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On the cover: graphic rendering of a detail from
Still Life with Bread, Pie and Ice Box by Giuseppe
Recco (1660 - 1670). On exhibit from February 11-
May 11, 2014 at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Part
of the exhibition *The Rooms of the Muses: Baroque
Paintings from the Collection of Francesco Molinari
Pradelli*.



The barbaric cuisine of functional illiterates

Even cooks who have refined technical skills are often barbarians incapable of managing a cuisine with the cultural values of the previous generation.

BY GIOVANNI BALLARINI
President of the Academy

Dear Academicians, under attack by an increasingly rapid and untamed globalization, is Italian cuisine at risk of dying out? Or has it already disappeared? Perhaps these are pointless questions if we consider them in terms of the ironical “Keynes principle” according to which “in the long term, we are all dead”. But to answer these questions we must reflect upon Italian cuisine before the country’s unification, or even during preceding times when behind the lavish cuisine of the court and the palaces of the nobility there was widespread hunger among the popular classes. Past periods when there was no such thing as regional cuisine and local eating habits were haphazard and lacking in dignity. Their codification and elevation would only come gradually with the rise of modern bourgeois cuisine. What predictions could have been made

on August 2, 1847 when Metternich wrote his famous and controversial phrase in a letter to Count Dietrichstein that “Italy is a geographical expression” without a unifying cultural identity, fragmented into regions and territories, of which cuisine is a reflection? Metternich’s may have been an overly schematic and pessimistic impression, but it should give us pause. Making predictions is the easiest way to make mistakes, especially on the slippery slope of cuisine and eating habits.

As an additional challenge we should recall the short term prediction (as we have already dispensed with the long term) that there will soon only be two cuisines left in the world: Chinese cuisine and that of the multinational food industry, which will ultimately be joined in a single industrial pan-Asian cuisine. A more realistic hypothesis is that new cuisines that are expressions of new local customs are springing up and evolving everywhere including Italy as a result of cross-cultural mobility and subsequent cultural exchanges, culinary corruption, and ethnic hybridization.

When looking at the current state of cuisine in Italy, we should ask ourselves the provocative question: Are we experiencing a dramatic abandonment of the cuisine of a diminishing or vanishing middle class, that risks the disappearance of regional cuisines that are dissipating in the face of rampant urbanization, loss of a rural/peasant identity, and the spread of xenophilic industrial food mayhem? While diagrams are not reality, they do help to explain it, and the condition outlined above cannot be confronted, much

less resolved, with populist or partisan movements that embrace vague concepts like slow eating or buying a food based solely because it is locally produced. They only lead to the nutritional equivalent of cutting off your nose to spite your face.

Self-serving rhetoric and practices like those currently in vogue in France that are based on the precarious concepts of a single and exceptional level of excellence that pit one brand of imperialism (that of French gastronomy) against American industrial food imperialism run the risk of soon having to confront a new common foe: Asian/Chinese gastrointestinal imperialism. The gastronomy wars can be as dangerous as religious wars.

Without attributing fault to fate or other specific factors, and without recourse to explanations based on conspiracies or hidden plots, we must realize and accept the sad reality that in terms of cuisine, Italians are becoming functionally illiterate. What is true for language is also true for cuisine, and functional illiterates are those who do not have an understanding of what they are doing.

These new culinary illiterates cook food and eat dishes whose meaning they neither understand nor appreciate. This information cannot be substituted by some dry data referring to calories, vitamins, protein content etc., nor by an enticing photo much less a name that has become a *flatus vocis*, or empty utterance, that is not infrequently misinterpreted. Food without meaning is food without soul, and therefore is culturally dead.

In Italy today fewer and fewer people



know the true cuisine of their region or their parents' or grandparents' territory of origin, which at the most they might visit briefly on vacations. Similarly, relatively few people enjoy a cuisine that is complete and that has its own well-regulated cultural dimension that corresponds to the concept of gastronomy as "a rule of stomach". Under these conditions it is easy to fall victim to the illusions of an innovative cuisine or the seduction of food industry advertisements falsely touting a "national cuisine" or worse still, "international" or "universal", which are a continually changing fusion of more or less industrially prepared dishes with names that are often misleading or contrived.

It is important to note that all this is not taking place as part of a preordained plan or hidden conspiracy as some would have us believe, but because the cultural void created by changes in the family and its cuisine is filled first by the artisanal producer and then by large industry. In this situation an extra-familial rapid style cuisine develops and an in-

dustrially inspired *fusion* cuisine is born with foods, dishes and recipes created to conform with industrial standards and organized mass production and distribution. At the most we arrive at a "creole" cuisine, i.e., a hybridization of the cuisines of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, with the corresponding formation of a bundle of composite cuisines.

As part of this brief portrait we must note that the explosion of specialized magazines and cooking schools for culinary amateurs and gastronomic theatricality and fan worship creates and popularizes culturally illiterate new cooks. Why culturally illiterate? They have refined technically skills, and understand everything about cooking with steam, low temperatures and pressure, rapid preparation; they use new food preparation and preservation techniques; they pay close attention to the appearance of dishes and pose as "food designers" etc. But they are barbarians in terms of a managing a cuisine with cultural values like that of our mothers and the generations that preceded them.

