

# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



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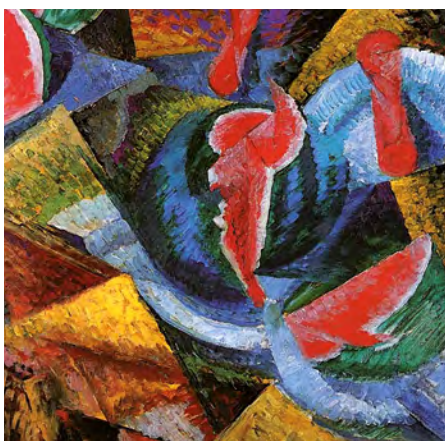
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**L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA**  
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI  
E DA LUIGI BERTETT, DINO BUZZATI TRAVERSO,  
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GIAN LUIGI PONTI, GIÒ PONTI, DINO VILLANI,  
EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,  
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



**On the cover:** *Graphic elaboration of a detail of Still Life: Watermelon (1913-1914) by Umberto Boccioni. Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum, Hannover*

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# The Academy's convivial gatherings are back

by Paolo Petroni

President of the Accademia

*Despite often absurd restrictions, the Delegations have enthusiastically resumed their activities.*

**W**e had predicted that the previous number of *Civiltà della Tavola* would be the first and last without the section on the Academy's activities. With this July edition, **we are immensely happy to reinstate the full format thanks to the numerous convivial gatherings** held by our Delegations during June, the moment the restrictions allowed it. We already have word of **many planned summer initiatives**. Amid a deluge of widely varying news about contagion in Italy and worldwide, we apprehensively observe screaming headlines, disquisitions on hot spots, and morbid forecasts of a second wave, though the statements of virologists, epidemiologists and immunologists leave us unsure as to whether they fear or desire it (at least it would let them continue droning on TV and in the papers).

*Restaurants remain shackled by limits which are absurd to say the least*

Enlightening examples of folly include the recent advice which allows carnal congress, but for no longer than 15 minutes! Or the permission of grandparents to be with their grandchildren, but a metre apart, without holding or kissing them! Yet they can request the 'grandparents' bonus' (emergency baby-sitting subsidy). "Oh, please!" as the comedian Totò might say. Meanwhile, people flock to the seaside while restaurants remain theoretically shackled by limits which are absurd to say the least. **Coats** (in cold climates!) **must be stored separately** lest they infect each other. Exit and entry routes and paths to tables must be clearly marked. **If a metre's distance is impossible, plexiglas separators are necessary** (hence restaurant patrons are now boxed into incubators), and as for **menus - verboten!** Only on mobiles, or billboards, or single-use paper. Excellent extra-virgin olive oil? Not a chance! **Oil,**



**vinegar, salt and pepper sachets instead.** Buffets? Absolutely not! Or rather, yes, but with pre-made portions, or served by the staff. Masks are mandatory upon leaving the table, but not those with a little virus-liberating exhalation valve. Not to mention the list of customers to be kept for 14 days!

*We need a clear strategy to solve real and concrete problems*

**We crave tourists.** Spend your holidays in Italy! It's pleasant and safe - unfortunately, however, between quarantines and bans, the 2020 tourist season is lost. Covid manifestly remains a problem, and the virus, while we await cures and vaccines, is obviously still around, though reduced. However, **to face the economic fallout** which is inevitable in September, **we need a clear strategy** to solve real and concrete problems: helping tourism and restaurants through less absurd rules and reduced bureaucracy. Substantial solutions - **not just electric scooter subsidies!**

*President Paolo Petroni, the President's Council, the Secretariat in Milan and the Editorial Office in Rome warmly wish all Academicians, in Italy and abroad, a pleasant summer holiday.*



# The unsuspected virtues of prickly pears

by **Adriana Zuddas**  
Cagliari Academician

*The FAO considers them  
a food of the future:  
they are suitable  
for arid climates,  
are distinctively  
flavoured and provide  
valuable health  
benefits.*

**P**rickly pears stand as imposing and sturdy sentinels arrayed alongside roads, perched half-way up hills or austere watching over fields as if to say: “You shall not pass”. Then they reveal their sweet side when they festoon themselves first with flowers and later, displaying the pride of a fecund mother, with **fruits possessing an archaic, unusual taste:** the intensely green ones to enjoy immediately after carefully removing their peel with its fine, insidious, invisible thorns, and the riper flame-coloured ones which Sardinian women’s ancient lore has long transformed into jam, liqueur, syrup or dried morsels.

