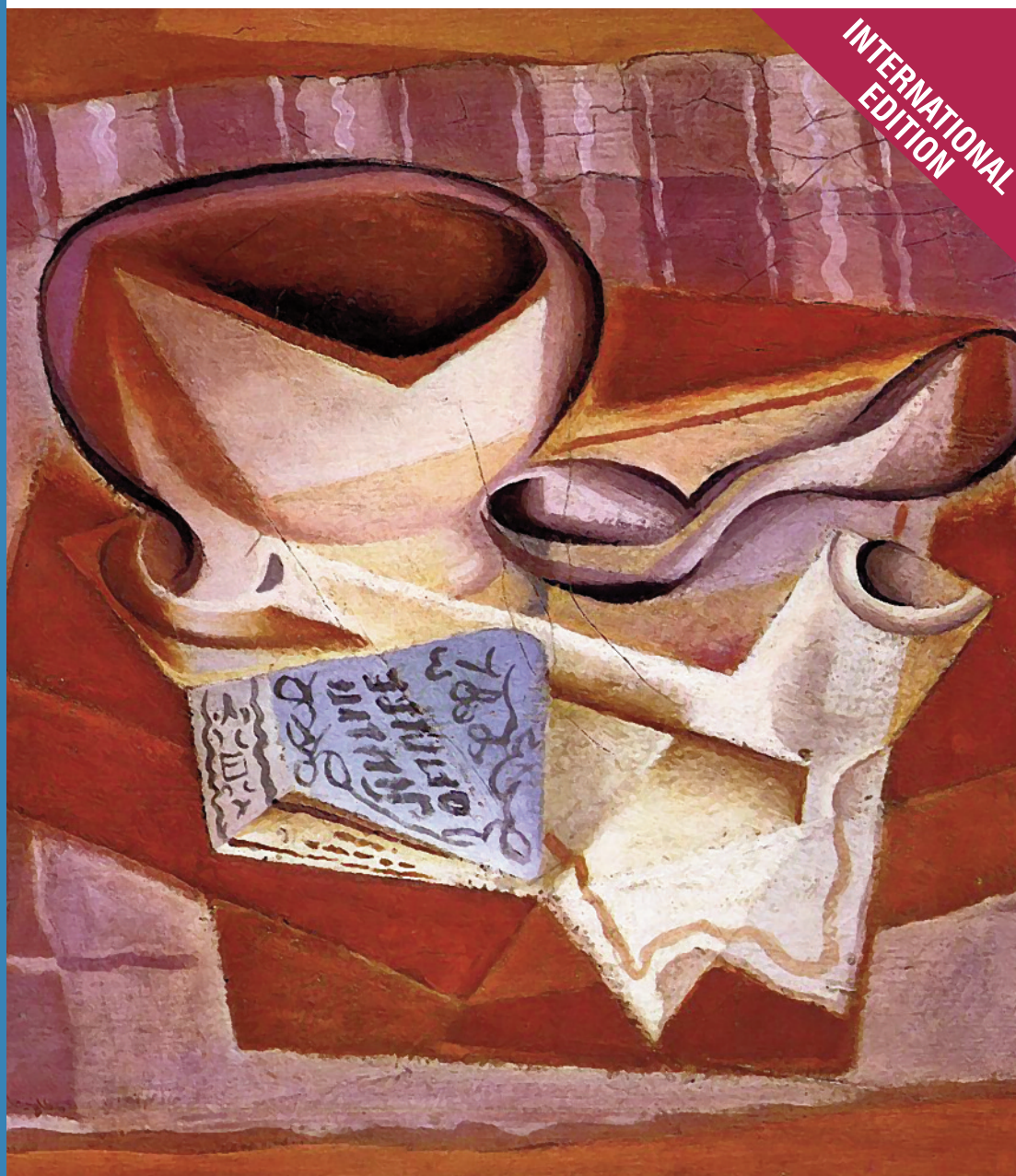


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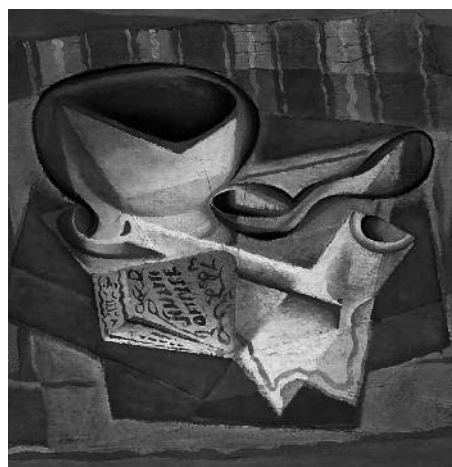
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On the cover: "Still Life with Bowl, Book and Spoon" (1923) by Juan Gris. From a private collection.

The new places of food and the crisis of the traditional restaurant business

A difficult moment that calls for a careful evaluation by the Academicians.

BY PAOLO PETRONI
President of the Academy

Not long ago, the *Yellow Pages* divided places to eat in three categories: restaurants, *trattorias* and pizzerias. It was not easy to find a telephone number for the simple reason that the criterion used to list them in that order was fuzzy. Later on, we found out that quite simply it was the listing person to chose the category where its business was listed. The real problem, however, was how to define a restaurant or a *trattoria* (incidentally, both names derive from the French). The *Treccani* vocabulary deals with the matter quickly by defining *trattoria* as a “simple restaurant”. *Devoto Oli* tries to be more clear about it by stating that “the *trattoria*, particularly in the past, is marked by a familiar and easy going atmosphere”. *Zingarelli* calls *trattoria* “a restaurant with modest features, simple service and familiar style”. Then we have to consider the “*osterie*” which featured above all wines with service in the way of *trattoria* (Rome however features “*Hostarias*” that often have an elegant outlook or at least the pretense of it). These are appropriate definitions that belong to long gone past. One cannot even find the translation of *trattoria* in English or French and in Italy it is impossible to distinguish a *trattoria* from a restaurant