

# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



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*On the cover: Graphic elaboration of the oil painting Breakfast in the Garden (Colazione in giardino) by Giuseppe De Nittis, displayed at the Pinacoteca De Nittis in Barletta.*

# The cook in the kitchen

*Carlo Cracco's decision reopens the question.*

BY PAOLO PETRONI

*President of the Academy*

The cook must remain in the kitchen: this was always the rule; the dining room was the domain of the maître d'hôtel and the waiters, while the owner manned the register, chatting to the guests. Frequently nobody knew who was behind the kitchen door - until *nouvelle cuisine*, headed by Paul Bocuse, changed the rules. An omnipresent chef: in the kitchen, in the dining hall, in the newspapers, a true star of the restaurant and the gourmet world. It is said that a truly competent cook must have a crew who can function without him, perhaps guided by an able second-in-command. The 'master' can therefore travel the world, open additional restaurants, give interviews, and these days even preside over talk shows. Obviously this only occurs for a few prominent names, but they are the ones that count, that make the news. And the news is that Carlo Cracco, handsome, sexy and Byronically fascinating, is leaving his *primadonna* post at MasterChef to return to the kitchen and above all to his restaurants, which truly are 'leavening' nicely. In addition to his "Cracco" restaurant, he'll have to handle the bistro "Carlo e Camilla in Segheria" and the restaurant in "Garage Italia Customs", a former petrol station in Piazzale Accursio in Milan, remodelled by the architect Michele De Lucchi and transformed into a custom automotive restyling workshop by Lapo Elkann, grandson of the FIAT tycoon Gianni Agnelli. But the greatest challenge begins in autumn with a new three-storey concept in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan: over 1000 square metres and, it is rumoured, almost 100,000 Euros in monthly rent. Good luck! A few hours after Cracco's television retirement announcement, his colleague on the show, the Ita-

lian-American Joe Bastianich (famous for his business acumen), declares that "we're friends, we work together, but we have different opinions: Carlo Cracco is conceited". And he adds: "The king is dead: long live the king". Such class! Besides such skirmishes whose sole purpose is perhaps to foment notoriety, there is still the problem of the cook in the kitchen. Other greats have remained there: Heinz Beck, Enrico Crippa, Nadia Santini, Enrico Bartolini and many more. A now-forgotten luminary, Angelo Paracucchi of Ameglia, once attempted this feat first in Paris and then in Korea: he exhausted himself with world travel and endless chitchat. Annie Feolde and Giorgio Pinchiorri were forever wandering between Florence, Japan and Dubai: a lifestyle to gruelling for many. But let's be honest: for a truly devoted gourmet, going to restaurants isn't merely about eating, but about the experience of interacting warmly with someone who represents the soul of the venue. Going to a restaurant without its chef is like visiting friends for dinner and finding excellent victuals but not the host. Though admittedly we can't turn back time, and we can acknowledge that today's star chef is often a brand, a veritable business with many collaborators and hence many problems and worries unrelated to the kitchen (which itself requires so much dedication and effort), we must draw the line somewhere. The victor, though, is the entire Italian culinary establishment: great chefs, great personalities, each having their (many) qualities and (few) flaws, each with their own distinctive philosophies of life, who collectively have made and are making our cuisine superlative. Then we can all choose where to go: where the chef is in the kitchen, or where a legend resides.



Carlo Cracco





# Easter cuisine in the monastery

*Aethereal sweetmeats, embellished with fine icing-sugar lace reminiscent of a wedding veil.*

BY ADRIANA LIGUORI PROTO

*Crotone Delegate*

**H**umble Vestals, diligent gatherers of wild herbs, divine cooks: these are the ascetics of the monastery, the industrious nuns who, amid chanted prayers and the fragrances of the cloister, exude beatific grace while creating culinary masterpieces of exquisite simplicity. The herbs gathered in the fields and the woods, the fruits and flowers, berries, milk, honey, cheese, poultry, eggs, lake and river fish, pulses and other vegetables, flours and grains are the protagonists of monastery cooking. Practiced hands work and transform these ingredients into warm soups,

flatbreads, golden nests of bread, omelettes with wild herbs, delicate sauces, milk puddings, fragrant jams, decongestant syrups, cleansing decoctions, far-famed sweets, and digestive liqueurs.