At flowering time, children would search for the plant’s pistil, seeking the pollen and a delicate juice contained therein which was as sweet as honey - while taking care to avoid provoking the beetles, hornets or bees which might be already ensconced there.

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*Picking pears prickle-free*

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Prickly pears are harvested **before the sun reaches its zenith**, beginning in late August, using an implement called *sa cannuga*. This is a **long cane** of which



one end is grasped while the other is quartered into four 'petals' held open like a hand using a cork wedged between them, and shaped into a rough cone with twine wound around the rigid cane 'flower'. The fruits are detached and rolled in the grass to remove most of their pliable but menacing thorns; they are then arranged, in large numbers, for transport in a basket called *su cadinu*, made of woven reeds and surmounted by a stiff arched handle. The stronger women may pile the fruits into a circle of cloth fastened with raffia and balanced on their heads like a crown, carrying them away like proud queens of the field.

Prickly pears are peeled with a knife, sun-dried for a few days on racks entwined with aromatic sprigs, halved or thickly sliced, and placed in the residual heat of the oven after baking bread. Somewhat flattened, they are placed in earthenware containers or in straw (*is cofineddus*) similarly to figs. Rare indeed, unlike its grape counterpart, is the concentrated prickly pear must called **sa saba de figumorisca**: the fragrance of the cooking fruit, blending with orange peels or cinnamon, pervades the home, the senses, and the heart.

*The FAO has declared that prickly pears will save humanity*

The FAO has declared that prickly pears will save humanity, also recommending their 'artificial' cultivation, of which I personally disapprove because of the associated serious maintenance problems. It would be wiser to make the most of what we already have!

Another misconception is the plant's impenetrability, however useful as a barrier against unwanted visitors. But this dense thicket harbours varied life, pushing upwards towards the sunlight: from asparagus to a profusion of white flowers. The prickly pear even creates while shedding its old, spent leaves: an apparently useless material fashioned into **beautiful, soft figurines inspired**

**by ancient Sardinian traditions**, a homage to Sardinian women's proud and elegant bearing and their mysterious, timeless faces.

Prickly pears are now sadly being 'deforested' because well-meaning but ill-informed landowners think they can protect them with nets and stakes, unintentionally blighting the landscape. European and regional policies have also regrettably favoured metal fences and even industrial prickly pear cultivation. Facilities for processing the abundant fruit, which now rots on the ground, would greatly reduce unem-



ployment while conferring a new dignity and respect upon prickly pears, as has happened with myrtle.

**Adriana Zuddas**



### **SA SABA DE FIGUMORISCA** (ancient recipe for prickly pear must)

**Ingredients:** 5 kg of prickly pears; dried orange peel (or cinnamon).

**Preparation:** peel ripe, whole prickly pears, crush them with your hands and place them in a copper pot (*su caddaxiu*) resting on a wrought-iron tripod (*su trebini*) over the hearth fire. Stir this with a wooden spoon; once it boils, let it cool and sift it through undyed linen or cotton. Set the now seedless liquid on the fire again, adding cinnamon or a curl of dried orange peel, reducing it to the required consistency. Cool, pour into sterilised containers and seal with cork stoppers; store away from light. This preparation can keep for several years.

*It is used for making 'must and bread' (su pan e saba) and in preparing sweets.*



# Sweet and fragrant melon

by **Morello Pecchioli**

*Honorary Academician for Verona*

*An ideal summer food,  
when paired  
with prosciutto it forms  
a classic duo revered  
by all.*

and calorically almost negligible. They are rich in vitamins A and C and anti-oxidant carotenes, and **contain potassium, which reliably reduces blood pressure.** Melon is delicious in fruit salad with port (and just as good with sweet Recioto wine), as an ice cream or sorbet, or as a digestive: *meloncello* now rivals *limoncello* in popularity.