since both of them can serve pizza. Our habits have overwhelmed any distinction and today’s eating establishments are numerous and quite different from those of the recent past. Having lunch where one works has brought to life bars that dispense by way of microwave pre-cooked meals of every kind, and in addition, cold offerings and assorted sandwiches, stuffed with improbable sausages and meat cuts reconstructed from unknown animals. Other places are a kind of hybrid: while the bar has become less visible, the emphasis is now on the food itself that is quickly consumed by clients who find a table or are perched on stools. And then one must count the premises for self-service, the take away food, and places where waiters rush around because the eating rite has to be rapid, and all work is accomplished between 1 and 2 pm. Before and after these hours, the place is empty. The young crowd has a penchant for aperitifs at “happy hour” and the so called “*apericena*” that are open to all you can eat and where you can drink for a modest sum. Obviously, what is served is pure horror, the food is made with leftovers and cut into small pieces, with servings of pasta that taste quite awful. All in all, the cost is minimal, and one can avoid eating a traditio-



nal dinner and can socialize. In spite of all that, a better and more modern form of eatery is emerging, a kind of *bistrò* (this word as well come to us from the French *bistrot*) where one can taste good wine by the glass, some excellent cheeses and decent sausages. These places are open for lunch and dinner, with diverse menus. A separate chapter concerns the pizzerias, which in most cases serve just pizza, and the *fast foods* that are increasingly serving full dinners at a reasonable cost.