The monastery cooks' invaluable recipe books represent a harmonious blend of ancient medical science, popular cooking and thrifty cuisine designed for avoiding excess and waste. Indeed, convent refectories rigorously respect the cycles of the seasons and religious observances and penances, while painstakingly embodying thrift and frugality. The stern fasting rules, and the prescription of certain foods





on particular festive or religiously significant occasions, were developed right here in the convents (a term deriving from the Latin *cum venire*: 'come together'). These were originally places of transit and rest, where monks on pilgrimage stopped for food and shelter on their way to preach in village and city churches. In these edifices, usually perched on scenic heights, food was offered in communal refectories alongside scriptural readings, emphasising food's role as bodily sustenance analo-

gous to the spiritual nourishment of prayer. The High Mediaeval period witnessed a flourishing of convents, monasteries, charterhouses and abbeys in Italy and more specifically in Calabria, the womb and cradle of a thriving monastic culture. The Carthusian monastery of Serra San Bruno, the Carmelite nunnery near Capo Colonna in the area of Crotona, the abbey of San Giovanni in Fiore, and the Bivongi convent, recently restored to revivify its Byzantine monastic traditions, are among the most significant religious centres to remain intact until our times. High Mediaeval Christian asceticism, as contemporary monastic diaries reveal, prescribed eating frugally. To mortify the flesh, monks ate cleansing herbs, turnips baked under ash, berries, mushrooms, chestnuts, beans and strawberries. This very strict diet was mitigated by the offerings of the faithful, whose tributes to those following such an austere and exemplary life included bread, onions, eggs, cheese and wine. The Rules of monastic orders, despite their divergences, were all notably rigorous and united in their disdain for all worldly goods, and therefore also any non-essential food. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recommended a daily struggle against gluttony, maintaining that the



necessary pleasure of eating can be overcome through fasting. Mediaeval monasteries offered two daily meals. During times of penance, such as Lent, there was a single meal, eaten at sunset. The day's first meal was called *des-dejunare* ('breaking the fast'), whence derive the Italian term *desinare* and the French *dejeuner*. In many convents, meals were taken in strictest silence, obliging diners to express themselves with gestures, "usually innocent and somewhat humorous" (L. Migliori). Many convents continue to observe Lenten fasting rules even today. Recently convents have become places of spiritual meditation even for laypeople who wish to spend a few days in total tranquillity, savouring the delights of a healthy, light and frugal cuisine. Until a few years ago, in Campania, Sicily, Puglia and Calabria, gentlefolk had the habit of commissioning nuns to prepare traditional sweets for religious feast days and even embroider their wedding trousseaux. The arts of cooking and embroidery have indeed always shared common elements: convent cookery manifests the same patient meticulousness evident in the nuns' admirable embroidery, delicate floral edgings and exquisite lace. Though the tradition of trousseau embroidery has weakened over time due

to diminishing demand, the bakery tradition has remained firmly rooted. Some convent sweets were invented by the nuns themselves, including the marzipan sculptures wrought in manifold shapes from the finest almond paste, with a heart of candied Isabella grapes (*mostarda d'uva fragolina*) and fig syrup. Representative examples of the opulent and elaborate convent baking tradition include the short-crust pastry doves covered with a virginal white lemon-flavoured icing, the sugar eggs, the wheat and ricotta cakes, the marzipan and pistachio lamb-shaped Easter

confection called 'Martorana lamb', and the dainty little biscuits covered in fine icing dyed vivid green, pink, yellow and blue with herbal and floral extracts, their hues evoking the colourful fruits and flowers of the enclosed garden, the *hortus conclusus*, in the Upper Rhenish Master's renowned painting *Paradiesgärtlein* (*Garden of Paradise*) displayed in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. These ethereal Easter delicacies are embellished by fine icing-sugar lace (recalling a wedding veil) and with decorations representing the symbols of Easter: doves, eggs and olive branches. Tradition and piety once caused these hand-made convent sweets to be welcomed into every home, imparting a serene air of saintliness to every religious festival. Partaking of them was viewed by the nuns not as 'ingestion' but as 'internalisation'. And so, the fragrances and flavours of those convent kitchens make their way to us in the here and now, with their power to elevate the spirit and inspire a subtle nostalgia for that feminine sphere of grace, respect and gentleness where so many orphaned children found not only protection, but also the mysterious and ineffable sweetness of maternal affection, in the shadows of the cloister.

