I. In the Beginning: Flour

Before approaching topics such as ingredients or recipes, products and dishes, their real or presumed values, and their actual histories, we must succinctly define Italian cuisine as it appears everywhere. Is there some foundation that captures Italian cuisine in all of its diversity, one that characterizes it in a nutshell? The answer is simple: the flour made from cereal grain—or rather, flours, for indeed there are many kinds and they are the origin of all Italian cuisine. Pasta, pizza, *piadina*, bread, and panini are their most well-known products, those which render Italian cuisine recognizable to all of the world. And this foundation, too, is simple: a dough made from mixing flour and water, with or without yeast, and/or eggs, and/or vegetable and animal fats, moulded into various forms of pasta and bread, which are then rolled into a pizza or *piadina* and seasoned with all possible condiments, before or after cooking. Given that Italy has historically produced and continues to produce less wheat than it consumes, and that the cereal grain needed to make flour is available everywhere, these types of dishes can be reproduced elsewhere at modest cost. It has been said that, besides the flour itself, it is the method of production that makes the quality. This is without a doubt true, but even the method of production can be subject to local, national, or international variations that influence the final product without altering its identity. Gathering quality ingredients, cured meats, or cheeses also influence the final product—this is particularly true for panini. But once in possession of a pot or a stove, the required culinary skills are most modest—or in any case, such skills are easily obtainable within the household or a public place. It is precisely for these reasons that many foreigners, in every part of the world, are themselves
cooking Italian as well.

Such a definition frames Italian cuisine as a handmade and homemade fast food that can be taken in a number of different directions, from mass-produced frozen foods to ravioli made from the thinnest dough, carefully pulled together by hand and filled with fresh ricotta and wild herbs. This latter dish requires mastery over the craft, positioning it as an object of value. Artisanal and mass-produced fast foods; high, medium, and low cuisine (the latter is exemplified by a plate of spaghetti *ajo ojo* with chili peppers)—these are the levels of Italian cuisine. A plain and simple foundation that, in the best cases, is transformed into a veritable work of art. Clearly, its success has attracted products of every kind—fish, meat, and dairies—as well as inspired the enrichment and perfection of sauces and stuffings without ever undermining the primary role of flour. But the main attraction is the local variations, particularly those of pasta, which have been allowed to infinitely multiply their offerings, often without substituting ingredients. Instead, these offerings distinguish themselves by form, colour, and consistency, and by those condiments that vary from one region to the next, giving the impression of a brand new food to discover. In other words, a common characteristic of a plate of macaroni, a margherita pizza, and a good panino is to feed the palate with a unique dish, one that progressively dissolves the same old structure of a meal while simplifying life inside and outside the home.

Such is Italian cuisine. Without flour, which is used to nourish and not appease the palate, Italian cuisine loses its originality, given that fish soups abound the Mediterranean and its slices of meat must compete with models of French gastronomy. Does this imply a poor art? Doubtless this question arises from looking back on the situation and attempting to reconcile food supplies with quality of life, when, sixty years ago, the immigrant worker from the south, for example, possessed little to no meat, bread and onions, and—when he was lucky—the plate of macaroni.
Given that there were hundreds of flours, which could be mixed for even more, we would have to determine the flours used and examine how their availabilities impacted the art of cooking for the poor labourer and the seasonal worker in comparison to the small town middle class. One could do a lot in the home, making use of what there was (according to seasonal harvests, provisions, and leftovers) without having to invent anything other than a food that began—in the beautiful country, in our own vocabulary—with the letter P: pane (bread), pasta, piada (flatbread), pizza, polenta . . .

II. Products and Ingredients

These have been sourced to their relative areas of localization and continuously discussed since 1904, but it is only within the last twenty-five years that Italian and European brands have attained commercial relevance. Food inventories are today prevailing typological, compiled by research centers (INSOR) and associations (Slow Food), and by regional and communal bodies, while the regulation of individual products is overseen by the European Community, by the Ministry of Agriculture, by the commune, and by associations. Name, geography, and industry help to identify a product, which varies greatly depending on where it originates from

1 See “Geografia gastronomica e potatoria d’Italia” 368ff.

2 The first two published inventories of the Istituto Nazionale di Sociologia Rurale (National Institute of Rural Sociology) are Atlante dei prodotti tipici: i salumi and Atlante dei prodotti tipici: i formaggi.