The panorama of food is large enough, varied and continuously evolving, with the result that the traditional restaurant, that is the restaurant business of the past, is now in a crisis. As they see their premises sadly empty, the great chefs resort to opening adjacent low cost food places; others offer lunch menus that are truly low cost or offer dinners with few courses at a fixed price. In general, the restaurant business is suffering. People talk about quality ingredients, food from local sources and the importance of selecting and offering valid products, but the naked truth is that the largest sector of the restaurant business offers standardized products, to be used at any given moment, in other words frozen, pre-cooked or pre-processed, obtained through specialized distribution to public establishments. These are precarious times that call for close attention by the Academicians in the face of the infinite offers that they receive. Every Academician has the experience of nameless food joints, trite and devoid of any acceptable gastronomical justification. It is imperative to select carefully and the Academy, through its territorial entities, should play its role with seriousness and passion for good cuisine.



How to drink wisely

Making the eyes and the nose be participants in examining wine helps in understanding whether the writing on the label and the product are coherent.

BY ROBERTO ROBAZZA
Academician, Treviso Delegation

Eyesight and smell are more “objective” (so to speak) senses compared to taste: ascertaining the tone of colors or perceiving a shade of perfume certainly varies from one subject to another. Yet they are not so tied to the concept of “I like it - I do not like it” as in the case of a gustative judgment. In the first instance, a careful preventative analysis based on sight and smell will help us understand if the wine that we are offered has the features that are listed on the label and in extreme cases will help us judge the “drinkability”. In other words, keep your eye on the glass! In the region of Treviso, if you are offered a glass of *Prosecco* with a beautiful yellow gold color, do not drink it and do not even raise the glass to your nose. The color that distinguishes this wine - to be drunk within a year of the harvest - is straw yellow (at times with a greenish reflection), a color that certifies the exu-

berant “youth” exuding from its well known qualities. A more charged color betrays either “old age” or “sickness”.

A surprising amount of information may be gathered, for example, about the period of harvest that determines the maturing of the grapes, the wine making techniques, the freshness or maturity of the product and by simply observing the wine as it is poured into the glass.

There are three characteristics that must be taken into account when we observe the wine: its clearness, its color and its density. Obviously, they must be related to the typology of wine and the wine making process under study. As to the clarity, for example, it behooves us to demand that the wine be limpid (without ever showing particles in suspension). A great Barolo with a few decades on its back can legitimately present some “bottom” residue, even though it should be correctly decanted; likewise, a well





bottled sparkling wine whose “bottom” has not been filtered cannot but be cloudy. On the other hand, a wine that is veiled or opalescent, or colored by visible precipitates, should never be accepted. This way we are able to evaluate an initial summary coherence between the label and the content to be poured. The major part of information, however, can be extracted from the color and its tonalities.

A person with normal eyesight is able to distinguish between 180 and 200 different shades of color. The ability to differentiate among them varies according to the color. Differences between the red and violet colors are more evident while those between green and yellow are less apparent. As a result, the evaluation of color in red wines will be more immediate in comparison to white wines and likewise the recognition of respective shades will be simpler. You can imagine how the analysis of such differences can transmit information concerning the wine that is being offered. Color depends on polyphenols (anthocyanins, flavones, leukocyanins, catechins and others) contained principally in the skin of the grape. Different vines provide wines with different colors (those obtained from Lambrusco grapes, Nero d’Avola, Ancellotta, Raboso or Cabernet are more intense than those obtained from Nebbiolo, Pinot Nero or Sangiovese). The evolutionary state of all wines, both white and red, manifests itself in different shades of color, since color changes markedly with the passing of time during aging in caskets or bottles. Thus, a young white wine, not excessively structured and ready to drink, will present yellow shades verging on light green since it was the product of wine making

with grapes that were harvested early with a short period of aging exclusively processed in “steel”. In the case of white wines, the observation of warmer golden tones reveals a more structured wine, the product of mature grapes, made into wine perhaps with a process of cryo-maceration and a fairly long “rest” period in wooden casks or in bottles. In other words, a more evolved wine.