At the same time we are also losing the culture of real regional or local cuisine. It is on the way to extinction, often misinterpreted by those cooks who limit themselves to using local products but ignore their cultural dimension, and above all their transformation and uses. No foreign cuisine or new technique can substitute what was created in Italy over the course of a long, tortuous and difficult cultural journey in which we not only learned to use the products of our territory but also to express this experience through a cuisine that was handed down from generation to generation.

The babbling barbarians of the new cuisines are the latest example of the current and worrisome culinary situation in Italy and the betrayal of tradition. We should revive these traditions, starting with their cultural significance, in order to give Italian cuisine back its soul that never died but has been in eclipse, hiding in the deep valleys of our collective subconscious.

GIOVANNI BALLARINI



2014 ECUMENICAL DINNER

The convivial ecumenical meeting, that brings together all Academicians in Italy and around the world at the virtual table, will take place on October 16 at 8:30 pm, and this year's theme will be The Cuisine of Rice. This theme, chosen by the "Franco Marenghi"



Study Center and approved by the President's Council, is aimed at rediscovering the cuisine of the many varieties of rice using traditional recipes that may have been long forgotten and that are part of our regional culinary patrimony. We will also examine some new culinary trends involving rice. Delegates are responsible for insuring that the ecumenical dinner be accompanied by an appropriate cultural presentation that illustrates the importance of the proposed theme, and that a menu devoted

to the chosen theme is followed.

Help! God knows what we should call parmesan!

*The more common names have been banished from the table.
From grated cheese, mozzarella, to salt, everything today has to have its own name.*

BY PAOLO PETRONI
Secretary General of the Academy

Please pass the cheese! If we are about to attack a nice plate of spaghetti with a good sauce, it should be clear that I am asking for parmesan cheese. Alas, not any more. Parmesan does not exist these days; it is not a recognized cheese and you cannot buy it. Today there is *Parmigiano-Reggiano*. If I want a “grana” cheese, can I get it? No, it does not exist any longer. Today we find *Grana Padano* or *Trentingrana*, that is, a *Grana Padano* produced in the province of Trento. There is also an old *Granone Lodigiano* or *Lodigiano Tipico* that is considered to be the “patriarch” of all *grana* cheeses and is recognized by the Ministry for Agricultural, Alimentary and Forestry policies as a traditional Italian agro-alimentary product. What is going on? Starting in the 11th century, the word “grana” has always referred to a cheese characterized by its granular structure, produced in the Po Valley. However, after the Italian law of 1996, the term “grana” has been absorbed by the new denominations of origin and by the typical Dop. It is truly a mess. We give up, and just ask for a grated cheese.

Now we turn to “mozzarella”. Mozzarella? It is only the cheese produced with buffalo milk, since in 1996 the buffalo mozzarella from Campania obtained the denomination of protected origin. As a consequence, the mozzarella made with cows’ milk called “*Fior di latte*” (milk flower) has obtained the certification of guaranteed traditional specialty.

This guarantees only the methodology of production and not the origin of the basic product or its quality. Let us now dress a nice salad and ask for some vinegar for the dressing. Pass the vinegar! Which one? Vinegar made with white wine, red wine, apples, or balsamic vinegar? Balsamic, thank you. Wait a minute! Balsamic from Modena or traditional balsamic vinegar from Modena or Reggio Emilia? What’s the difference? The first is made with wine vinegar that is not aged and is produced almost everywhere at low cost; the other ones are aged for a long time, produced in a specific area and are therefore costly.

May I have some oil, please? What kind of oil? Olive oil, of course. However, olive oil can also be produced with rectified oils and not by squeezing the olives. This can’t be right. We are asking for extra virgin olive oil (a long and not so clear name). But it is not enough. We are asking that it be Italian, of course; that is 100 percent Italian and nothing less. If it is produced in your region or in your area, so much the better, and you hope that the oil is genuine and not adulterated. Finally to dress our salad we need salt, but how do we go about asking for it? They will offer us sea salt, black or smoked salt, coarse, raw or semi-fine... We are happy to be protected and to be presented with such a vast variety, but it almost gives us a headache. I am tempted to fry myself an egg, but... it is better not to think about the ten kinds of eggs that I can choose from the shelf.

THE ACADEMY SILVER PLATE



*An elegant silver plated dish engraved with the Academy logo.
This symbolic object may be presented to restaurants that display exceptional service, cuisine and hospitality.
Delegates may contact the Milan Headquarters
(segreteria@accademia1953.it) for more information and orders.*

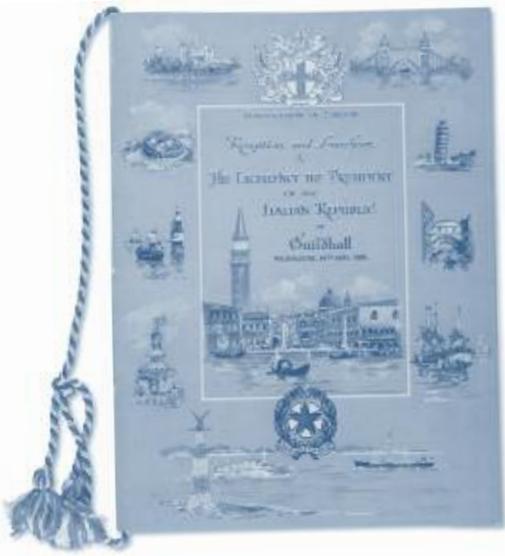


The birth of the menu

Today it is difficult to imagine beginning a dinner or lunch in a restaurant without having first consulted the menu. Just when did this habit begin?

