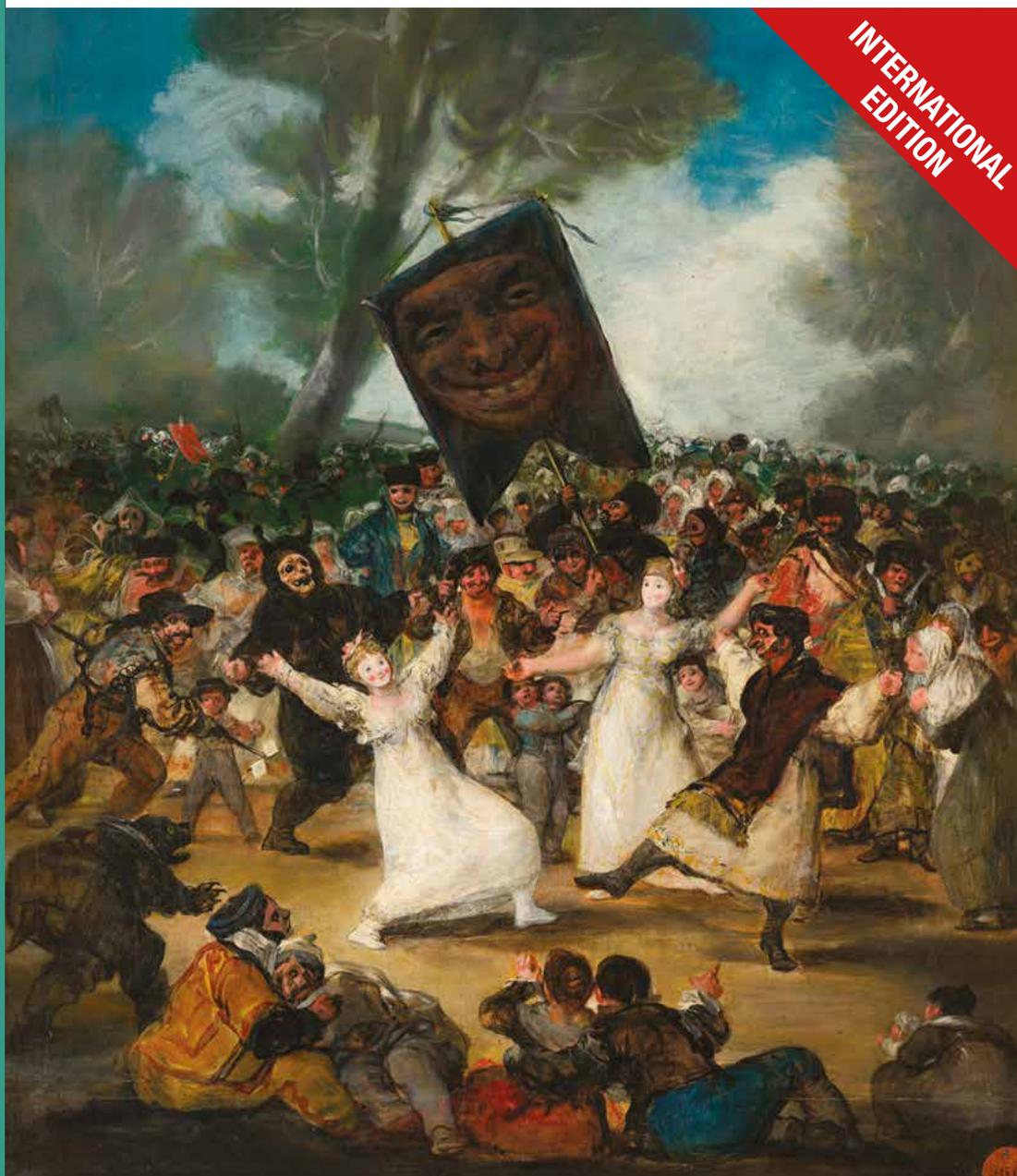


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**EDITOR IN CHIEF**  
PAOLO PETRONI