4 For works of particular interest in this area, see Croce and Perri; Gho and Ruffa.
(compare the vast production area of Parma prosciutto to the tiny production area of the
cicerchia of Serra de’ Conti, both of which are inversely proportional to the products’ values).
Here two phases are fundamental: the first, local, is concerned with processes of production or
transformation (as in the case of the lentils of Ustica or the lard of Colonnata); the second is
protective and regulatory as, opened up to the market, the product is subjected to all sorts of
gastronomic and commercial advertising. On the one hand, the success of a lard, prosciutto, or
cheese drives the simplification or industrialization of these processes alongside an increase in
the available quantity, whereas the strict regulation of a product causes an increase in price while
confining it to an amateur market all the same. In numerous cases (one such case is Bitto, which
is produced in its namesake valley of Valtellina), 5 two regulatory associations emerge: one the
more rigorous and the other more receptive to demand, each at war with the other.

While flour takes on myriad forms, both the origin of the grain and its area of localization
are often left unsaid, despite in fact being very extensive. Milk used in the production of cheese
follows the opposite path: one must know the breed of the cows, the pasture and grass in which
they are nourished, the type of rennet used in curdling and the duration of maturation. This is a
milk that is defined by the place in which it is produced—mixtures are not permitted—and only
in such a case will the cheese bear its region’s name; otherwise, it is mass-produced and wears a
common brand. Conflicts are on the agenda, as well as the favourable re-qualification of certain
types (as is the case with the Parmigiano Reggiano produced from red cows), and this increased
attention to the production chain also grows in the consumer. For a laudable cheese is not merely

5 Bitto, recognized as a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) in 1996, can be contrasted with
“Valli del Bitto,” which is protected by a Slow Food presidia. See L’Italia dei presidi 102.
eaten: one tastes it, one digests it, one compares it, and one remembers it. Its identity is a credit to those who produce it and those who recognize it, which is received into the market as having not only monetary value but also cultural value. Even flour, whether made from durum wheat or semolina, seeks a particular area of localization and value by taking the form of a certain pasta, but the reproducibility of that final product does not have set boundaries, whereas a cured meat or cheese is branded with a defined territory and condemned to be either provincial or local. As a result of this branding, the cured meat or cheese indirectly takes on the features of the area and is loaded with additional value. The lard of Colonnata, which is produced with imported pork meat but matured in the Apuan Alps, whose vast caves are of historical and contemporary importance, is a perfect example. The marble of the parallelepipedal basins in which the lard is deposited for maturation is an important part of its identity and has contributed to making it famous. Colonnata is a hamlet of the commune of Carrara without crops or livestock, yet its marmolardo is unique in the Italian production of pork fat. Due to its success and simplicity of consumption—served in thin uncooked slices at the beginning of a meal, like a cured meat—Colonnata’s marmolardo has been designated within the last thirty years as one of the products that best represents Italian gastronomic culture. Its origins seem to be less important than its contemporary presence: visibly imitated, reproduced, falsified, Colonnata’s marmolardo exists in two versions—artisanal and mass-produced—and so it struggles not for survival but for its own identity. Is this the case for all of the Italian cured meats? Many are unknown outside of the confines of their provinces. One such example is the zia of Ferrara, whose first taste can be had on Google, but the second must be had on site.

III. The Imaginary

By assigning high value to a cheese or cured meat, it is inevitable that its identity will be
twofold: real and imaginary. Behind every flavourful bite into a wedge of Bitto or Collonata’s marmolardo, there is a complex genesis of various dairies or fats matured to diverse ends, and their sampling brings into play their respective local cultures—not just the foods themselves, but the prestige that they acquire from the thousands of consumers that debate them. No traditional product simply lives and dies where it is born, but rather its strength lies in travelling by diverse means: that is, along distribution networks, in the memories of those that love it, and within the promotional packaging in which it comes assigned. In this process of cultural growth, a cheese is preceded by its own renown, which conditions the same taste and flavour that each wedge calls to mind; if unknown, the cheese requires an escort that will describe and recommend it. The language used to describe a product, then, is its first identity, so that little by little this description is made more precise and concrete by the taste, in the first as well as all successive bites.

If a product is imaginary before it is actually consumable—or in other words, if it must be known by the mind as well as the palate—then this is the result of a particularly complex system of Italian gastronomic patronage, one whose reach is wide and timely. The distribution carriers are many: flour, before all else, has been used to compliment produce, cheese, and cured meats. A pizza with buffalo mozzarella and a panino with uncooked Parma prosciutto are examples of glocal combinations that permit variations and substitutions, with each country offering up its own variety for comparison, such as the Spanish *jamón serrano*, or New Zealand and Chinese mozzarellas. Yet the most authoritative carrier remains the product itself: for while our appetites avail themselves with a composite and varied picnic basket, so that not even bread is consumed on its own—flour finds its way into everything these days!—the value of Bitto or Colonnata’s marmolardo is unique and must be discovered in degrees: on its own, with a piece of fresh bread, in a dish with Valtellina Casera cheese and *pizzoccheri* pasta, or in bruschetta. The imagination
performs many diverse functions: it authenticates a product that is consumed at a great distance from its place of origin, it inserts the product into a new nutritional context or identity (one that is different, perhaps contaminated), and it delivers the product to a kitchen that will blend it into a versatile repertoire. If the inhabitants of Colonnata were never to consult the Web, they would have difficulty imagining the concoctions, both high and low cuisine, into which their slices of fat have ended up.