It is a different matter if wine presents itself with vivid shades, between amber and topaz. In this case, the coloring does not stem from the evolutionary state, but from the harvesting of grapes that were left to mature for a longer period or were left to wither on the vine or attacked by the noble mould (*botrytis cynerea*). In fact, only the great white raisin wines present such shades. It is obvious that when we find this color feature in a wine that was produced through a different process we are facing an alteration that must be rejected. In this case, however, the color will appear somewhat “dull” given the fact that the wine is oxidized or Madeira-like (it is up to the nose to resolve the uncertainty in unequivocal fashion).

The visual analysis of red wines is more complex and entertaining although it is absolutely parallel to the analysis of white wines. This is due to the greater richness of polyphenols in the skin of red grapes, and in particular the anthocyanins that appear only in this species. In this case as well the various processes of wine making with somewhat longer periods of maceration determine significant chromatic differences.

At any rate, notwithstanding the determining differences originating from the vine, the evolution in casks or bottles plays a decisive role in the variation of the shades of color. The young red wines distinguish themselves for the exuberance of their color, thus producing a beautiful ruby red with violet shades. In the more mature wines, color will evolve as a result of oxidation and polymerization of the pigments, from ruby to garnet, all the way to an orange hue. One must pay attention, however, since not all wines undergo

the same evolution within the same span of time.

The vividness and luster of color is a most important feature for both white and red wines. Should they not be supported by a gratifying vivacity, the same chromatic characteristics could demonstrate wines near the end of their life, in which case they should be avoided. The last characteristic to be observed, not only for non-sparkling wines, is consistency. It should be evaluated by swirling the glass and observing the velocity of movement of the liquid mass: the slower the wine is moving in the glass, the richer its content of alcohol, polyalcohol, and extractive substances (sugars, glycerol, acids and so forth). In this case, the structure of the wine will be greater and in particular, its alcohol-metric title.

The “fresh” white wines, to be drunk while young, will be more “fluid” than long aged raisin wines and reds, but this is an example of limited value insofar as wines of great consistency may be found even among young wines (all great wines were once young!). Owing to the same characteristics, another significant feature is the velocity with which the wine descends on the wall of the glass, forming “tears” or “small arches”; the wider the arches, and the faster the tears descend, the less is the content of alcohol and polyalcohol. Conversely, tight “small arches” and slow “tears” indicate a good structure and good alcohol-metric title.

In sum, for non-sparkling wines, the clarity tells us about the correctness of the wine making process; color suggests a great deal about the evolutionary state; consistency prepares us for the structure of the wine. In the case of the sparkling wines, effervescence should be appraised instead of consistency: the finer, more numerous and persistent the bubbles, the “better” the sparkling wine. It must be repeated and underlined that the visual examination is a first approximation that helps in taking stock of the coherence of what is poured with whatever is declared in the label.

ROBERTO ROBAZZA



The history and legends surrounding honey

Its health benefits are linked to its high anti-oxidant content, which simple sugar does not possess.

BY PUBLIO VIOLA
Delegate, Rome Appia



Honey is a food with ancient roots. Many archeological studies have shown that pre-historic man not only consumed honey as food but he also attributed to it a spiritual value that represented a link between man and the gods as well as between man and time. Since the beginning honey has been associated with historical myths and legends, not only for its nutritional properties but also because it is produced by those industrious insects known as bees, which have a particular discipline and selective capacity for work. The Old Testament even tells us that through their production of honey, bees are able to distinguish good from bad. This concept was later seized upon by the Greek philosopher Plutarch, who wrote a great deal about it, and subsequently also by many medieval scholars. Bees

were even deemed worthy of appearance on coats of arms.

Our prehistoric information tells us that bees have been in existence for over 25 million years, while the first traces of human consumption of honey would seem to only go back 10,000 years. We can deduce this from a rock painting found near Valencia, Spain that depicts a person holding onto a vine while collecting honeycombs from a rock while bees buzz around his head.

There are many legends about who was the first to recognize and utilize bees for the production of honey, among them Aristeo, the son of Apollo. But the most credible would seem to be Melissa, a priestess whose name literally means “she who offers honey”. She was the daughter of the King of Crete, and according to some scholars she

was transformed into a bee by the gods of Mount Olympus so that she could provide honey to go with Amaltea’s goat’s milk to feed little Jupiter.