**COPY EDITOR**  
SILVIA DE LORENZO

**LAYOUT**  
SIMONA MONGIÙ

**TRANSLATOR**  
ANTONIA FRASER FUJINAGA

**THIS ISSUE INCLUDES ARTICLES BY**  
GIUSEPPE BENELLI,  
GIANCARLO BURRI,  
VALENTINA DI MARCO,  
PAOLO PETRONI.

**PHOTO CREDITS**  
ADOBE STOCK.



**PUBLISHER**  
ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA  
VIA NAPO TORRIANI 31 - 20124 MILANO  
TEL. 02 66987018 - FAX 02 66987008  
PRESIDENTE@ACCADEMIA1953.IT  
SEGRETERIA@ACCADEMIA1953.IT  
REDAZIONE@ACCADEMIA1953.IT  
WWW.ACCADEMIA1953.IT



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# The restaurant world's transformation

*Italian fast food and clones of renowned restaurants gain ground.*

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

**T**he Italian restaurant world is undergoing a **phase of profound structural transformation**. With losses amounting to 19,000 restaurants closed in 2024, we are witnessing a proliferation of chains and investment funds attracted by the Italian market. Alongside such historic, established foreign brands as **McDonald's, Burger King and KFC**, Italian counterparts are emerging, such as **Roadhouse, Old Wild West, Rossopomodoro, Doppio Malto, La Piadineria** and others, which try to 'Italianise' fast food by relying on local ingredients and healthier, more artisanal formats than the classic American models. Another standardisation phenomenon is that of cloned success stories. An emblematic example is **All'Antico Vinaio** (The Old Vintner's). The celebrated purveyor of Florentine *schiacciata* flatbread, filled with myriads of ingenious ingredient combinations, began with a small sandwich shop on via De' Neri, named, of course, *All'Antico Vinaio*, which swiftly became **an empire exceeding 50 shops in Italy and beyond** which is expanding at a dizzying rate.



prospects. For young people, giving up their social lives by working when their friends are free, and furthermore precariously, discouragingly and messily, is an arduous choice, which is often obligatory only for non-Italians.

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*A viable and successful idea is enough to kick off a 'chain reaction'*

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*The future belongs to enterprises that undertake a more modern management path*

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**Thanks to social media, and no longer the classic restaurant guides**, nowadays a successful, even local idea can spawn a branch in another city, and if that works, a chain may follow. Admittedly, this also happens for big-name restaurants that open in other cities under the same name, though the acclaimed chef is never there thanks to the 'resident chefs' forming a shield and umbrella, keeping the branches alive. All this churning, which can certainly be termed 'cultural', **fulfils the younger generations' requirements** and the necessity to standardise logistics, resupply and management styles, thus affecting expenses. In part, **such structures tend to solve the substantial problem of labour**, especially waiters, increasingly underqualified, underpaid, hard to find and without

This therefore **favours enterprises better aligned with a modern employment paradigm**: clear wages, working hours, shifts, holidays and medical and social insurance. Qualified workers now increasingly avoid traditional restaurants, often managed in an archaic, authoritarian manner, preferring economic stability, **a more solid structure and a more recognised, respected brand**. The painful fact remains that thousands of closed restaurants have left a hole in our country's economic and social fabric and, especially, caused a loss of local traditions. There's only one way to halt this process: embrace more modern management. Mummy in the kitchen and Daddy serving food are all well and good, but restaurants today are businesses and must be viewed and managed as such.



# Delicious foods for Carnival in Lunigiana

by **Giuseppe Benelli**  
*Lunigiana Academician*

*Some of the area's  
iconic recipes are  
specifically associated  
with this period.*

**minating the Val di Magra**, chasing away the winter cold and the old year's many misfortunes.

*Essential ingredients for  
a timeless atmosphere*

Essential ingredients for a timeless atmosphere. Not by chance, **the symbol of the festival is the mask**, elected as a means **of changing identity**, becoming what we wish to be. **A celebration of the comic and the grotesque**, when tradition spills noisily into the village lanes and squares of Lunigiana.