BY RENZO PELLATI

Academician, Turin Delegation
"F. Marengli" Study Center



Even long ago, at the time of the Assyrians, there was the equivalent of a menu, a clay tablet upon which were listed the plates of the day. Centuries later, on January 23, 1489, on the occasion of the scrumptious wedding banquet for Isabella of Aragon and Gian Galeazzo Sforza, an anonymous Milanese wrote and printed a "poem-menu", the first such incunabulum. In the following century, Cristoforo of Messisbugo, chef and Palatine count, documented in a book all the banquets that he put together. We are still far, however, from calling such listings real menus. The use of the menu on a printed card or folder, on a piece of more or less elegant paper with an odd shape, started in France and spread not only in that country but later in Italy, only in the middle of the nineteenth century.

After the French revolution, the old hostels, taverns, and "auberge" for the nobles underwent quite a few changes: hotels and restaurants got ready to welcome the new bourgeoisie, the services offered were spelled out, the number of tables increased and the menu became indispensable for listing prices and services. To be sure, no document is more authentic and reliable for assessing the table service, the succession and definition of the servings by the use of their correct names, sometime even with the date, the place and the specific occasion. At official dinners, the order of the servings cannot be left to individual whims but is regulated by a codex that was institutionalized by the experience of the chef in charge of the event.

The celebrated chef Auguste Escoffier wrote in his *The Book of Menus* in 1912: "The term menu has two different meanings. The first refers to the overall presentation of the foods and drinks that make up the meal: in other words, the program of the luncheon or dinner. The same word denotes the card, of any material or shape, upon which the program appears, a sample of which is laid on the table at the side of the plate in front of each guest." The diffusion of the menu was enhanced by the official banquets of monarchs and noble personalities when the service shifted from the French style (that was fashionable in Versailles) to the Russian style.

In the first kind of service, all the food offerings were set on a sumptuously laid table. The guests could thus admire the scenic effect and then asked the servants to collect the selected dishes. Obviously, the menu was superfluous because the foods were placed before everyone's eyes. There were problems in the kitchen though in finding the right time to serve hot or cold plates. In June 1810 the situation was upended. Prince Borissovic Kurakin, the Ambassador of Czar Alexander 1st to Napoleon, offered a dinner in the palace of Clichy at the gates of Paris, and had the guests sit down at a richly set table with porcelain, embroideries, chalices, flowers, silver candelabra, but no visible food. When the host gave the order to start the dinner, the various servings came to the table gradually, one by one, in a logical succession. Clearly, Prince Kurakin would not have dared to introduce such a re-



volutionary table service unless it had been launched with success in Russia. Starting with that dinner, the official banquets followed the so-called “Russian Style”, which was more practical because it allowed the exquisite foods to be prepared and served in real time. The written menu became irreplaceable since the guest could read the general program and appreciate the dishes that he fancied the most.



The menus that were offered in Europe in the 1800s at the official dinners of the high or middle social classes were written almost exclusively in French, on the basis of the favorable consideration enjoyed by this language in the gastronomic realm. This trend changed in Italy thanks to King Victor Emmanuel III when he staged a gala dinner in Rome on December 22, 1907. The compiling of the text was entrusted to the Crusca Academy and other glottologists who were recruited to give Italian names to the terms of French gastronomy. On January 12, 1908 the Crusca Academy decreed the equivalent of the term “menu” to be “list” or “draft”; in spite of that, the word menu is still used today. Initially, some well known painters, who were skilled in the illustration of books and posters, collaborated in illustrating menus and sketches. Navigation companies and the producers of wines, liquors, aperitifs, chocolates and meat products started giving out classy and artistic menus to restaurants and hotels. Incidentally, our Academy has published an interesting book entitled *The Menus of the Quirinale* that features the menus printed for special events of the royal family and of the Presidents of the Republic who came after it.

RENZO PELLATI

COOKING WITH THE HEAD VS. COOKING WITH THE HEART

Like so many first-generation Americans, I have a mix of European bloods coursing through my veins. My Friulian Grandmother prepared her polenta bent over a large copper kettle, and later sliced it with a long piece of thread, to be served with the tiny roast birds, or “ose”. My Norwegian Grandmother made traditional lefse as well as the dreaded lutefisk. I never saw either of them consult a recipe book or worry about the amount of time required to prepare a dish.



Having experimented with recipes written in American English, Italian, and Spanish over the years, I have found

one major difference between Italian and American recipes: the former rely heavily on instinct and experience, while the latter focus on precision and detailed instructions down to the precise minute. After all, Betty Crocker’s “test kitchen” was an American invention.

