

# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



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**On the cover:** graphic elaboration of *Nature morte au potiron (Still Life with Pumpkin)* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1905; Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

# UNESCO and 'labels' to safeguard typical cuisine

*Much marketing and little substance.*

BY PAOLO PETRONI  
President of the Academy

There is recent news that a priority of the mayor of Florence is the inclusion of Florentine-style steak (*bistecca alla fiorentina*) on the UNESCO world heritage list.

Riding the success of his Neapolitan counterpart, he contacted him for insights on how he obtained the coveted title, not for pizza itself, mind you, but for the art of the Neapolitan pizza maker, since Neapolitan pizza is a typical food of the city of Naples, prepared using methods, traditions and gestures which make it culturally unique, with a worldwide influence which far transcends the city's confines.

The enthralling fashion for cuisine, which attracts and fascinates us, may make us forget or overlook tradition and history. It is true that the steak to be had in Florence is often delicious, but it is nonetheless a grilled beef rib steak (which, moreover, is also equally excellent in New York under the name of *T-bone steak* or *Porterhouse*). The term *bistecca* - 'steak' - is relatively recent (from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and its preparation technique more recent still: one need only consult Artusi and other cookbooks of the time to realise that the Florentine steak of today has little in common with its early 20<sup>th</sup>-century incarnation. All told, from the cultural perspective, it is rather overdone for the benefit of food and wine tourism. Fair enough! We Italians, it must be said, are lovers of 'labels': labelling is an obsession of ours, as demonstrated by our staggering number of labelled and certified products. One cannot help wondering what is the purpose of many such labels beyond marketing.

In 2010, UNESCO recognised the 'Mediterranean Diet' on its cultural heritage list, attributed, rightly enough, to Italy, but also to

Morocco, Spain and Greece; and since these were evidently too few countries, in 2013 the privilege was extended to Cyprus, Croatia and Portugal. An operation with zero practical utility. The *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, known by its acronym 'UNESCO', was founded in 1945 with the aim of promoting peace and understanding among nations through education, science, communication and information.

One of UNESCO's missions is that of maintaining a world heritage list. Since 2004, UNESCO promotes the Creative Cities Network, to which nine Italian cities belong, often with odd rationales (Turin, design; Bologna, music); fortunately Parma and Alba are in the 'gastronomy' category. Practical usefulness: none. Of course, Italy is the nation having the greatest number of UNESCO heritage sites (54 sites).

The oral and intangible heritage of humanity consists of ancient traditions which often have no written codification but are passed orally down the generations. UNESCO has set itself the task of safeguarding these treasures to prevent their loss, just as it is already doing for material culture. But neither pizza nor steak run the risk of extinction. In concrete terms, these lists, denominations and labels have little use: if anything they have the purpose of generating copy for a few newspapers and work for many bureaucrats while justifying the existence of agencies and organisations. In any case, in the end something good and substantially useful has been wrought, especially in the artisanal field (cheese, cured meats, oils, wines), but everything depends on consumers' discernment and producers' honesty.





# Typical products: historic but not ancient!

*A reflection on the innovative power of gastronomic tradition.*

BY ANNA MARMIROLI  
*Reggio Emilia Delegate*

Since ancient times, humans - like every other species on our planet - have interacted with nature based on a dominant imperative: survival. Whether it meant picking a fruit off a tree or hunting prey, their relation with their surroundings was always transformative. Cooking, as we know, was a watershed in human history: a transition from nature to culture implying a fundamental shift to a 'cultural and social', rather than solely 'natural', era, with humans beginning to define and shape their environment and not vice versa. From this transition onwards, food became a starting point for extraordinary developments in every society. One may therefore affirm that the history of humans' relationship with food has been a momentous adventure of social and cul-

tural exploration and the search for meaning. What was once the most problematic aspect of life (obtaining food) was transformed from an urgent need into an opportunity.

This account may introduce the theme of how regional cooking, local products, and any given territory's food and wine tradition not only participate in expressing our entire nation's culture but constitute a most interesting mechanism favouring its development.

The increasing willingness to make the most of tradition in recent years represents a rebellion of sorts against a globalisation of taste which has impoverished us and continues to do so in many ways, causing a growing desire for authenticity, itself connected to the rediscovery of a new sustainability encompassing not

only food, but also the ecological, health and interpersonal realms.