The imagination has a second end: to regulate the real, the apparently real, and the fake. Since the success of a product drives an ever-expanding market in which it becomes increasingly difficult to satisfy demand, producers will attempt to solve this problem using contrived solutions (for cheese: import the milk, substitute the animal feed, or accelerate its maturation) that result in an authentic substitute, an apparently identical copy, a de facto imitation. On the one hand, this phenomenon allows for a rarity to be introduced to many people; on the other hand, it increases the value of the rarity at lower cost. Lacking a specific expertise of the rarity (which is reinforced by repeated tastings, only attainable on site), we therefore purchase the semblance of an elusive, indefinable substance and consume it without questioning its legitimacy, which would ruin every pleasure. The food industry plays a big part in this game, simplifying and multiplying a balsamic vinegar that, at a distillery in Modena or Reggina, is matured over time until it achieves a purely amateur or antiquarian value, whereas its imitation is readily available at a supermarket and can be purchased in a small bottle for few euros. Which to choose? The first option demands patient research, while the second is a purchase that is valorized only by its own taste and the operations of autosuggestion.

But the real triumph of the imagination manifests with a product on its way to extinction, or rather a product that is (nearly) extinct and subsequently reborn. In order to assign value to a
food product, it has need of its own story. It can immerse itself in an agricultural past, or even in the memories of the home, or better still in those words that are passed down by tradition. It is important to recognize that tradition is both the past and the present, the memory and the cuisine of all days. The history constructed within the last thirty years by enthusiasts of traditional Italian products, those scouts of excellence, is simple in design: the economic boom (1956–62) and subsequent two decades of growth in mechanized agriculture, a food industry, and its distribution in supermarkets has resulted in the rarefaction and (in some cases) the complete disappearance of hundreds of “minor” products, either because they originate from a small, depopulated territory or because they are unknown to city markets. Their renaissance marks a new era and is the result of independent farmers and breeders; a growing interest in smaller distributions and rarities; and associations inspired by the protection of the environment, sustainability, and the human quality of the product. The imagination is fundamental for gastronomy, just as it is for the tourist visiting the excavations at Pompeii. The tiny lentil grown in the mountains of the island of Ustica, the cicerchia of Serra de’ Conti, extinguished and reborn after a reorganization of its cultivation and harvest, is just like the frescoes in the House of the Vettii that leave tourists to imagine lavish banquets and evoke emotions within them beyond curiosity, stupor, and nostalgia.

Those tiny lentils priced at 7,99 euros per 500 grams (the same Canadian lentils sold in Italian supermarkets cost 1,50 euros) perform the conversion of imaginary value into real value, and enter into the market by means of that commercial multiplier known as the Internet. Inserted into a website, the lentils are immediately represented to the eye and offered to the entire world, without the filters established by their belonging to strictly land or islander cuisine, or suggested by their insertion into a few Sicilian dishes. Whoever made that to be an indicator of the tradition must release the lentils from their heritage in a poor and rural culture, whose meals were reduced
to little and compensated for with *babbaluci* (snails of the earth), and deliver the lentils into that market of specialties which would put them in competition with the widely distributed lentils of Castelluccio or Colfiorito. With the premise that cuisine requires careful and not always simple analysis, one can offer up a plate of lentils not in exchange for the rights of the firstborn, as did Jacob, but for a sincere thanksgiving and license for Italian gastronomy; after which the hunt for the lentils continues towards other fields and other farmers, or, more simply, towards the tasting exhibition at Torino, towards Eataly, towards that countryside harvest festival from which one returns with another package of 500 grams and some memories of flavours and words expressed with a spoon in hand or a slice of meat between the fingers among the commotion of booths for the selling and tasting of food. In this way the consumer is educated to treasure the memory, the tradition, and the flavour, deluding himself into thinking that he plays an active role in the food’s production, in the market, and in the definition of its quality. When he messages his friend about his participation in the harvest festival of the cicerchia of Serra de’ Conti at the end of a cold and fair November, he bestows upon himself a gastronomic honour, sounding a call to never give up the tradition. As for the package of cicerchie, which has never been known nor mentioned among his family, he will have seen and read enough (on the Internet and elsewhere) to cook the lentils in his own way.