While our European grandmothers’ recipes may refer to “a pinch” of this or that, even modern Italian recipes are still filled with such delightful, if somewhat imprecise, phrases like: “un filo d’olio” (a stream of oil), “una manciata di prezzemolo” (a handful of parsley), and the wonderful, all purpose “QB” “quanto basta” (as much as you need). Compare that with the American recipe specifying one cup, half cup, one-third cup, one-quarter cup and even one-eighth cup, with the corresponding fractions indicated for level Tablespoons and Teaspoons. Instructions for cooking time are no different. The Italian recipe may recommend: “Bake in a hot oven until golden” while the “American one states: “Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes in the upper half of the oven”. I attribute the difference to the American penchant for precision and the scientific aspects of nutrition. Today not only are all the foods we buy in America labeled with their nutritional content, but even restaurant menus have jumped on the bandwagon. Do we really want to know how many calories are in a meal when you’re having a night out?

Italians tend to cook with family recipes peppered with generalities and approximations - almost always with wondrous results. They cook from memory, and with boundless love.

It may be an over-simplification to say that Italians cook with their hearts and Americans cook with their heads, but having lived among both, I believe there is a “pinch” of truth to it.

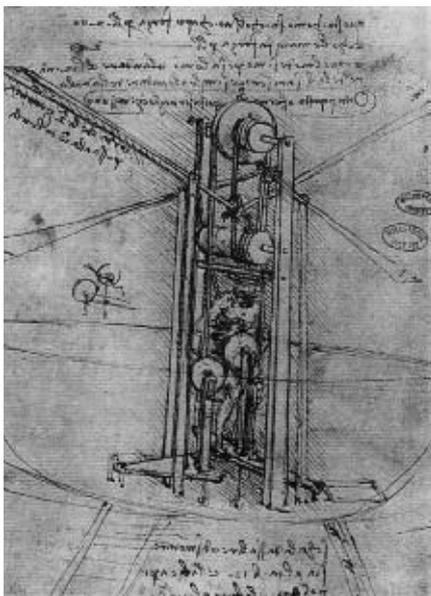
(Nicola Lea Furlan)



An engineer in the kitchen

From an early age, Leonardo sharpened his taste for the culinary art that led him to many experiences in the kitchen, sometime successful other times ruinous

BY DANILA CARLUCCI
Academician, Benevento Delegation



Leonardo da Vinci stands out as an singular case of a polyvalent artist, with a creativity that expanded beyond the limits of the imaginable, whose amplitude and depth of interest extended into designing devices for the kitchen and the preparation of banquets.

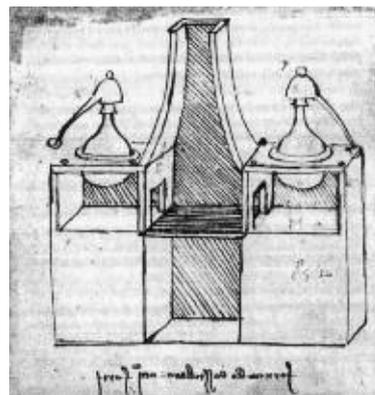
Such inventions are tied specifically to the activity that Leonardo implemented in some courts that were centers of cultural activities of the time, stemming from the institution of patronage. Leonardo worked at the court of Ludovico the Moor since 1482 and in spite of the fact that he was a vegetarian and most of all abstemious, he knew well the menus of the epoch and organized parties for the duke of Milan as well as the court of Francois I of Valois. Such parties called for a synergy with the chef in charge.

A testimonial to his knowledge of food, the structure of a meal and the table setting can be found even in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. As one looks at the painted wall in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, what strikes the visitor is the meticulous attention paid to each detail. Even the objects and foods on the table seem to be participants to the intense pathos of the scene: knives, glasses and pitchers, pewter plates and loaves of bread seem to balance out the nervous reactions of the apostles to Jesus' announcement. The scene is

opens: the glasses are half full and the dishes bear slices of oranges to garnish pieces of eel. This fish is present in the initial servings of meals during the Renaissance, particularly at the court of Este, where eel was cooked in a sweet and sour sauce, a taste that was high in flavor, almost indispensable, at those times. The Renaissance menu at the court of Este included several servings of fresh water fish such as purée of trout, sturgeon cream, spleen of pike, small fish from the Po river, boiled sturgeon, fried fish covered with orange juice, cinnamon and sugar, eel fritters, fried pike covered with anise seeds, slices of sturgeon cooked over charcoal and flavored with parsley, and stew of cuttlefish cooked in Venetian style.