*Geographically widespread,  
melons often originate  
in small villages*

Melons thrive over a huge territory, but 'Formula 1' melons originate from small villages, just as the Ferrari was born in Maranello. **Celebrated melons come from Casteldidone (Cremona), Sermide, Viadana and Sabbioneta, near Mantova. Another melon superstar comes from Erbè, a small town in the Basso**

Veronese (Verona plains) where a **melon festival has been held** for over 40 years. *Cucumis melo*, as the melon is taxonomically designated, probably originated in Africa. In Egypt it was already grown in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In antiquity, melons were small and presumably less sweet; they were eaten in salads, with pepper and vinegar.

**The most common melon varieties in Italy** are **Cantalupo** (a hamlet near Rome, whence the name 'cantaloupe'), **retato** ('reticulated' melon), the smooth and elongated **invernale** ('winter' melon), and **viadanese** (from Viadana near Mantova). **The zatta melon**, also called *rospa* ('toad') because of its warty skin, is unfortunately **disappearing**. Its excellence earned it the **sobriquet 'melon of popes'**. Pope Paul II particularly loved it; some blame his death in 1471, aged only 54, on a surfeit of melons. But the gastronome and papal biographer Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as Platina, expressed the suspicion

**F**rancesco Sforza, mercenary commander and first duke of Milan (1401-1466), was crazy for melons: "choosing a good horse, taking a good wife and buying a good melon are the hardest things to do". **François de Malherbe**, a French poet whose life straddled the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and a gentleman-in-waiting to king Henry IV of France, condensed the beauty and goodness of existence into two verses: "There are only two beautiful things in the world: women and roses; and only two choice morsels: women and melons". The elegant, refined French aesthete and gourmet and the rough, belligerent Italian warrior agreed on melons and women - like many pleasure-loving sophisticates, after all, who seek emotions and sensory delights through beauty and good food. Melons are **useful during the warm season because they replenish moisture** lost through sweat and can be eaten at any time of day. They are over 90% water





that the 'two goodly melons' on which the pope had gorged the day before his death had perhaps been poisoned. The *zatta* melon has, for centuries, been reputed among the finest *Cocumis melo* for its especially sweet flavour, intense and satisfying fragrance, and soft flesh. Familiar and appreciated in Italian Renaissance courts (a basket of *zatte* appears in *The Fruit Seller* by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century painter **Vincenzo Campi**), at a certain point in its, and our, food history, it was marginalised. It is hardly a beauty, to be sure. Its 'warts' bring to mind the lumpy pumpkin called *zucca barucca*, and it has an ill-defined, uninviting hue. Yet, if we were to discard all delicious but ugly foods, we should also reject oysters, Prato biscuits (known in the Anglosphere as 'biscotti'), the *cardo gobbo* ('hunched cardoon') of Nizza Monferrato, octopus and gorgonzola. And surely nobody can claim that Nutella spread on bread is beautiful to behold.

### How to select a good melon?

How can we select a good melon? Some weigh it in their hands; others palpate, sniff, judge rind colour or swear that they can distinguish male from female melons. In their *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Love*, Nizza and Morbelli tell of a sultan who stationed two slaves day and night in his vegetable garden, to monitor the ripening of melons. He wanted to eat them only when ideally ripe. When a melon was perfect, the slaves alerted the sultan,

who leapt off his bed or sofa, descending to the garden bearing a small knife to partake of the delightful fruit. Then there are Their Majesties, **melon and prosciutto, monarchs of the summer table**, sovereigns of the sunny season, dietary overlords of torrid climes. Chill the melon in the fridge for about an hour, unite it with *prosciutto* and they will sing: "we're the world's tastiest pair". As inseparable as Laurel and Hardy, Chip'n'Dale or a pair of lovebirds, *prosciutto* and melon have each sometimes cut a dashing figure alongside other co-stars (*prosciutto* and figs, *prosciutto* and avocado, melon and *speck*, melon and swordfish *carpaccio* or duck breast...) but were inevitably reunited, exemplifying the Unity of Opposites posited by Heraclitus 2,500 years ago: **one being sweet and the other salty, they are drawn together**. The philosopher contemplated a secret principle underlying the structure of the world, but for us, a golden rule of gastrosophy will suffice. We don't know who first paired the cured meat and the cucurbitaceous fruit. Some attribute the combination to ancient Greece (was Heraclitus the instigator?); others hypothesise a mediaeval origin when melon was popularly thought injurious to health but rendered more digestible by ham. Idle theories, we suspect. **Achille Campanile**, the journalist and playwright whose pen delivered such razor-sharp wit, maintained: "*Prosciutto* and melon are among those awe-inspiring international binaries which all revere without seeking to unravel their mystery. Why melon with *prosciutto* and not

