difficulties, he feels satisfied and claims victory”.

GIGI PADOVANI

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MAGAZINE

Academicians’ contributions to the magazine are not only welcome, but essential. However Academicians should keep in mind some important guidelines so that their contributions, which are the fruit of their passion and dedication, are expeditiously published.

● **Articles:** it is essential that the **text of articles be sent via email**, in MS Word format (not pdf) to the following address: redazione@accademia1953.it

● **Article length:** it is important that articles are **between 3,500 and 7,000 characters** (including spaces); this is the best way to avoid cuts that are bothersome for both the editors and those submitting the texts. All computers should be able to provide character counts..

● Each issue of the magazine is printed one month ahead of the cover date so that it can be delivered to the Academicians by that date. Those submissions that are time sensitive should be sent in ample time.

● **“From the Delegations” Section:** In order to facilitate reading, please **limit articles to a maximum of 2,500 characters including spaces**.

● Please remember that in the “From the Delegations” section as well as elsewhere, **descriptions of meetings held outside the territory of the Delegation or in the homes of Academicians, unless they are associated with an important event, will not be published**. Also, **please do not include a list of dishes and wines**. Such listing should appear on the appropriate rating form regarding convivial meetings.

● **Rating forms for convivial meetings:** should be sent to the Secretariat (segreteria@accademia1953.it). It is also important to limit remarks in the “notes and comments” section of the form to **800 characters** (maximum 1,000) spaces included in order to avoid cuts. Rating forms that reach the Secretariat more than 30 days after the event will be discarded.

● We also request that you not submit reports on convivial meetings held **outside the territory of the Delegation**, or that take place in the **homes of Academicians**, or are otherwise not held in restaurants or public venues, as they will not be published.





The *pizzutello* grape of Tivoli

An agricultural tradition worth defending, just like the art and culture of the town in Lazio that boasts two important Unesco world heritage sites.

BY MAURO GAUDINO

Academician, Rome Nomentana Delegation

The Tivoli *pizzutello* is an excellent grape whose organoleptic characteristics are linked to pedoclimatic factors that cannot be reproduced in other places. We know about the fertility of the lands along the Tiber from the ancient Romans, thanks to the writings of Columella, Pliny and Strabo, who lauded the territory in particular for its fruit, and thus for the wine and oil that were derived from it. That fertility is also evidenced by the numerous plant species that grow abundantly there. To understand just how luxurious that growth is one need only visit the park of “Villa Gregoriana”, or take a look around the centuries-old olive groves that surround the town of Tivoli.

Traces of the area’s *pizzutello* grape

have been documented since 1575 when during a visit to the villa of her late uncle Ippolito, Eleonora d’Este, daughter of the Duke of Ferrara Ercole II wrote to her family in Ferrara: “In the gardens of the Tivoli villa the *pizzutello* grapes grow abundantly. The local people call them ‘horn grapes’ because of their elongated form that resembles a tiny horn. There are two kinds, white and red, but the ladies prefer the red because they believe it enhances and beautifies their eyes”.

This correspondence confirms that the *pizzutello* grape was already well known and eaten regularly by the local population as early as the Renaissance. Still, at Villa d’Este it was more often used ornamentally in its classical Italian gardens than as a table grape. At that time





the *pizzutello* was still not considered a prestigious grape, as it would come to be known many years later with the deviation of the Aniene river that crossed the town. The fortunes of this grape in fact took a significant turn in 1845 after Pope Gregory XVI had the river rerouted away from town in order to avoid the continuous and disastrous flooding of the town of Tivoli. Thanks to his intervention, the river now plunges down for 160 meters into the underlying “Valley of the Inferno”, creating the waterfall in the hits the rocks, its waters nebulize throughout the valley. This creates the ideal pedo-climatic conditions for the growth of the plant, which requires a great deal of water and prefers a humid environment. Thus it has acquired its unique organoleptic characteristics. Until quite recently, the *pizzutello* grape grew abundantly across over 60 hectares of the valley. Today however, its cultivation has been reduced to less than 10 hectares, largely farmed by families who have kept the tradition alive for generations. Just like the rest of the major Italian agricultural products, the production of the *pizzutello* grape is



threatened by the effects of globalization. In recent years the number of producers of this delicious fruit has multiplied. In Italy it is now also cultivated in Latina and in the Apulia region. Abroad, production centers around France, Spain, Algeria and Argentina.