The *Last Supper* was a commission by Ludovico the Moor who had married Beatrice of Este, which explains how the food portrayed in the mural was popular at the Milan court insofar Beatrice was devoted today to day activities, include culinary ones, so much so that in a letter sent to Venice she described the sugary works of art that enriched the Venetian table. On the occasion of

great festivities, the chef became a choreographer with a keen artistic sense, staging the banquets and enriching the tables with automatic implements and mechanical devices. Giorgio Vasari reports that Leonardo himself introduced an automaton to celebrate the arrival of French





King Charles VIII (in 1515): a lion that transformed itself into an eagle with its chest opening to reveal lilies. In the *Atlantic Code*, whose name derives from the dimensions of pages resembling those of a geographic atlas, containing 1,750 drawings, notes and observations by the artist, Leonardo displays a hammer that could be used in the kitchen. Among the machines that he designed there are two models for a roasting spit, mechanical variants of the traditional spits that were hand turned the kitchen personnel. One of the models (C.A., f, 21r) is connected to a system of weights; it seems that it was employed in the kitchens of the castle of Chenonceaux where it still operates today. The second system (C.A.,f, 5v) is more elaborate as it uses a vertical propeller that is turned by the hot air rising in the fireplace through mechanisms that transmit the movement of the axis to the spit. The very idea of employing the movement of hot air produced by fire is applied in the project of a kitchen-hearth (Codex 2037, 20r) that is built to channel the smoke in a way that allows the smoking of sausages, meats and other edible products. In sum, there is an unknown Leonardo, attentive to the development of possibilities of civil life and to the small daily needs, a Leonardo who is more human and reachable.

DANILA CARLUCCI

SURFING THE WEB WITH THE ACADEMY IS MORE USER FRIENDLY THAN EVER!

The Academy website (www.accademia1953.it) has been completely redone. It is more dynamic and rich in online information that is much easier to access by its users (almost 9,000 visitors each month). The site's clearer and more modern graphics allow the user immediate access to news about the Academy's activities both in Italy and abroad, as well as the most recent issues of the magazine. In addition, the images that run across the home page take us to the major areas of interest (the Library, New Delegations) but also to those places where important conferences have taken place.



Thanks to the many menu categories it is possible to access the national recipe database of Italian regional cuisine, and consult the section devoted to restaurants, which includes reviews of 3,000 eating establishments in Italy and abroad, including those from the printed guide *The Good Traditional Table*. And much more space is devoted to Delegation activities, with photos of events, books contributed and publications. There is also a new Delegate's Area that will allow Delegates to communicate directly with Headquarters in order to streamline communications.

The most recent issues of *The Civilization of the Table* can be downloaded in Italian (with selected articles English), as well as the most important published "Notebooks".



The true origins of tiramesù

Another piece in the puzzle of the history of this luscious dessert that is known throughout Italy and the world, with as many variations as the pastry chefs can invent.

BY NAZZARENO ACQUISTUCCI
Treviso-Alta Marca Delegate



Tiramesù in local dialect, more commonly known as *tiramisù*, is the most famous Italian dessert in the world. It even appears that it is the second best-known Italian dish, coming right after pizza and ahead of spaghetti. The origins of this extraordinary spoon-eaten dessert are the subject of much discussion. Today not only can we find *tiramisù* in the most unlikely place with that name. It is easy to understand that claiming bragging rights to being Italy's most famous dessert is no small thing. And for this reason we need to shed more light on its actual history, eliminate some of the myths, and establish the facts.

History tells us that this dessert was part of the authentic Hapsburg gastronomy that included "desserts made with coffee". This centuries-old Mitteleuropean historic patrimony was centered in Vienna, Budapest, Ljubiana and, in Italy, in Trieste, which was already an important crossroads for coffee. Venice, under Austrian occupation, influenced Hapsburg culinary traditions, and in turn, those of the Imperial court as well. The Venetian rice and pea dish *risi e bisi* can still be found in Vienna.

It is also very likely that coffee-based desserts that were associated with Venetian culture, history and tradition since ancient times also arrived in Treviso in the hinterland of Venice.

And speaking of history, it is a fact that even in 1956 the Treviso restaurant *Al Fogher* owned by Speranza Bon Garratti included on its dessert menu the item "Fogher Imperial Cup" which sug-

gests its Hapsburg origins. Many people still recall this wonderful and extremely refined lady because she made her *tiramesù* with the same ingredients that we know today (black coffee, mascarpone, sugar and egg yolks) but substituted sponge cake for the traditional ladyfingers and shaved chocolate in place of cocoa. The next appearance of this spoon-served dessert is on the 1963 menu of the restaurant *Al Fogher* with the name "mascarpone cup" on the occasion of the 5th Festival of Trevisan Cuisine.

Therefore we see this version in Treviso before the true *tiramesù* as we know it today with layers of coffee-soaked ladyfingers separated by a mascarpone cream.

News Item:

THE "LAST SUPPER" AT BECCHERIE

At the end of the month the Treviso restaurant run by the Campeol family where tiramesù was invented will close its doors. The establishment was opened in 1939 in the center of the city and offered the historical specialties of Trevisan cuisine as well as, of course, the most famous spoon served dessert in the world. The restaurant was known world wide, but evidently its fame was not enough to counteract the economic crisis besetting the restaurant industry. Owner Carlo Campeol sadly commented that "this just confirms the saying that family businesses shut down with the third generation. Unfortunately this is also true in our case."



The “mascarpone cup” was an elegant dessert that preceded the “*tiramisù* cup” that for a number of years now has been prepared in some of the best restaurants in Italy and around the world. The creation of the dessert with the name “*tiramesù*” must have taken place sometime after 1964 since there was no trace of it on the list of foods at the 6th Festival of Trevisan Cuisine that year.