This is why typical food is so important: because it is, first and foremost, a manifestation of culture, and is also enshrined with near-mythical status in every individual's olfactive memory. Indeed, we are not indulging in mere poeticism here: such claims have solid and amply studied scientific underpinnings, demonstrating that certain brain functions coordinated by the hippocampus can powerfully associate experiences with sensations, including olfactive ones.

We must all have experienced the awakening of an olfactive memory which in turn activates the other associated sensory memories, each contributing in its own manner to enrich the recollection. This explains why a familiar flavour has





the power to conjure a detailed image of past events. We all carry within us a little 'personal drawer' wherein we store our most intimate 'emotional contents', capable of evoking past experiences and produce a desire or distaste for a particular food even after a very long time has elapsed.

It is therefore worth delving into the concept of 'typical foods' because I dislike the frequent association of 'typical' with 'ancient', that is, past. Instead I believe typical food to be historic, not ancient! It safeguards the distinctive characteristics of a geographical area, respecting its nature and habitat because it is perceived as authentic and powerfully rooted in its land of origin, whose distinctive flavours it embodies. It also carries within it all the complexities of its homeland, resulting from a history of cultural cross-pollination and eluding conformity to modern production regulations.

When I consider the regional foods of Emilia, particularly of the Reggio area, I see the historical encounter of Byzantine pastoral culture with local hog-raising culture, and of the Longobard and Germanic hunting culture with the Roman wheat and oil culture.

Protecting characteristic local foods is not merely an operation of salvaging the past: it also includes the history of current 'collective tastes' which can be communicated and shared here and now, telling the tale of the peoples inhabiting a territory today.

Characteristic foods, therefore, have roots in the past but neither remain in



the past nor betray it: they form a conduit for learning about other cultures, because being locally characteristic does not mean being closed to outside influences. So it is crucial to protect such foods: they pertain to the present; they are products of a society, representing a community's collective taste, and are therefore modern and current.

So investing in reclaiming excellent local foods, rooted in an area's climate and geography and in the artisanal skills of its people, is a winning choice, because, if intelligently formulated, it does not limit itself to reconstructing the gastronomic ambiance of a given area, but goes far beyond that.

It brings us back to a healthy relationship with the quality of raw materials, aiming at excellence in ingredients; it reclaims

the value of food as a catalyst for meaningful intergenerational contact, given the simplicity and clarity of its benefits; it makes the most of the vast potential for conviviality, disseminating the culture of taste and of good living through 'original' food; and last but not least, it salvages ancient flavours as repositories of extraordinary cultural wealth to render them familiar and also to reintroduce them to contemporary tastes.

Making the most of traditional food means, therefore, not only defining it as the sum of its organoleptic properties, but most crucially, constructing around it a web of meaning composed of history, memories, tastes and knowledge which have contributed to creating it and will contribute to establishing it as a historical memory for future generations.

### 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](mailto:segreteria@accademia1953.it)) for more information and orders.*



# Baccalà: philosophy on a plate

*From woody and stringy to supremely succulent.*

BY MORELLO PECCHIOLI

“Franco Marengi” Study Centre

When speaking of the dried and salted cod named *baccalà*, the people of the Veneto, culturally tolerant and pacifist by nature (“Mi no vado a combàtar” - “I’m not off to war”, declares a popular local saying), become furiously belligerent, and, notwithstanding their habitual submission to their mothers, then sweethearts and finally wives, turn to rabid misogyny: “El baccalà”, states a proverb, “l’è come la dona, più la se bate e più diventa bona” (“*Baccalà* and women both improve with beating”).

In Vicenza, Verona, Venice and the entire Veneto region, *baccalà* is more than a food. It is an Aristotelian category of being, an intersection of substance, quality, time and place. History and geography. Science and the art of the table. No mere foodstuff, it is a legend. It involves not only the palate and the gullet, but also the intellect and the intuition.