Today Italians are acquainted with the *pizzutello* grape only through large industrial distribution. However this product seldom has anything to do with the exquisite “horn grape” of Tivoli that is distinguished by its crunchier and denser fruit when compared to its competitors. As mentioned above, two types of *pizzata* grapes are grown: white and red. The former has sweet, firm flesh that is both succulent and crisp. The

skin that encases the grape is very thin and easily digestible. When completely ripe the grape takes on a pleasant golden color. The red variety has similar characteristics but a thicker skin. This trait makes it more resistant to dehydration and consequently it has a longer shelf life. During the first decades of the 20th century the *pizzutello* grape once again became popular locally and in the 1950s the majority of

production was absorbed by the Roman market. Only in the last few decades do we see a sharp decline, owing to the progressive abandonment of the fields because its cultivation is considered to require too much work to be remunerative.

This abandonment puts the future of this wonderful Tiburtine grape at risk. It is a product that is unique and in the past had many admirers in the world of culture. Among them was Franz Liszt, who during his frequent stays at Villa d’Este in Tivoli loved to pick and eat the delicious flesh of his favorite grape. Many people said that he managed to eat them three times a day.

MAURO GAUDINO

2015 ECUMENICAL DINNER

The convivial ecumenical meeting that brings together all the Academicians in Italy and around the world at the virtual table, will take place on October 15 at 8:30 pm. This year’s theme will be Condiments: Sauces and Gravies that characterize regional cuisine. This topic, chosen by the “Franco Marengi” Study Center and approved by the President’s Council, is aimed at recapturing, through cuisine, traditions that are undergoing great changes today owing to our passage from home and family cooking to artisanal and finally industrial foods. And if at one time the use of condiments was determined by neighboring cultures, today the field is a global one and is in a state of constant and rapid change. Delegates are entrusted with ensuring that the ecumenical dinner is accompanied by an appropriate presentation of a cultural character that illustrates this important theme and that the dishes served are relevant to the topic.

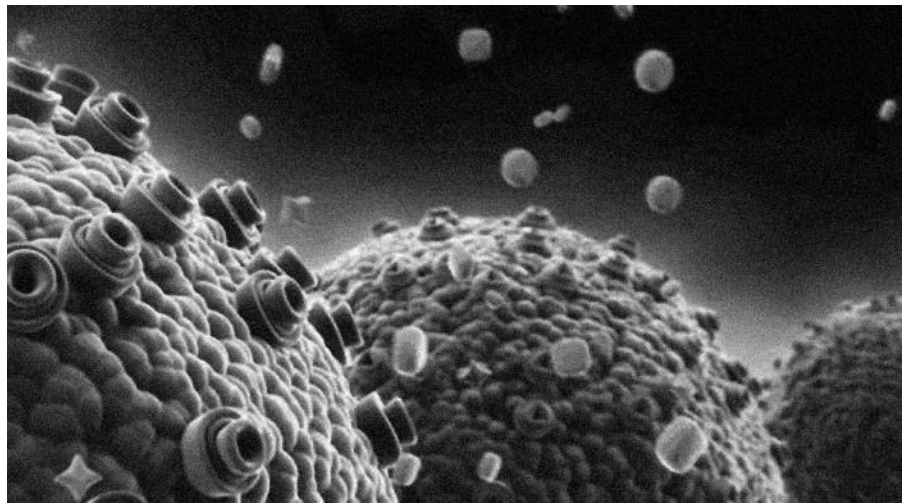




Silence, the nose is speaking!

Although after time, olfaction has lost its primary function, the electronic nose is able to unmask over 90% of food falsifications.

BY PIER GIOVANNI BRACCHI
Academician, Borgo Val di Taro Delegation



To be curious is just one way to activate our mind and nourish it with information coming from external sources through those particular windows that we call “senses”. Among those, olfaction is certainly the most terrestrial, the most animal like, the most transgressive.

Nietzsche elevated it to the symbol of his battle in favor of instincts, of the natural virtue stolen by civilization. He went as far as stating that his entire genius resided in his nostril.