To this day, Carnival is marked by abundance, interrupting ordinary food habits and suspending dietary rules. **Many mouth-watering and colourful dishes** enrich the table **for the Mardi Gras meal**, known for its rich and generous banquets

**based on meat** and sweets before Lent. In Lunigiana, the presence of special foods is, indeed, one of the signals of a **pork-heavy** celebration. Sausages, cured pork shoulder, head cheese and black puddings are symbols of Carnival and its caloric excesses, making the peasant's dream of abundance come true once a year.

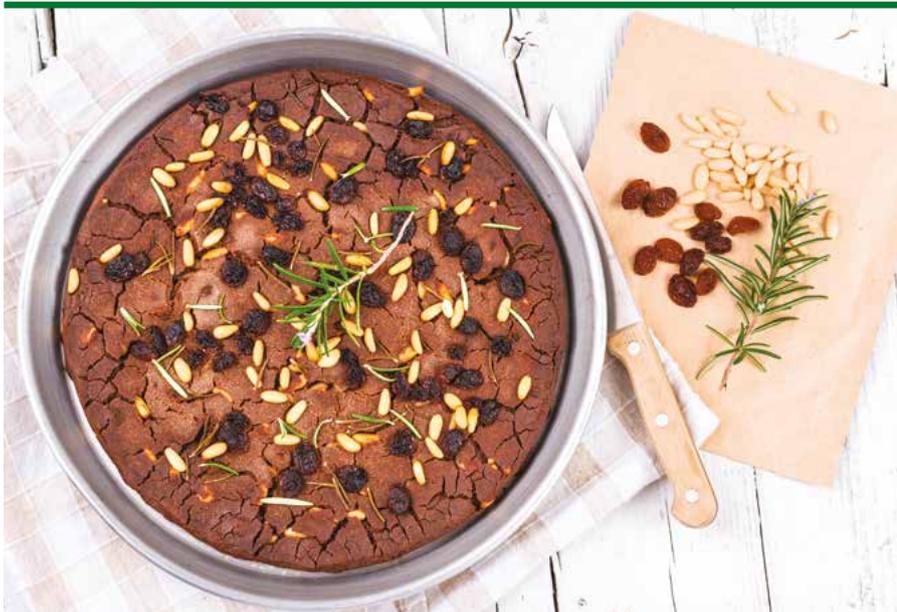
The traditional association of pork and winter festivals derives from the habit of sacrificing hogs in winter, between the feast days of the Saints Lucy (13 December) and Anthony (17 January). Uncured pork products, to be consumed swiftly, include sausages made with pork rind, always **particularly prized and reserved for Mardi Gras** (Shrove Tuesday). Indeed, Lent, when Catholics are forbidden meat, begins on the following day: Ash Wednesday. The *Codice Pelavicino*, the precious *Liber iurium* (Book of Rights) of the mediaeval Diocese of Luni, contains such terms as *carniprivium*, *carniprevio* and *carnislevamen* (all denoting abstention from meat) to define the period after which meat is forbidden until Easter. The word 'Carnival' (*Carnevale*), therefore, invites and admonishes us to inhabit the present fully, enjoying its pleasures which will soon end.

*Carnival in Lunigiana brings  
humble but substantial  
dishes to the table*

Lunigiana has a very rich gastronomic tradition as befits a borderland where encounters and exchanges are more vivacious and interesting, engendering incredibly varied food cultures, precious witnesses of biodiversity. **There is no unified, codified Carnival menu**, but

In Upper Lunigiana, wedged between Tuscany, Emilia and Liguria, Carnival falls during the chilly *giorni della merla*: 'blackbird days'. The season's typical foods are therefore filling and flavourome: a triumph of sugars and fats, a party for the palate. **These delights are devoured around the many bonfires illu-**





some local specialities have historically been prepared in this particular period. Carnival brings humble but substantial dishes to the table, **often involving chestnut flour and cast-iron testi (skillets)**. **Testaroli** (testo-cooked pasta) are not exclusive to Carnival, but remain the convivial dish par excellence during masked banquets, served with **pesto lunigiano**. When chestnut flour then arrives from the mill, **polenta with sausages** is prepared using age-old recipes. There is also the timeless **pattona**, a **chestnut flour cake**, plain or with raisins, pine nuts or hazelnuts.