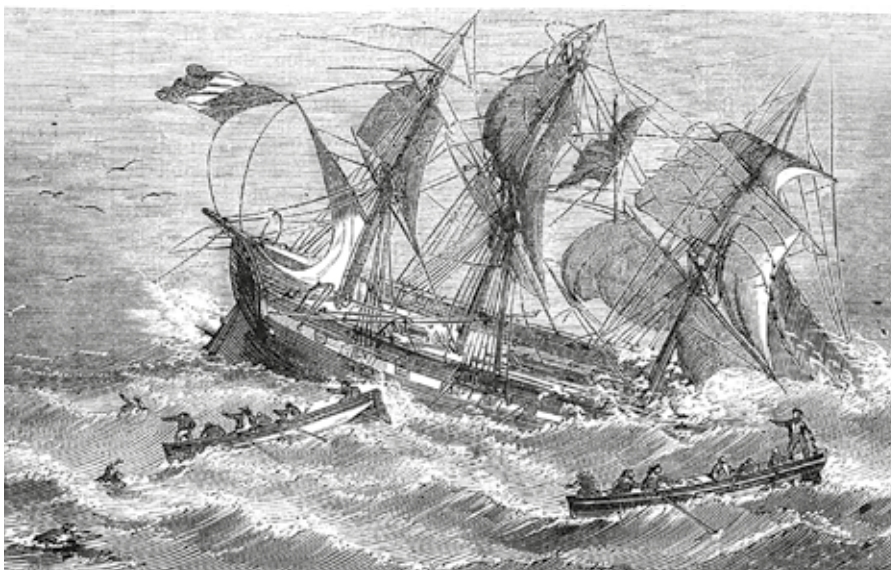
*Baccalà* is philosophy served on a plate. Paolo Monelli, the gourmet from Modena who wandered between the Adige and Piave rivers, narrates the transformation, even “transfiguration”, from “sad ice-eating northern fish”, the *pesce bastone* - ‘stick fish’ - which is one of the possible etymologies of the hard and rigid Scandinavian ‘stockfish’, to a tender delicacy “capable of checkmating all other foods”. Giuseppe Maffioli, the late and lamented high priest of Venetian cuisine, held forth at length on the “metamorphosis” of *baccalà*, to which he dedicated the same reverent attention displayed by Ovid towards Daphne and Narcissus: “Coming to us woody and stringy, it emerges as a most succulent dish”.

Even terminology undergoes a transformation in the presence of *baccalà*. Metonymy is preferred: the finished product upstages its raw material. Once it has

left the glacial waters of the Norwegian Sea and entered Italy salted in barrels, we forget that it is cod, because it is identified by the name of the resulting dish, *baccalà*. The waters are further muddied in the Veneto: what is known in Vicenza, Treviso and environs as *baccalà* is more properly stockfish.

Indeed, clarification is appropriate here. Stockfish - in Italian, *stoccafisso*, abbreviated to *stocco* in the south - is the Arctic Norwegian cod (*Gadus morhua*), decapitated and eviscerated, then placed on wooden racks without a grain of salt, and exposed to the dry and cold Scandinavian winds until it becomes the ‘stick fish’ of the Vikings. True *baccalà*, instead, is the far softer salt cod kept in barrels.

It was the Venetian patrician Pietro Querini, merchant, ship owner and navigator, who discovered *baccalà* by chance in 1431 following the wreck of his transport carrack, a full-bellied craft capable of carrying a thousand tonnes of merchandise. Querini punctiliously documented his adventures in a diary. He narrated that his ship, departing from Candia with a crew of 68 men, sailed for Flanders with a cargo of spices, alum and 800 barrels of Malvasia wine. After passing the Strait of Gibraltar, the ship lost its sails and rudder to a fierce tempest, remaining at the mercy of the waves and sea currents for six weeks. After this ordeal, another storm dealt the coup de grâce and sank the battered vessel. Querini and a dozen sailors escaped on a sloop to a small island located, as the *capitan da mar* eloquently tells us, “in culo mundi” - ‘in the arse of the world’. Retracing master Pietro’s voyage using