The word “*tiramesù*” in the dialect of Treviso first appeared on the menu of the *Beccherie* restaurant run by Alba and Ado Campeol in the piazzetta Ancillotto in the heart of Treviso. Therefore the name must be attributed to them. In fact, it appears that shortly after giving birth, Alba’s mother-in-law served her cups of beaten egg yolks, sugar, mascarpone, coffee and ladyfinger biscuits to help her regain her strength. It was a stimulating concoction that was often also given to children and the elderly and it was called “*tiramesù*”, in the sense of a “pick-me-up” or tonic.

The pastry chef Roberto “Loli” Linguanotto who worked in the restaurant’s kitchen first assembled this layered dessert in the 1960s in a round dish. He used the same ingredients - ladyfingers, mascarpone, eggs, coffee and cocoa. This was also known as “*tiramesù*” and its main characteristic was the absence of liquor, enabling it

to be served to everyone, including children. The dessert’s ease of preparation, simplicity of ingredients and easy-to-remember name together with the imagination of the chef increased its diffusion and popularity, but also differed greatly from the original recipe. Giuseppe Maffioli, a passionate gastronomy writer and Academician from Treviso recalled the original version of the dessert at *Beccherie* in an article published in the magazine *Vin Veneto* in 1981: just a little more than a decade ago in the city of Treviso a dessert was created with the name “*tiramesù*” at the *Beccherie* restaurant by pastry chef Loli Linguanotto.”

The main ingredient in our spoon served dessert is mascarpone. It is a product with Lombard origins that dates back several centuries. It is obtained by curdling cream with tartaric, acetic or citric acid. The other typical ingredients are coffee, egg yolks, ladyfingers and unsweetened cocoa. With the passing of time there have been many varia-

tions, including the addition of liquor or the use of sponge cake, cream, or even ricotta, depending on the imagination of the chef.

The fact remains that the name appeared for the first time in Treviso and it is irrevocably associated with a spoon served dish that is easy to prepare, originally using ladyfingers, in which the flavor of coffee and that of mascarpone cream blend harmoniously to create a delicate and pleasant dessert.

NAZZARENO ACQUISTUCCI



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The new still life

From the visionary gastronomy project by Ferran Adrià as shown In New York to the artisanal “sampurū” in vinyl, exhibited at the Victoria Albert Museum of London, the representation of foods manifests itself in new ways.

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Is the still life stilled? This is how Lucio Piombi headlined his contribution to the Academic volume *Italian Cuisine Today*. My opinion is that within the landscape of modern art still life is surely alive: compared to the past it has transmogrified or rather it has adapted to the times. Unquestionably, the role of painting as the supreme instrument in the reconstruction of surroundings and in the representation of foods, with a wealth of details, tones and arcane symbolisms, has become marginal in the face of new instruments of expression, particularly photography and the use of new plastic materials in the three-dimensional reproduction of objects, including the most varied foods.

Today, the marriage of art + kitchen and, more generally, art + food is very much in vogue. As Gualtiero Marchesi states, “Beauty is the extreme reaching out of quality... cuisine is science, it is the chef’s responsibility to make it art.” Design is fundamental not only in the making of industrial products (for example, pasta, sweets and chocolate) but also in the conception and preparation of individual dishes. For a great chef, the formal aspect of the creation of a recipe becomes extremely important: it is the starting point around which his project evolves. The capacity to reproduce it is another fundamental factor, indispensable for the success of a culinary endeavor.

This is how attempts start, with more or less success, to ennoble the representation of “still life” in forms that are not obsolete so that they can touch the new generations or at any rate in-

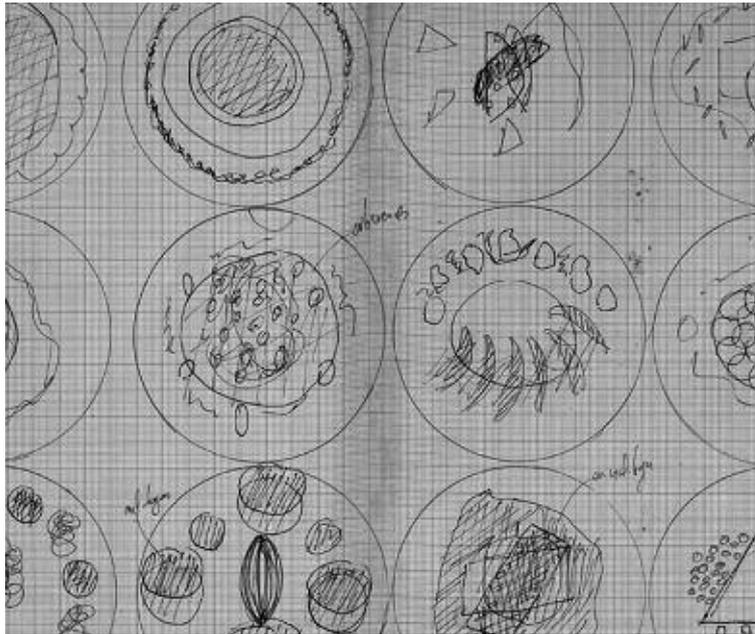
roduce themselves to the world of art just as the times demand. One outstanding example: Ferran Adrià, the creator of molecular cuisine, conceived to stupefy the eye more than the palate, exhibits his “sketches” at the Drawing Center of New York. Since the beginning of the year, the Center has pre-