Four thousand years ago, the Egyptians held honey in such esteem that they used it as an offering to the gods. They also placed jars containing the precious nectar next to the sarcophagi of the Pharaohs to help them on their journey to the next life. The ancient Egyptians also practiced apiculture along the banks of the Nile, in part because of the organoleptic and nutritional value of the honey, but primarily because its virtues were thought to be sacred and therapeutic. We also can refer to an ancient legend written on a piece of Egyptian papyrus that is now housed in the British Museum in London. The legend states that when the Sun God Ra wept from love his tears fell to Earth



and turned into honey, and thereafter bees made the honey into their home and built hives. This concept was later echoed by the Latin poet Virgil.

The Greeks considered honey to be the food of the gods, an essential component of ambrosia that was a fundamental element of life. Although they utilized it during their rites and rituals, they also used it in the preparation of sweets on festive and ceremonial occasions. Aristophanes

affirmed that flat bread and honey constituted the prize for the winners of races; Pythagoras recommended to his students that they eat honey with bread in order to assure a long and healthy life. And finally, the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre wrote in his *Cave of the Nymph* that honey was the symbol of both sleepiness and lucidity, and it was offered to initiates as the symbol of a new life.

The Romans were well acquainted with honey and there are numerous testaments to its use as a food, as described by Gavius Apicius, Horace, Trimalchio and many others. In addition to being used by the wealthy patricians to make cakes and other favorite dishes that were pleasing to the palate, honey was widely utilized among the lower classes as a worthwhile as well as delicious nutritional supplement. And we also should note that Roman newlyweds, upon entering their home after the wedding to be left undisturbed for the duration of an entire lunar phase, would find honey spread on the threshold.

According to ancient traditional Indian Ayurvedic medicine, honey has curative and purifying properties, as well as anti-toxic and even aphrodisiacal ones. But in any case it is considered a "*rasayana*", that is, a substance that has the power to rejuvenate. However, it must never be eaten cooked.



Honey is an excellent food source, composed of - in addition to a small percentage of sucrose (2-3%) better known as sugar - primarily oligosaccharides and more specifically, dextrose (34.5%) and fructose (40.5%) that together form the so-called "inverse sugars". Both oligosaccharides are present in nearly equal quantities, although fructose, which is responsible for the characteristic sweet taste, is prevalent. Honey also contains a fairly large quantity of water (20-22%) as well as vitamins and minerals. But there are also some minor components that are very interesting from a biological point of view, such as some derivatives of benzoic acid, which have antibacterial properties, as well as some phenolic compounds belonging to the bioflavonoid classification, which have protective antioxidant properties. Along these lines it should be stated that depending on its place of origin, honey can contain a diverse concentration of polyphenols, and a darker color seems to indicate a larger quantity since they comprise pigmentary components.

From all this we can deduce that honey constitutes a traditional healthy food that is fully compatible with the canons of the Mediterranean Diet. Certainly it must be consumed in appropriate quantities, as with any other food. It is easily digestible and provides quick energy that can contribute to recovery

of both physical and cerebral activity in patients suffering from fatigue. In particular we should emphasize honey's health value associated with its high content of antioxidant agents (bioflavonoids) that help protect against the deleterious effects of the free radicals contained in oxygen. This effect does not take place with common sucrose or complex carbohydrates such as starch.