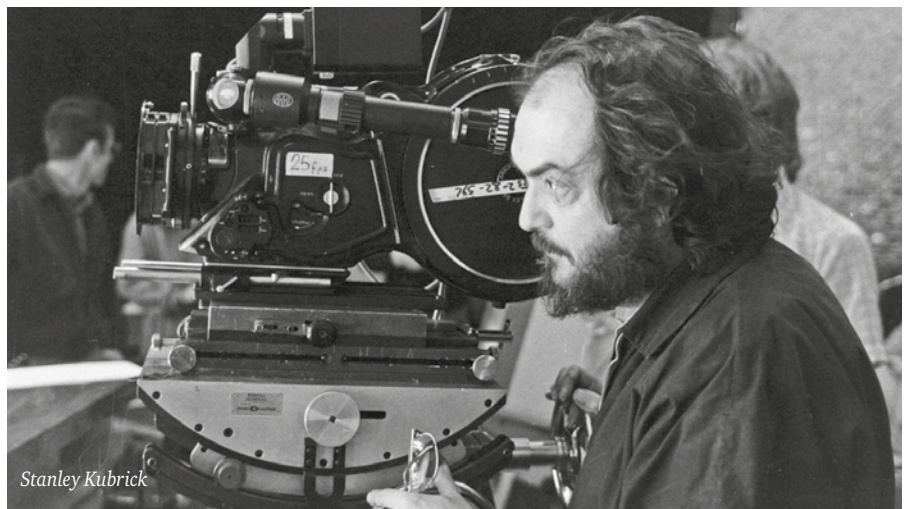
**ADRIANA LIGUORI PROTO**



# Computers in place of humans?

*Those genuinely concerned with protecting and respecting culinary traditions will find ways to defend them from encroaching automation.*

BY ANDREA CESARI DE MARIA  
*Milano Duomo Delegate*



In the early Seventies, the genius of Stanley Kubrick had already divined the future through two seminal films: *A Clockwork Orange*, addressing the issue of society's imminent subjection to gratuitous violence perpetrated as an end in itself, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, prefiguring a world of increasing human subservience to robots. The second prediction is alarmingly relevant to us and should seriously worry us, as Academicians who take to heart the necessity to defend and respect culinary traditions.

In hotels it is often useless to wait for someone to take our breakfast order: we must follow the LED lights leading to slots and shelves with cups and spoons and teapots, and serve ourselves, trusting our instincts and the aid of guests who have already encountered this new reality.

A hotel's first priority should be its guests, who must be pampered and spoilt in order to cultivate their loy-

alty; self service should be relegated to makeshift realms like schools and stations and waiting rooms where one requires no service, merely expecting a quick, cheap and simple issue of substances. Yet personnel costs money, so service is sacrificed to the paramount necessity of balancing the books.

Stiff upper lip: client satisfaction is secondary, and automation is mandatory. The same strategy is in the works for McDonald's, which plans to replace its human burger-flippers and spud-fryers with computers. A company which once based its very identity on unerringly precise preparation protocols and exact serving times replicable in every corner of the world must now capitulate to the imperative of 'cost rationalisation'.

And what's more, the television news recently and almost gloatingly reported that a new computer can replace chefs in each and every way (what must such eminent gastronomic lumi-

naries as Cracco, Oldani and Bottura think of this?). This will, to be sure, make everything more precise, more codified, since the robot will be able to detect odours and act accordingly, and presentation will be flawless and free of unsightly smears thanks to the pinpoint precision of a machine which is immune to human error.