IV. The Present History

From the moment that it is put on display, the food product amplifies or diminishes within the imagination depending on how it is perceived. Our first impression of a product comes from scrupulously reading and memorizing the label (perhaps even conducting a scientific analysis of its ingredients) to ascertain its quality. In Italy, however, it would be difficult to impose this sort of critical approach on the cultures of production and consumption, given that they both lack a
scholastic or media discourse in spite of all of the words and images associated with food. Are there alternative methods by which we can educate the masses? More than methods, we should privilege external–internal approaches rooted in language and communication, which come into play however, wherever. The present history is receptive to such approaches, which is itself not a university discipline but a particular slant from which to examine food and, in the best of cases, a desire to inform ourselves and become objects of study ourselves, all the while keeping an eye on the past-future. And the imagination? It is the substance—or rather, the mind—of such inquiry.

Let us proceed with dates and periodization. The history of contemporary Italian food begins following the Second World War and is visibly pronounced in the earlier cited phases of economic growth, but it is not limited to them—in fact, it has already distanced itself from them. When consumption falls, as in the past decade, we witness a return to the earth and to the garden; consequentially, the value of traditional products rises along with that of nonna’s kitchen. If the present involves a break from the agricultural past of sharecropping, now since forgotten, and if it is enriched by new technologies, then the prospect of such innovation at all costs creates fear. Our impending future is already in play from a climatic point of view, one whose implications are both environmental and economical; we are faced with a question mark that is not followed by a response. Our own food history has created numerous agents, industrial and gastronomic, rural, chemical, and mechanical, and it identifies itself with small territories, with products of variable quantity, from gardens to greenhouses, and indeed it is the bearer of some useful ideas for the entire world. Just as flour, in how it has been treated and offered, has generated a global

Italian model, so have individual foods, from vegetables to lard, proposed the idea that Italy is a provisional union of micro-territories—that is, an example of gastronomic particularism. When economic crises blow up, the latter becomes a good refuge, much like art and natural beauty.

Building on these foundations, the present history is at once a collection of past evidence and future prospects. It concerns itself with lard and mozzarella, recipes and brands, amateur and regulated products, rearranging all of these things in search of a relationship with the past as well as the future. For the first, it must resolve the problem of discontinuity: those ruptures that have occurred within the framework of agricultural sharecropping, which mark a scarcity of food and not a self-sufficiency of food. When a product arrives before us, its value should be studied as a variable, recognizing that a lard, for example, has performed nourishing roles long before it came to our dinner table and which have nothing to do with the high, luxurious value that we assign it today. The present history confuses our convictions, but it also suggests uncertainties about our future that are still more grave. Throughout the period that runs from the 1950s up until this day, Italy has radically changed the way in which to nourish oneself and continues to do so in order to make an offering to the world with its pasta and pizza, presenting a static image of Italian cuisine that corresponds only in part to its reality. Hence the question of whether a present founded upon the hunt for traditional products and recipes is at length sustainable amidst a system that finds its own equilibrium by balancing tasting exhibitions and McDonald’s, harvest festivals of cicerchia and supermarkets. While the food industry provides the basic nutritional necessities, it does not necessarily have the privilege and ability to offer a quality product discovered far from the usual points of sale, far from the city, that touches only a small number of influential consumers.

The most important task of the present history is to look towards the future while keeping both feet on the ground, studying the ideologies and practices that surround it while focusing on
the problems: the environment, climate, animal rights to life, biodynamics, wastefulness, and the unsustainability of our waste are amongst the most recurrent and at the forefront of a production system founded upon quantitative and qualitative revenue. It is not the end of the world but the beginning of a conflict that does not bring peace to the appetites, and jeopardizes a clear vision of natural progress and nature’s relationship to human labour and basic nutritional necessities. It is not possible to take a step back and seek refuge in so-called traditions, nor lessen consumption by using past generations as a model, nor move ahead blindly while expecting that resources will adapt to our desires. Not even flour, whether GMO (genetically modified organisms) or organic, is safe from conflict. However, there are in fact checks and balances within the food system. The current management of so-called traditional products serves to imaginarily rebalance the system, reaffirming a reciprocal relationship between the past and the present. Paradoxically with a lentil we readjust weights and measures, surpluses and basic necessities, while investing in prospecting for that quality which is the intelligence of gastronomy. It is useless to ask ourselves whether this will be sufficient to exhaust the anxiety that troubles the consumer since the imaginary value of a lentil, cicerchia, or chicory becomes a symbol that enables faith to be restored within the surplus of our food. Whereupon we can begin to discuss a recipe, proceed into a comparative analysis of its ingredients or write up a variation, and—returning to the kitchen—conduct a test. Where can all of this be done? Why even here in Toronto . . .

Works Cited


Croce, Elena and Giovanni Perri. “Geografia gastronomica dell’Italia : territori e prodotti.”