On the final day of Carnival, cheerfully rowdy gaggles would chaotically caper around the bonfires where 'the Carnival' was burnt in effigy. Besides masks, dances and late-night frolics, Carnival meant, especially, sweets: chestnut flour fritters alternating with doughnuts gracing every

table, which our elders 'dunked' into wine. **Chiacchiere are classic crunchy fried dough ribbons**, also known as *cenci* ('rags') for their rough-cut appearance. Upon landing in hot oil, many don't resist and puff up. They were named 'wind fritters' (*frittelle di vento*), perhaps because old Augustinian nuns, who had prepared them for centuries, vented their joie de vivre through harmless chatter (literally: *chiacchiere*) which dissipated in the silence of the convent.

### Spongata di Pontremoli as a betrothal gift

*Spongata di Pontremoli*, more generally associated with all winter festivities, **assumes a special significance at Carnival** because young men traditionally gave it as a promise of marriage to their betrothed. It is a **substantial cake** with a spiced apple, dried fruit, bread and pine nut filling. This period in Lunigiana combines classic desserts with deep-rooted local traditions, often involving chestnut flour. It is attested that in the mid-nineteenth century much of the Lunigiana population remained chestnut-centric, as witnessed by **Giro-lamo Gargioli** whose *Calendario Lunese* decla-



red in 1834: "chestnuts nourish our agricultural populace almost daily, and thus deserve to be cultivated with every care". **Castagnole** (literally 'little chestnuts') were themselves once made with chestnut flour: small round fritters enriched with a soupçon of liqueur and sprinkled with sugar. With a fine crust and a dense and soft interior, they exude the fragrances of lemon and vanilla. Their original recipe includes both aniseed liqueur and Alchermes liqueur for a distinctive taste. In all their goodness and special texture, their golden hue and roundness, they truly resemble the chestnuts whence their name derives.

### A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale: no holds barred for Carnival pranks

The expression "A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale" ('any prank is licit at Carnival') reflects the **spirit of liberty and transgression characterising this period**, when parodies and buffoonery were *de rigueur*. These include the tradition of the trial and bonfire which, in Lunigiana, also symbolises purification and the Earth's rebirth. Until a few decades ago, in the villages around Pontremoli, masked men accompanied by an accordion would gather and **bring cheer from door to door**. In the midst of the festivities, a **comedic ritual** would 'condemn' the head of a household to offer flasks of wine and cured meats to his companions. The 'trial' imitated the formality of extant laws, with different characters playing various court-house roles, from the judge to the prosecutor and the defence lawyer, called *podaliga*, because his hat was adorned with a taxidermied *cinciallegra* (a great tit, whose Italian name onomatopoeically imitates its chirping), known in dialect as *pudaliga*. As with many other festivals, the hidden meaning of Carnival, kept intact for centuries, is regrettably lost, replaced by a celebration replete with consumerist rituals.

**Giuseppe Benelli**



# A spicy Carnival

by **Valentina Di Marco**

*Parigi Montparnasse Academician*

*The cinnamon gnocchi of “Venerdì Gnocolar” express tradition and identity in Verona*

In the annual cycle of traditional celebrations, Carnival represents a suspension of the ordinary, a ritual moment when food abundance and convivial indulgence assume a shared symbolic value. **In Verona**, this dimension is expressed in a particularly significant manner through cooking, and **one of its most emblematic manifestations is through the potato gnocchi of Venerdì Gnocolar** ('Gnocchi Friday'). A simple recipe is distinguished, for Carnival, by **an added note of cinnamon**, imbuing the dish with

a cultural value which transcends taste. Within Italy's culinary heritage, Veronese cooking exemplifies continuity encompassing practicality, collective ritual and civic identity. Carnival gnocchi are not merely traditionally codified food, but **an urban symbol intimately associated with the city's history**, including *Venerdì Gnocolar* and the figure of the *Papà del Gnoco* ('Father of Gnocchi'), Verona's official Carnival character. They blend historical memory, material craftsmanship and community values: fundamental elements of culinary culture.