our own rather different navigation parameters, we reach the Lofoten islands and more specifically Røst, where Querini and the other survivors were welcomed by fishermen and nourished with stockfish. Rumour has it that, thanks to the generosity of those humble folk, the Venetian castaways were able to satisfy another type of hunger: this is given some credence by the considerable proportion of dark hair and eyes found among the otherwise flaxen-haired, cerulean-eyed islanders. The Venetian patrician himself recounts in generous detail the habits, customs and appearance of these good and simple people: “the men of those islets are most pure and of splendid appearance”; the women “entirely unclothed before us, were wont to steam themselves every Thursday at the stove, mixing freely with men”. Unclothed and warm from the sauna; but no reference to the post-sauna activities of the castaways from the lagoon. The Italian merchant repaid this generous courtesy by introducing the remarkable ‘stick fish’ to his homeland, initiating its import and relaying the valiant Viking housewives’ recipe to two of his countrywomen, *siòra* (Madame) Mirandolina and *siòra* Felice. “When they wish to eat stockfish (*stocfisi*), they beat them with the back of a cleaver until they shred like nerves, and then flavour them with butter and spices”. Italy imports over 50% of Norwegian dried or salted cod, of which 85% comes from the Lofoten islands. Substantial contributors to the dissemination and popularity of *baccalà*, however, were the Council Fathers of Trent, who in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century imparted precise dispositions on abstinence from meat: on Wednesdays and Fridays and throughout the 40 days of Lent, one should avoid eating land animals or fowl, as well as other animal ingredients, making olive oil and almond milk preferable to lard and cow’s milk. Since fish was allowed, the cooks of the Capuchin monasteries



became unsurpassed masters in preparing *baccalà*, whose heavenly flavour however eventually induced them to dispense with the Council’s injunctions and resume the use of milk and butter. And so the intended retort to the troublemaker Luther, who accused Rome of being the mother of all deadly sins including of course gluttony, ended up heralding the triumph of unassuming fish and humble fare. Each Italian regional culinary tradition is convinced of preparing the world’s best *baccalà*. True *baccalà*, namely dried salt cod, is good in Florence, Naples, Bologna, Palermo with tomato, black olives, potatoes, raisins and pine nuts, or in Cosenza where it is prepared with peppers, as the inhabitants of neighbouring Lucania also do, using the dried sweet peppers known as *cruschi*. In Rome it is delicious in two traditions: the Catholic version and the kosher version of the Jewish ghetto. A recipe from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bears the name of Cardinal Mastai Ferretti, who would soon become Pope Pius IX. The province of Teramo in Abruzzo is the home of *stocco alla corropolese*. Among other ingredients, the recipe calls for fresh tomatoes peeled and cooked in a bain-marie, and quinces. In Messina, such is the enthusiasm for stockfish that it is indeed eaten as a second course, but also in a flavoursome sauce (which includes *pecorino* cheese and capers) for a first course of short pasta. Even in the Veneto it is used in a sauce to serve over hand-made *bigoli* (thick noodles).

In the Triveneto area, each province has its own *baccalà* recipe, whose minute variations may ignite furious arguments: some insist on anchovies and others not; some redden the fish with tomato, others whiten it with milk, and still others flavour it with wine; some add grated *grana* cheese, or a garnish of bay leaves. On the Montello hill, *baccalà* is crowned with sautéed mushrooms, while the inhabitants

of the Belluno area add bacon and potatoes. These culinary influences even reach Istria, where in a classic folk song the “Mula de Parenzo” (‘Girl from Parenzo’ - or Poreč, now in Croatia) sings wistfully: “If the sea were a stew and the mountains were polenta /oh my, what a stew of polenta and *baccalà*”. Nothing is wasted of the cod as of the pig. Norwegians go mad for its tongue and cheeks, and even use its head. Cod liver, once a disgusting liquid torture to cure childhood rickets, is now distributed in capsules or made into a *pâté*. Even the seminal fluid of cod is used for making cosmetics. Born poor, *baccalà* was mistreated even by Pellegrino Artusi who, despite providing nine *baccalà* recipes in his landmark publication *La scienza in cucina e l’arte di mangiare bene* (*The Science of Cookery and the Art of Good Eating*), emphasised its “trivial nature”. *Baccalà* takes revenge by titillating the creativity of chefs, including those with upturned fastidious noses who list it on their menus under the most outlandish names. Paolo Conte chastises them in a famous song: “Pesce veloce del Baltico/dice il menu, che contorno ha?/‘Torta di mais’ e poi servono/polenta e *baccalà*/ cucina povera e umile/fatta di ingenuità/caduta nel gorgo perfido/della celebrità” (“Swift Baltic fish/says the menu; what is the side dish?/‘Maize cake’, and then they serve/polenta and *baccalà*/poor and humble food/wrought by ingenuity/fallen into the perfidious abyss/of celebrity”).