sented the exhibition *Fer-ran Adrià, Notes on Creativity*, a retrospective of his work: hundreds of sheets filled over the course of many years by the chef with the intent of building his recipes. Drawing is indeed the base of his cuisine. Dishes are born with strokes of colored pencil that allow Adrià to give shape, after ideation and intuition, to the *corpus* of his experimental culinary projects. Diagrams, sketches, collages with geometric shapes and a variety of colors are exhibited. His vision of the gastronomic project is available to the

lovers of this genre and will be also the object of an open discussion under the supervision of the director of the Drawing Center. Perhaps it is a provocation to define his graphic compositions as “still life.” In reality, unlike the classic still life celebrated by painters over the course of the centuries, the starting point here is the drawing before it reaches reality, from imagination one stretches to give a concrete shape to a very personal idea of food. A test of the sensitivity and attention devoted over time to the representation of food leads me to recall that in 1987, well in advance of fashion, the Museum of Decorative Arts in Lausanne staged an exhibition entitled *A manger des yeux*, (to eat with one’s eyes) artistic installations of culinary products according to codes related to the different food cultures in the West and the East. These creations achieved their objective of calling attention to the strong relationship between visual art and food. An example that pushes to the extreme and warps the relationship between food that can be eaten and food for exhibition is surely the “*sampuru*”, a fashionable phenomenon in Tokyo’s Kitchen Town, the area that encompasses the restaurant business in its many aspects. The *sampuru* are perfect



replicas of cooked foods, exhibited by the restaurant owners in their windows to attract clients. Beside the typical dishes of Japanese cuisine one can find dishes of other cuisines, including Italian, with spaghetti and pizza catching the eye. These reproductions are all made out of vinyl. *Sampuru* was born in 1932, the creation of Maestro Iwasaki, who produced the wax prototype of a rice omelet and scored an immediate success. The idea was to help the clients, particularly tourists, in choosing dishes, something that was difficult for those who did not know the Japanese language. The captivating aspect of the reproduced dish engendered a higher flow of clients to the restaurant and consequently better profits. The phenomenon gave way to a huge business.

An artisanal *sampuru* of high quality can fetch from 300 to 1,000 Euros. A skilled artisan, once he has obtained the license of “*sampuru* maker” following three years of strict apprenticeship, watches the cook while he prepares the dish to be replicated in vinyl and photographs it under the very light that will be illuminating the dish in the window with the purpose of catching the right effect of light and shade. The *sampuru* creator goes to

his laboratory with the original dish and completes his replica in a very short time (three hours max) to keep the food from deteriorating and losing the pristine freshness, and most of all the brilliancy of its colors. The dish must be imitated to perfection in its best appearance. The vinyl reproduction is exhibited in the window of the restaurant and the client is able to compare it with the serving to be eaten at the table: should the food not conform to the model in its detailed com-

position, it is sent back to the kitchen. The chef will apologize and immediately prepare another dish.

In some cases, the perfection of *sampuru* sets off a perverse mechanism that makes the chef a prisoner of the plastic version with the fear of not being able to create a perfect copy of the copy. This is a case where the reproduction impacts the original.

In fact, *sampuru* are considered to be of such artisanal and artistic quality as to deserve the exhibit that was dedicated to them by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a further demonstration that throws light on the shape of food, with the underlying principle that design is complementary to culinary creations, be they unconscious or at times essential as in the case of *sampuru*. If in the kitchen appearance, color and shape represent a single entity to satisfy our palate, their artistic expression captivates our sight and our esthetic sense, thus inviting us to eat with our eyes. What can stimulate creativity more than food? Whether it is soft, hard, raw, cooked, liquid, solid and even “nitrogenous”, what is there that is more versatile and available than foods to launch our fantasies?

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Not just a cameo appearance

In the movies food reinforces the symbolic value of cultural expression and provides a cross section of the life of a society.

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Since its birth of cinema, the world of cuisine has always played a leading role. In the first public projection of a film on December 28, 1895, the Lumière brothers showed *The Baby's Meal* which included the slice of daily life of parents feeding their baby. A few years later, in 1904 in *Sorcellerie Culinaire* Georges Méliès depicted a chef preparing delicious dishes. In the 1925 film *The Gold Rush* Charlie Chaplin tackled the theme of hunger and unavailability of food. In one memorable scene in celebration of Thanksgiving dinner "Charlot" boils a shoe and shares it with Big Jim, his partner in crime. He eats the laces like spaghetti, and deftly slices the soles and sucks the juice off the nails as if they were succulent pork chops.

With the help of some great actors and directors, let us embark on a tasty screening of some of the silver screen's most memorable gastronomic moments.

Spaghetti is the indisputable leading actor in two unforgettable films, both produced in 1954. *An American in Rome* with Alberto Sordi and *Poverty and Nobility* with Totò. Both so well known in Italy that we need not say more.