Honey is comparable to fruit and vegetables because it is an important source of useful nutritional components. In this regard, it is relevant to refer to a study that was recently conducted in Sardinia that demonstrated higher antioxidant activity on the part of berry, chestnut and cistus honeys which are darker in color. As previously stated, this corresponds to a higher polyphenol content compared to other varieties, both mono- and poly-floral. In conclusion, honey is a product that is pleasing to the palate and that has a long history in human civilization that places it among luxury foods. It was perhaps for this reason that in antiquity, honey was considered to be a gift from the gods; an elixir that helps and protects us - so much so that the Valkyries of Valhalla offered it as a prize to their heroes. It is also a delicate food that in the past was considered to be a symbol of poetry and wisdom. In this regard, legend tell us that bees landed on the lips of Plato in his cradle as if to announce that a honey of wisdom and eloquence would issue from his lips. Finally, we must recall that in English the word "honey" is used as a pet name among lovers - more or less the equivalent of the Italian word "*tesoro*" (treasure). And on this point we must concur, because honey constitutes a gastronomic treasure that enriches our lives.

PUBLIO VIOLA



The Italian table as seen through the eyes of Lady Blessington

“The Italians are truly masters of the culinary art, and they offer a variety of foods that have no equal elsewhere”.

BY LUCIO FINO

Academician, Naples-Capri Delegation



1825. Having arrived in Naples in 1822 with her second husband, she lived there for almost three years. She soon transformed her residence Villa Belvedere in the Vomero into an endless dinner party frequented by Neapolitan intellectuals and the most prestigious English visitors to the city.

Lady Blessington vivaciously describes the luncheon at the residence of the Archbishop of Taranto with a series of original observations:

“The Russian style of service and table setting has been adopted by almost all Neapolitans. A *plateau* and an *epergne* occupy the center, as in England; dessert, served with vases of flowers, takes the place of the individual dishes, which in England are placed on the table like party decorations, whereas here they are placed on a buffet and are served by the waiters. Although it prolongs the duration of the meal, in my opinion this custom has a great advantage: the table is not encumbered by a lot of stuff and unlike having to contemplate the leftover dishes of the first and second courses, the sight of fruit and flowers is pleasing to the eye. Our sense of smell is gratified by pleasant scents rather than the conflicting lingering odors of meat and fish. But I cannot help but mention yet another advantage: the ladies’ sleeves never graze the plates and our hairdos are

not disturbed by servants reaching from behind us to change out our plates. Some of the Neapolitan dishes are excellent and the local cooks do not lack gastronomic *savoir faire*. I have noticed that like the French, the Neapolitans taste every dish that is brought to the table no matter how numerous, and no one, except perhaps an unwell person, limits themselves to just one or two. It is not that they eat more than the English, but they enjoy a greater variety of foods. Still, in spite of this epicurean tendency, other foreigners suffer less from “*le remords de l’estomac*” - as Grimond de la Reynière delicately describes indigestion - than do the English, who eat smaller quantities and less sophisticated foods. I think that our simple roasted or boiled meat may be more nutritious for those who expend relatively little energy, and that the dishes prepared by the French and Italians are less likely to cause dyspepsia because during the cooking process our meat loses most of its juices. Perhaps it is more than just gluttony that leads foreign visitors to eat all the dishes served: it could be that good manners require them to accept everything that their dinner companion does not turn down”.

In the end, Lady Blessington concludes this original recollection of her time in Naples with a sincere exaltation of Italian culinary art: “The way in which the Italians prepare the various dishes and ice creams is far superior to that of the French and the English; they are truly masters of the art of cuisine, and they offer a variety of foods that have no equal elsewhere”.

Monsignor Giuseppe Capelatro, a fascinating intellectual, both curious and cultivated, was Canon of the Naples Cathedral, and beginning in 1778 was Archbishop of Taranto. Imprisoned by the Bourbons for participating in the Neapolitan Republic in 1799, and later persecuted for having served as Interior Minister during the reign of Joaquin Murat, he spent his final years in the Sessa Palace that had been the magnificent residence of Sir William Hamilton, English ambassador to the Bourbon court. Here, on a daily basis he received the upper crust of Neapolitan society and the most eminent people who came to Naples on their *Grand Tour*.

In her travel memoir *The Idler in Italy*, the beautiful and famous Lady Blessington recalls an elegant luncheon held at the residence in December