# Mozart in the vineyard

*University research suggests that the Austrian master's music, unaided, can improve the health and quality of grapevines.*

BY FLAVIO DUSIO

*Novara Academician*

Plant growth involves biochemical and physiological processes considerably influenced by external environmental factors including temperature, hydration and sunlight, but also electromagnetic radiation, gravity and mechanical vibrations. Sound has recently been shown to interact decisively with numerous biological functions of plants. In particular, low-frequency sound doesn't induce stress but instead increases enzymatic activity, membrane fluidity, DNA synthesis and the synchronisation of cellular cycles. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the diffusion of sound, but only at a specific intensity, protects from attacks by insects and parasites, almost like a natural insecticide.

How can such a thing happen? Here an intriguing personality in mathematics

comes into play: Leonardo Fibonacci, also known as Leonardo Pisano (1175-1250), with his numerical sequence explaining the proportions of the 'golden ratio', wherein each number is the sum of its two predecessors (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, and so on). Such sequences occur in the most disparate forms in nature: in flowers, plants, the cochlea of the human ear, the spiral of snail shells, the disposition of sunflower seeds or leaves on trees, insects, music. This last has been studied by Professor Lucchi and his team in the Department of Agricultural Entomology at the University of Pisa, to counteract the reproductive strategy of an insect responsible for a disease known as 'flavescence dorée', the most severe of the leaf-yellowing diseases. Its vector is the American grapevine leafhopper, *Scaphoideus titanus*.







Its reproduction is aided by pheromones and mating calls produced by abdominal vibrations. The sonic duet between male and female is essential in the partner recognition and mating phase of the reproductive process.

It is now possible to interfere with the vibrations preceding the mating phase of these insects, which reach the leaf clusters of the vines with varying degrees of attenuation and have frequencies between 200 and 1000 Hertz, coinciding with the frequencies of classical music. Musical vibrations overlapping with those of the male leafhopper confuse the female's efforts to locate her mating partner, leading the insects to

abandon the vineyard in search of more fruitful mating grounds wherein to lay fertilised eggs. The music of Mozart, whose frequencies are arranged in a manner embodying the Fibonacci sequence, has thus defeated these insects as effectively as the best commercially available insecticides, without environmental damage, while safeguarding the useful insect life present in the vineyards.

This extraordinary result was reached through research initiated at the University of Florence to evaluate the effects of different sound frequencies and intensities on the growth of *vitis vinifera* in a controlled environment. The

study was field-tested on Sangiovese vines exposed to music 24 hours a day for an entire year through special sound systems adapted for exposure to the elements, disposed at regular intervals along the vine rows at a height of 2.8 metres off the ground. The results were surprising: increased leaf thickness and surface area; increased chlorophyll content; more efficient gas exchange with better resistance to environmental stressors (drought, excessive rain, wind); and swifter plant growth with activation of ionic potassium-calcium exchanges through intracellular proton pumps. Sound-treated plants reached technological and phenolic maturity, with optimal sugars, acidity and polyphenols, 15 days before untreated plants, advancing the harvest to a more favourable time (September instead of October). Sound-treated vines also produced a less acidic, more alcoholic wine richer in anthocyanins and phenolic compounds. The analysis undertaken reveals, therefore, that the frequencies broadcast by the sound systems reach the vine leaves almost unaltered, interfering with leafhoppers' mating calls. In vineyards treated with Mozart's music, the disappearance of leafhoppers further confirms the efficacy of those particular frequencies rather than other sounds.

### ECUMENICAL DINNER 2018

Our group dinner, uniting all Academicians worldwide around one virtual table, will take place on 18 October at 8:30 PM; its theme is **"Sweet and savoury cakes in traditional regional cuisine"**. The topic, chosen by the "Franco Marengi" Study Centre and approved by the President's Council, honours regional baked specialities, whether stuffed or dry, abundant in Italian home cooking and also amenable to interesting innovations. The Delegates will arrange a suitable cultural presentation to illustrate this important theme, and a menu befitting the same.