## *Venerdì Gnocolar and the citizens' parade*

The diffusion of gnocchi in the Veronese area is part of a popular food culture characterised by subsistence cuisine, with careful attention to the availability of ingredients and the population's nutritional needs. Preparations based on flour and, later, potatoes - reliably available starting between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - fulfilled the need for sufficient calories when frequent famines, instability and social inequality were the norm. **Simple ingredients and ease of preparation made gnocchi an accessible, nutritious food**, suitable for a domestic subsistence economy.

A decisive moment in the emergence of gnocchi's symbolic value in Verona occurred in 1531 when the physician **Tommaso Da Vico** endowed a fund for distributing flour to the needy in the San Zeno neighbourhood in the days preceding Lent. This charitable enterprise initiated the custom of eating gnocchi on the Friday before Mardi Gras, which, established over time, became a distinctive element of the city's traditions.



**Venerdì Gnocolar**, still celebrated, preserves its original significance: a moment of collective sharing when food gains a meaning beyond nutrition, becoming an **instrument of social cohesion and memory transmission**. It is manifested by a parade through Verona, with floats and costumes, culminating in the San Zeno neighbourhood. The parade's closing ceremonies honour the memory of that generous act, reinforcing **the link between celebration, food and civic solidarity**, embodying a sense of cohesion and belonging which is a hallmark of the Verona Carnival.

This milieu birthed **the figure of the Papà del Gnoco**, emblem of the Veronese people: **neither satirical nor aristocratic**, he represents **abundance, generosity and community identity**.

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### *Traditional condiments and a spicy note*

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Veronese gnocchi are characterised by sobriety, as befits traditional home cooking. The quality of the potatoes and balance between the ingredients demonstrate a firm culinary expertise founded on respect for raw materials and reproducible results.

**Over time, these gnocchi have encountered various condiments**, all rooted in local food culture: from simple melted butter with grated aged cheese, to versions **aromatised with sage**, to 'richer' preparations.

However, **in the particular context of the Veronese Carnival**, a distinctive custom emerges: **the use of spices and particularly cinnamon**, which confers not only flavour but symbolic value. The use of cinnamon, perceived nowadays as unusual for savoury recipes, does not replace traditional condiments but **enriches them with an aromatic note** signalling the exceptionality of the festive moment. Using that spice in savoury food fits premodern gastronomic parameters: the distinction between sweet and savoury was not rigidly codified, and spices now thought 'sweet' were used in many kinds of dishes.



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### *Cinnamon in Verona: historical context and cultural mediation*

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The presence of cinnamon in Veronese culinary tradition should be understood in the historic and commercial context in which the city developed. From 1405 to 1797 **Verona was within the Venetian Republic, one of the main European destinations for spices from the east**. Cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and pepper arrived in the ports of the Serenissima through the Levant and were then redistributed inland, along consolidated trade routes. Thanks to its strategic position, Verona was directly involved in the trade. Despite remaining prestige goods, spices were not alien to urban food culture, and their **culinary and therapeutic uses were codified by monasteries, physicians and apothecaries**. Premodern

dietary beliefs, rooted in humour theory, **classified cinnamon as 'hot'** and suitable for winter and filling foods, and also a digestive and corroborant.

The cinnamon used for *Venerdì Gnocolar* is therefore a hint of controlled luxury, **reserved for special occasions**. Carnival, the last hurrah before Lenten sobriety, is the ideal time to serve such delicacies as a sign of celebration. The warm, enveloping fragrance of cinnamon can evoke opulence, transforming even such simple, humble fare as gnocchi: **a recipe expressing shared celebration** and a Carniva I tradition in which **even food becomes a character and a story**. This tradition, while adapting to the transformations of tastes and society, exemplifies cultural continuity and the preservation of local core food habits, in full harmony with principles aiming to protect and enhance Italy's gastronomic heritage.

**Valentina Di Marco**



# Taralli great and small

by Giancarlo Burri  
Padua Academician

*A fruitful marriage of simplicity and flavour.*

**"F**inire a tarallucci e vino": this expression, 'to end in tarallucci and wine', means resolving a formerly tense, conflict-ridden situation in a friendly and peaceful manner. Lately it has an additional, more negative meaning, especially among journalists, to indicate sneaky political agreements or compromises. Yet **it reflects the ancient southern Italian rural hospitality tradition of offering small, crunchy bread rings** (*taralli*, or the diminutive *tarallucci*) to express welcome, cordiality and friendship in a relaxed convivial atmosphere.