Not enough salt? Missing ingredients? This is no longer the domain of a chef, but of a computer operator who will rectify these defects by means of buttons, valves or nozzles.

How remote are the days when the housewife (a term now sadly entering obsolescence) kept an eye on the pasta sauce in between other chores, making sure that it was correctly simmering! In other words, her whole heart, concerned with the care of her loved ones, went into everything she did, and this no computer, no matter how advanced, can do. The foregoing is no longer science fiction, alas, but



Still from 2001: A Space Odyssey



mere description of an increasingly impending future. So what should the 8000-odd Academicians do, each in their corner of the world? Appropriate the founder Orio Vergani's anguished cry of fear for our culinary future? Today what is in jeopardy is not just *our* cooking but cooking in general, which

is threatened with extinction, to be swept away by progress, if it should thus be named.

We should therefore be grateful to the Academy which is engaged in a noble struggle; we should assist it, help it to grow, and talk about it whenever possible, serving as ambassadors of cuisine,

real cuisine, also - indeed, especially - vis-à-vis the younger generations, to rescue a vast wealth of knowledge from oblivion.

Otherwise we might as well resign ourselves to a life spent at home, in an armchair, with a computer increasingly doing everything for us.

After all, why worry about what to eat when a computer can spare us the burden by assigning optimally healthy foods based on our DNA, warning us about foods to avoid, and then purchasing and preparing the recommended victuals following the data we have submitted regarding our taste preferences?

Let us hope that this preordained computerised food won't arrive already pulped, thereby emancipating us even from the drudgery of chewing it!

ANDREA CESARI DE MARIA

### GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MAGAZINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Variations on sweet and sour

*This combination of contrasting flavours has typified many recipes over the centuries.*

BY GIANCARLO BURRI

Padova Academician



Squid lasagne with ratatouille, toma blue cheese with butter-nut squash croissant, coriander scampi with daikon, fried sardines with mixed vegetables, mallard with caramelised shallots, tuna scallop surprise: delightful and whimsical recipes all sharing a sweet-and-sour flavour. A perusal of the recipes of Italy's greatest established chefs and young rising stars of gastronomy suggests that the adroit combination of sourness and sweetness can still constitute a form of culinary refinement. Regarding the origin of sweet and sour, it is widely believed to be a mainstay of Chinese cookery, but it is noteworthy that in China sweet and sour is prevalently represented by a sauce known as 'the people's sauce', because of its affordable ingredients, and used on previously cooked foods, especially meat or fish. Only in a few recipes is the sweet-sour combination produced during the cooking itself, such as Hong Shao Rou

(red-cooked meat), a pork stew also known as 'Mao's pork' or 'five-flower meat', whose recipe has been declared a 'national treasure'!

Returning to the fertile gastronomic history of Italy itself, many are the reports of the Romans' predilection for the sweet-sour combination, almost exclusively obtained through honey and vinegar or, as an affectation, the *omphacium* (verjuice) obtained from squeezing unripe grapes.

In the collection of ancient Roman recipes associated with Marcus Gavius Apicius, *De re coquinaria* (*On Culinary Matters*), about 40% of recipes involve sweet and sour, predominantly in the form of added sauces but also in more elaborate preparations, such as *Patella Lucretiana* (onion soup), *Pullus Numidicus* (a flavoursome variant of roast chicken) and *Gustum de paecoquis* (a tantalising starter made of early-ripening peaches).

In the High Middle Ages, alongside the

increasing use of verjuice, the encounter with Arab cuisine rendered the sweet-and-sour combination gentler and more delicate by replacing vinegar with citrus juices (especially that of the bitter orange) or pomegranate juice, and honey with cane sugar.

The art of the social meal, increasingly associated with the aesthetic as well as sensory elements of the food, evolved through the Renaissance Humanist era and the Renaissance proper towards a cuisine dominated by the bizarre and imaginative creativity of cooks, whose talents were documented through books and manuscripts detailing recipes, rules of style, table-setting conventions, and the use of wines.