Olfaction is the most ancient and most primitive sensory system, with the most direct access to the brain, with a brief itinerary to the oldest part, the cerebral cortex. Three phases can be detected in the biological olfactory system: the picking up of the smell, the transformation of the olfactory signal, and finally its recognition/interpretation.

The average human nose is capable of detecting about 2,000 odors while the

nose of a well-trained person can detect up to 10,000. It is therefore the most selective system that Mother Nature bestowed upon us to evaluate the environment in which we live and the substances that nourish us. Another aspect cannot be ignored: the tissue that connects the olfactory system and other cerebral structures enables the shaping of associations between the odors and other events, the so called “olfactory memory” implying a larger emotional content, as witnessed by the celebrated example of a “madeleine” being dunked into tea, as Proust evokes in his work *The Search for Lost Time*.

It is well known that the sensorial response of taste is the combination of the experience of the gustative papillae of the tongue with that of the olfactory receptors due to the volatile substances that evaporate from food at the temperature of the oral cavity, carried over to the nose by the breathing pathways connected with the pharynx. Let us go



back to the olfactory system: human beings consider it as of low usefulness while for the larger part of animals it is one of vital importance, as it allows them to find food, to escape predators and to choose a partner for coupling. For many mammals, odors are the most productive way to communicate with their species and to interpret the world that surrounds them.

At the closing of the Fifties, the term “pheromone” came into being to define the chemical messenger between individuals, in other words the very first origin of animal communication. In man, however, the secretion of pheromones has gone through a sort of inhibition over many thousands of years, determined by the progressive spreading of the community lifestyle. In short, humanity began to smell less

and odors ceased to exude explicit biological messages, something that continued in the animal kingdom. Man would have succeeded in eliminating so perfectly his past as “smelling animal”, thus feeling the need to recreate artificially aromas and odors, in other words perfumes and deodorants, losing his primary function of perceiving odors. The world revealed by the olfactory sense became less important in comparison with that connected by eyesight and hearing. It is a matter of use and misuse of an organ, a principle that was enunciated in the Lamarchian period of the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The family of the olfactory genes, however, is one of the largest of the entire human genome and the reasons for that go back to the multiple functions

exercised by the olfactory system. For example, think of the bodyguard who inspects foods before bringing them to the mouth to check if the food is fresh or rotten. An old fisherman, who was inspecting fish as it was unloaded from the boat, was asked how he could ascertain whether the fish was fresh. His instinctive answer was: from the odor! The need to express the evaluation of freshness with just one operational module that could be repeated egged on Artioli and Ciani to device one, sixty years ago, for the teleostean fishes. The central feature of this scheme, that sets the basis for the modern evaluation of freshness, adopted even today by sanitary inspectors, is the olfactory finding (Artioli D., Ciani G., *A Rational Scheme of Organoleptic Tests to Determine the Condition of Freshness of Fish*). This is the origin of sensorial analysis aimed at describing and measuring in an objective fashion what is strongly subjective, i.e. perception.

In order to overcome the limits implied by subjective observations, an olfactory artificial system emerged forty years after the scheme previously described. It is a new system used to evaluate in absolute primacy the freshness of cod: the artificial nose. Such a “nose”, outcome of technological innovation, is proving to be of great help, especially if used to unmask food falsifications, those that threaten our health. Our President dealt with them in exhaustive fashion in a recent book, denouncing the culinary falsifications that betray the best traditions of Italian cuisine. Finally, it must be pointed out that the artificial nose has been thoroughly tested. It was able to discern, with an index of reliability exceeding 90%, dry IGP *porcini* mushrooms of Borgotaro from dry *porcini* imported from China. Once again, the nose knows!

PIER GIOVANNI BRACCHI

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Ragù: neapolitan meat sauce

“Ragù does not boil, he thought. One needs only keep his deepest thoughts focused on the spoon” (Giuseppe Marotta).

BY LUCIO FINO

Academician, Naples-Capri Delegation

It is certainly the best known sauce from Naples. So while pizza may be the queen of Neapolitan cuisine, there are many in that city who consider *ragù* to be her worthy consort. *Ragù* forms the basis of the entire region's gastronomic tradition. And until just a few decades ago it represented the quintessence of the Sunday meal in Naples; its recipe was handed down from generation to generation and even today it is part of every family's basic repertoire.