*There is talk of taralli from Puglia and Naples vying for primogeniture*

There is talk of *taralli* from Puglia and Naples vying for primogeniture, **but in reality this is unwarranted**, considering the **crucial differences** between the two products' ingredients and preparation: they share little more than their **ring shape, popular origins and savoury flavour**.  
**Regarding the origin of *taralli* from**



**Puglia (also known as *tarallini*)**, amid the doubts of scientists, philologists and historians, **there is an ancient legend**. In the fifteenth century, famine gripped the whole of Puglia. To feed her children, a woman resorted to what little remained in her bare larder: flour, a little oil, white wine and salt. She mixed them into a dough, creating tiny loaves that she formed into rings and baked. Her family loved them, so she told needy neighbours about her invention, and soon other homes in feudal Puglia relieved their hunger pangs thanks to this new speciality.

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*An important improvement  
in quality*

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**Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**, an important quality improvement was developed: ***scaldatura*, meaning rapid boiling in lightly salted water before baking**. This causes the starches in the flour to pregelatinise, fixing the shape of each *tarallo* (the singular) and creating a slightly waterproof surface which slows the evaporation of inner moisture. **The result is the distinctive, incredibly light and crunchy consistency** boasted by *tarallini*. Industrial *taralli* are often quickly steamed rather than boiled, with organoleptic effects readily perceptible as a loss of crunchiness with respect to the fare produced by the now regrettably few artisanal *tarallifici* (*taralli* bakeries). **These tireless defenders of tradition have recently protested energetically against some producers who seek to eliminate wine from the ingredients to reduce costs and "safeguard exports to Islamic countries** where alcohol is banned for cultural and religious reasons" (sic).

***Taralli* from Puglia**, known locally as ***picc'latedd*, *vescottere* or *taredd***, have been **recognised since 2001 as Traditional Agrifood Products (PAT), in 5 variants**, but due to their now considerable diffusion as finger foods and snacks for apéritifs and ingenious culinary uses - crumbled into soups and salads, as breadcrumbs for fried or *au gratin* fish or meat, etc - they are **commercially avail-**



**able in a surprising variety of delicious flavours**, from onion to olive, fennel to rosemary, pepper to chilli, and even from pizza to turnip tops.

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*The history of Neapolitan taralli  
begins around 1700*

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The **history of Neapolitan *taralli*** begins around 1700, when **some bakers** in Naples began **using *sfriddi*, risen dough scraps left over** from baking bread, thus cleverly avoiding waste. They added **'nzogna (leaf lard)** and abundant pepper, forming strips twisted in pairs to make rings, twice-baked alongside bread until crunchy. **In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this 'tarallo 'nzogna e pepe' was enriched with another ingredient which remains an integral part thereof: almonds**, whose sweetness perfectly complements the strong, piquant flavour of lard and pepper.

**Matilde Serao**, in her famous book //

*ventre di Napoli (The Belly of Naples)*, **celebrates *taralli*, born to nourish the inhabitants of the *fondaci*** (humble neighbourhoods near the harbour), who, perennially indigent, malnourished and ravenous, survived thanks these bakery by-products, often seasoned with nothing but seawater.

*Taralli* formerly didn't await customers in bakeries but sought them **in the streets, borne by the *tarallaro***, a characteristic figure who incessantly wandered for pennies, shouldering a basket, announcing his arrival by calling "*Taralle, taralle cave-re!*", meaning 'hot *taralli*' (which were carefully protected by a blanket, allowing them to retain and unleash their distinctive aroma).

Confirming its renowned culinary creativity, **Campania** has received **PAT recognition for an impressive 11 *taralli* variants**, demonstrating, particularly for the aforementioned *'nzogna e pepe*, the evolution from sustenance to trendy, youthful self-indulgence.

**Giancarlo Burri**