The sweet-and-sour combination is represented, for instance, by a sauce principally consisting of spices, vinegar and sugar, recommended as a complement for any roast in the mediaeval cookbooks *Liber de coquina* (*Book on Cookery*) by the so-called *Anonimo*



*Meridionale* (Unknown Southern Author) and the *Libro della cucina* (same meaning) by the Anonimo Toscano (Unknown Tuscan Author).

Sauces of a similar nature, possessing a “perfectly forceful flavour”, are defined by the Unknown Venetian Author (Anonimo Veneto) in the *Libro per cuoco* (Cook’s Book) as “a goodly flavour with any roast”. The same work recommends *Cisame de pesse* (‘Fish Sauce’, based on onions, vinegar, almonds, raisins, honey and spices) to pour over friend fish: an illustrious predecessor of *sardè in saor* (sweet and sour sardines), one of the most renowned Venetian delicacies.

Attributed by historians to the same period, and of similar preparation, was *el sisàm*, a sweet-and-sour dish much in vogue among the nobility, prepared with dried *alborelle* (*Alburnus arborella*, a freshwater fish of the carp family also known as *aole*): this has survived to this day as a delicacy of the Garda region.

In the weighty Renaissance recipe books of Bartolomeo Scappi (*Opera: Opus*), Cristoforo da Messisbugo (*Banchetti compositioni di vivande: Banquets and Composition of Victuals*) and Domenico Romoli (*La singolare dottrina: The Singular Doctrine*), veritable milestones of sixteenth-century food literature, the preparations detailed in the “services from the kitchen and sideboard” mostly manifest the sweet-and-sour flavour in vogue at the time. Among the “flavourings”, for instance, we find extravagant sauces to accompany roasted or boiled fish or meats, based on almonds and bread soaked in vinegar or verjuice, and supplemented by dried morello cherries, Zante currants, pomegranate, various spices and the ubiquitous sugar: examples include the *savor camellino* for boiled vegetables, the *miraus* for fowl and game, and the *savor bianco* for fish. Other elaborate preparations involving that flavour combination include the elegant *cervellati di polpe* for sturgeon, the succulent *caprirotata* for roasts, the labour-intensive *potaggio* of mutton and the intriguing *civiero*

*de salvaticina*. Particularly common are sweet-and-sour recipes involving pumpkin (whose use appears rather widespread in Renaissance recipes): from the Catalan *carabazada* to the golden pumpkin soup (*suppa dorata*) to the *tortelli* (a larger version of *tortellini*) so prized by the era’s eminent families: Gonzaga, Este, Farnese, Sforza.

Remaining in the vegetable realm, a dish based on aubergines, artichokes, vinegar, sugar, capers, olives and celery, described by Romoli, bears an uncanny resemblance to the legendary Sicilian *caponata*. Curious uses of New-World ingredients in recipes of that era include that of cocoa in *dolceforte* (literally ‘strong sweet’): a sauce to accompany stewed hare or wild boar, based on minced *panforte* (a dense and spiced confection of dried fruits and nuts) and *cavallucci* (heavily spiced Christmas biscuits), chocolate melted in butter, pine

nuts, raisins and crushed walnuts, all doused in vinegar.

Between 1600 and 1700, with the encroachment of French cookery which aimed for a cuisine no longer based on artifice and contrasting flavours, but rather on such new principles as ‘naturalness’, delicacy and flavour isolation, many traditional mediaeval and Renaissance food habits changed, including sweet and sour and the use of spices.

Acidic sauces and condiments gave way to oil-based versions, including mayonnaise and béchamel; cookbooks exalting the extravagant refinement and sophistication of cooks catering to the aristocracy were gradually replaced by accounts of popular cookery and regional variations, some of which still embody that archaic refined spirit in their retention of the sweet-and-sour flavour, giving rise to true culinary excellence.