The theme of hunger and food recurs frequently in Totò's movies; sometimes with many images of abundant dishes in the same scenes. In *Totò, Peppino and the Hussy* a 1956 film directed by Camillo Mastrocinque, the protagonist considers food to be a tool for survival in an unknown world that is far from his own culture. Upon his arrival in Milan, Totò opens his suitcase and takes out olive oil, wine, bread, *caciotta* cheese, prosciutto, sausage, a live chic-

ken and a good four kilos of spaghetti, while wondering aloud if it is "enough to last him for three days".

Returning to Naples we have another great actor, Massimo Troisi and his classic 1994 film *Il Postino*. Spaghetti "alla Mario Ruoppolo" unites the mailman with the poet Pablo Neruda: food becomes poetry thanks to the protagonist's ability to find a poetic metaphor for each dish and ingredient. For example: artichokes are "dressed as soldiers and burnished like pomegranates"; garlic is "precious ivory" and tomatoes "red entrails".

In Luciano Emmer's 1949 *A Sunday in August* food symbolizes post-war abundance after the sacrifices of World War II and the desire to enjoy the outdoors, where we can see a clear division between the status of the wealthy seated at a restaurant, and the poor outside the fence, eating picnic style. Around the plebeian Ave Ninchi, the poor consume cases of spaghetti, *frittatas*, loaves of bread stuffed with roast pork and salami, large flasks of Frascati wine and the inevitable trays





of lasagna or eggplant *parmigiana*.

In the 1961 film *A Difficult Life*, Dino Risi takes the leading characters on a twenty-year journey, focusing on the new more wasteful approach to food during the economic boom that followed the privations of the war. We see the differences in social classes when the two protagonists are saved from their hunger with an invitation to dinner by the princes of Rustichelli - an invitation whose sole purpose was that of avoiding having the unlucky number of 13 guests around the table. The passage from Monarchy to Republic is clear when the noble guests take their leave

from the table and the two interlopers attack the plates piled high with spaghetti and meatballs.

A maccheroni *timballo* is the protagonist of the 1996 American film *Big Night* that takes place during the 1950s. It tells the story of two brothers from Abruzzo who run a small restaurant in New Jersey - with many challenges. The *timballo* is prepared with infinite care - it is palpated, examined and dissected at the table to the delight of the diners who are treated to a full explanation of its contents: home made pasta, sauce, meatballs and hard boiled eggs.

The abundance of food is majestically depicted by Marco Ferreri in his 1973 film *La Grande Abbuffata* (*The Blow-out*). The film is the antithesis of the original physiological philosophy, "eat to live". In this case the characters "eat to die", dispensing with any form of conviviality. The staff of the celebrated gastronomic purveyor Fauchon was on the set preparing the food every day of production because director Ferreri wanted the food to "act" as well. Some of the leading dishes" were blood sausage, wild boar, young deer, pheasant, game hen, codfish, ostrich, turkey (fattened with chocolate, nuts and Cognac),



kidneys, lobster Mozart, roast suckling pig stuffed with chestnuts, caviar and eggplant. Between meals the characters prepare their stomachs with cups of chocolate; they continue with Provençal pizza, mashed potatoes, *tagliatelle*, *tortellini* with mushrooms and cream, apple compote, chestnut purée, duck, goose and chicken liver patè, crepes with Grand Marnier and a Bavarian cream pie shaped like a breast.

"You start with a little oil and then you fry a clove of garlic. Throw in some fresh and puréed tomatoes and heat, stirring to make sure it does not stick. When it all boils, toss in some sausage and meatballs. Then add a splash of wine and a pinch of sugar. That's my secret." The words of Clemenza, the corpulent middle-aged Italian American cook who is preparing a meal for the Corleone boys before a war council. In the 1972 film *The Godfather* food is both a harbinger of and witness to death. In a particularly memorable scene from Martin Scorsese's 1990 *Goodfellas*, even while in prison the protagonists find a way to obtain their favorite foods, from salami to lobster. Henry recounts: "Dinner in prison was always a big event. We always had a first course of pasta and a second of meat

or fish." "Paulie was in charge of the garlic. He sliced it with a razor blade - so thin it dissolved when it hit the oil in the pan. Vinnie was in charge of the sauce. Johnny did the meat. We didn't have a grill so we did everything in a frying pan. We filled up the whole place with smoke and the guards nearly suffocated, but we made a fantastic steak."

Allow me to finish by returning to Cinecittà, that fulcrum of great cinema. There the famous *trattoria* in Via Albalonga, complete with street food, was reconstructed for Federico Fellini's *Roma*. The classic Roman cuisine of Trastevere predominated.

But we cannot close without recalling the famous recipe for

soup in the 1943 film *Campo dei Fiori* (*The Peddler and the Lady*) demonstrated by fishmonger Aldo Fabrizi. Or the same actor in *They Stole a Tram* (1954) who defends the Roman origins of the dish by insisting that "The ancient Romans were the first to make *tagliatelle*. They were prepared by Numa Pompilio's daughter Emilia and Roman Emperor Lucullus wife made the first *tortellino*."

In conclusion, food does not just make a cameo appearance in the movies, but has always played important roles and reinforced the medium's communication and relationship with the audience.

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