Nowadays, unfortunately, the rite of preparing *ragù* is seldom celebrated in Neapolitan homes, where it appears only on special occasions. Perhaps this is owing to the modern preference for “lighter” dishes, or perhaps to the complexity of its preparation and extended

cooking time. Indeed, it must “*pippiare*”, or “simmer away” for hours because only then does it achieve that flavor and consistency that have made it legendary. For this reason, in the past its preparation usually began Saturday evening in order to be ready for the big Sunday meal.

Its history is only about two centuries old - the famous Corrado was totally unaware of *ragù* while Cavallanti, incorrectly referring to it as “stew”, provided three vague recipes for it. However, descriptions and comments about this sauce can be found frequently in Neapolitan literature, and even in some of the writings of foreigners. After a brief stay in Naples in the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, mentioned it in an essay entitled





Oedipus in the Kitchen in which he compared eating *maccheroni* with *ragù* to an incestuous relationship.

Among the many authors who have immortalized *ragù*, we must certainly recall Giuseppe Marotta, a brilliant journalist who was also a poet, prolific feature and story writer, composer of songs, critic, essayist and playwright. Marotta wrote a novella about *ragù* as part of a collection of stories published in Milan in 1947 under the title *Neapolitan Gold*. It was also famous for being made into a film directed by Vittorio De Sica in 1954.

This novella tells the story of a little man, don Ernesto Acampora who “had neither an age or a shirt”. He was a merchant who had a “store on wheels”, a vending cart “that was equipped to carry all sorts of products and commodities”. Every Saturday and Sunday he lovingly devoted himself to the preparation of his *ragù* with almost religious dedication, thus enabling himself to forget all about his miserable life.

The story begins with some of the author’s reflections about the celebrated sauce, interwoven with heartfelt poetry: “For how many centuries, every Sunday just like the mass served upon the altar, has *ragù* appeared on the tables of Naples? From the earliest hours of the morning the delicate aroma of onion cooked until pale blonde and a sprig of basil freshly picked from the plant on the windowsill emanates from the ter-



racotta pots. It is even better if the leaves of the herb are tinged with dew. The Neapolitan sky presides over the outcome of the sauce in many ways because *ragù* is not cooked, it is achieved; it is not a sauce but the story and poem of a sauce. From the moment in which the pot is set upon the burner and the required spoonful of lard slides into the pan and begins to melt until the moment when the *ragù* is truly ready, anything and everything can happen to perfect or ruin this laborious sauce that engages the cook the way a painting engages an artist. The *ragù* cannot be left to its own devices during any stage of the cooking; just like an interrupted and restarted piece of music is no longer music, a neglected *ragù* ceases to be a *ragù* and loses the capacity to become one”.

Then, after the lively introduction of his protagonist, Marotta continues his story with the description of don Ernesto’s choice of the best piece of meat at

the butcher shop, observing that “it should be neither fat nor lean” and that it is essential that the animal has been dead for at least 48 hours. It is also important to be sure that the flesh has been cut along “the path of the fibers and branching off of the veins”, that is with, and not against, the grain.

Finally, the novella comes to an end with a precise description of the preparation of the sauce: “He adjusts the heat and watches over everything; he smells the melting fats, the li-

quid that leaves the meat as vapor and that which dilutes or assimilates the fats, browning the meat. He knows the exact moment in which the wooden spoon should turn over the piece of meat, with the delicate movements of one who works with a sensitive and living material, spreads the first layer of tomato paste. Here don Ernesto uses the grave and well suited gestures of a priest; he does not cook, he *celebrates* the *ragù*. [...] Now, having spread the tomato paste on the meat at scientific intervals, the last word regards the heat and the spoon. The *ragù* does not boil, he thought. One need only keep his deepest thoughts focused on the spoon and see that the flame is kept very low, very low.”

In conclusion, this short and amusing story by Marotta once again demonstrates how literature can emerge from a discussion of gastronomy!

LUCIO FINO

THE ACADEMY SILVER PLATE



Large, elegant and silver-plated, with the Academy’s logo embossed on the front. This symbolic object is the recommend gift to be presented to those restaurants visited by the Delegations whose atmosphere, service, and cuisine are deemed particularly worthy. For further information and orders, Delegates should contact the Secretariat in Milan (segreteria@accademia1953.it).