**GIANCARLO BURRI**

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# Sturgeon and caviare in Lombardy

*Italian sturgeon farms produce a caviare which has won over even the most sophisticated markets.*

BY LORENZO CASSITTO

*Milan Academician*

Considering this year's new volume of the *Food Culture Library* series, dedicated to seafood, it is timely to emphasise one of Italy's high achievements in luxury dining. A brilliant example of creativity in line with the most advanced standards of energy efficiency recommended by the European Union has been in place for over thirty years - and is still steadily expanding - in Lombardy, where Europe's largest facility of this nature is producing a caviare which has won over even the most discerning markets.

In the course of their production cycle, local steelworks inevitably produced

hot water which regulations required and still require to be cooled before it re-entered the environment. Displaying genuine Lombard entrepreneurship, a partner in one of the steelworks decided to vanquish two birds with one stone: cooling the water by creating large tanks kept at a stable temperature year-round, taking advantage of the local abundance of exceptionally pure water, and thereby maintaining an ideal habitat for fish farming. Further adventurous research led to a previously untested enterprise: raising sturgeon in captivity and consequently harvesting caviare. From the waters of the Volga to the Po River Valley.





Sturgeon is a prehistoric fish which retains its archaic appearance. It lives in both salt and fresh water, invariably taking refuge in the latter during mating and egg laying; due to its exceptionally tender white flesh, it was formerly reserved for royalty and potentates. It grows exceedingly slowly, over 8 to 20 years depending on the species, before reaching reproductive maturity when its eggs may finally be harvested. Its lifespan can exceed 100 years. It inhabits the waters of half the world, but overfishing and industrial pollution have brought it to the brink of extinction. Sturgeon and caviare harvesting is most firmly established in Russia, its epicentre being the Caspian Sea; but overfishing has almost rendered this sublime animal extinct. Today, partially thanks to a repopulation policy, this danger appears to have been averted, but the most abundantly populated areas are the southern Caspian shores which belong to Iran. Political and religious reasons have hindered caviare production there in recent decades, involuntarily defending the sturgeon. In any case, since 1998 this fish is listed as threatened with extinction, and



its fishing has been reduced and regulated by a quota, with the side effect of rewarding the Lombard company's entrepreneurial spirit.

There are five main species of farmed sturgeon, ranging from the smallest, the starry or Sevruga sturgeon (maximum weight: 25 kilogrammes) whence caviare can be harvested after 7 to 9 years, to the largest and most prized, the Beluga or *Huso huso* (maximum weight: 1.5 tonnes; length up to 8 metres) producing eggs after 20 years. Farming has facilitated the rescue of the Italian sturgeon, once abundant in the Adriatic Sea and the Po River, but now almost extinct. Sturgeon caviare has particularly interesting

features. Sturgeon eggs, tiny spheres with a diameter of 1.5 to 3 millimetres, are extracted manually from the ovaries, washed, treated and piled conically in an appropriately sized half-tin. When the second half of the tin is applied, with gradual pressure, the container is filled completely and closed.

An elastic of the right size guarantees a reliable seal. The caviare is then aged for several months in a refrigerated cell where it acquires its desired characteristics.

This entire procedure is termed *malossol*, meaning 'low-salted', and is the preferred method of processing caviare. Beyond the eggs, every other part of the fish is used: the flesh, the cartilage and other valuable materials. This enterprise in Lombardy is the largest in the world for the production of farmed sturgeon caviare: with approximately 40 hectares of tanks and over 25 tonnes of eggs processed each year, it accounts for 25% of a market spanning Russia, Japan, the USA, and the United Arab Emirates: wherever there is demand for a food which is deemed a luxury.

**LORENZO CASSITTO**

### ECUMENICAL DINNER 2017

*The ecumenical dinner, which gathers all Academicians in Italy and abroad around the same virtual table, will occur on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October at 8:30 PM, and its theme will be "cheese in traditional regional cuisine". This theme was chosen by the "Franco Marengli" Study Centre and approved by the President's Council to celebrate an ingredient which is abundant and varied in Italy, and which stars or has a supporting role in numerous traditional regional recipes as well as innovative dishes. The Delegates will make sure that the menu pays homage to the starring ingredient and that the dinner is accompanied by an appropriate cultural presentation to illustrate this important subject.*