stewed beef? Why cheese with pears rather than, say, strawberries? Among these famed, mysterious pairs, other minor, though no less noteworthy, examples include salad with hard-boiled eggs, artichokes with *coratella* (offal stew, only in Rome and environs), and polenta with roast game birds".

### Different ways to serve a platter of prosciutto and melon

In her *La cucina della felicità* (*Cooking for the joy of it*), **Sister Germana**, the celebrated cookbook author and nun, suggests **ham arranged on a serving dish with little cubes of melon** (chilled at least for two hours in the fridge) on each slice, then **sprinkled with pepper**. Another cook, a layperson given to contemplation, recommends a garnish of corn salad sprigs. Thyme and mint we find overly harsh towards the *prosciutto*, but some adore them. **Very trendy and convenient** are *prosciutto* and melon **kebabs** served with aperitifs outdoors, with buffets, or in bars on a tray during happy hour, constructed thus: a **melon ball**, then a **cube of Langhirano ham**, another ball, another cube and so forth. If you prefer colours and flavours to food geometry, skewer a **melon wedge, a fan-pleated slice of Parma ham** (or San Daniele or Montagnana) **and a sliver of kiwi**. Melon, ham, kiwi. Wedge, fan, sliver: a skewer of refreshing simplicity. *Prosciutto* and melon aren't limited to appetisers and aperitifs. **Ugo Tognazzi**, as gifted in the kitchen as on stage, recommended wedding them on an altar of delectable risotto. Particularly delicious was his **recipe for Vialone nano rice with Mantova melon and raw Parma ham**, with which he impressed his guests. It's easy to make. Use the ingredients for a *risotto alla parmigiana* (vegetable stock, onion, extra-virgin olive oil, a knob of butter, and *parmigiano reggiano*) and, three quarters of the way through cooking, add the *prosciutto* and melon, previously marinated in port or rum.

**Morello Pecchioli**



# Paper in the kitchen and in the modern restaurant

by Omar Balducci  
Budapest Academician

*An indispensable  
tool in kitchens  
around the world.*

**W**hat paper do we mean, and how important is it for cuisine and restaurants?

When speaking of paper, we often generalise, including vastly different materials within this category, ranging from printer paper to the classic, familiar paper hankies. However, intrinsic features like softness, resilience and absorbency pertain to **the paper known as 'tissue'**, and we shall **describe its use in cooking** and modern restaurants.

Paper is hygroscopic, that is, capable of swiftly absorbing moisture from the surrounding environment. It is simply a sheet of raw materials, primarily of plant origin, felted together and dried. The Italian word *carta* has uncertain origins; many linguists

trace it to the Latin *charta*, others to the Greek *χαράσσω* (*charassō*) meaning 'carve' or 'sculpt'. Instead, the word for 'paper' in English and several other languages - Hungarian (*papír*), German (*papier*), Spanish (*papel*) French (*papier*), etc - indicates an almost certain derivation from the papyrus on which the Ancient Egyptians wrote from 3,000 BC.

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*How much harder would daily  
life be without kitchen paper?*

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How much harder would our daily life be without kitchen paper? Yet **it only appeared in Europe very recently**, af-





ter the Second World War, indeed introduced by American troops. For the present purposes we shall only deal with its use in the hospitality industry.

Kitchen paper is currently **indispensable in kitchens around the world**: it is used in food preparation, for drying implements with greater hygiene since it is not re-used, and for absorbing food liquids, whether vegetable or animal (from meat and fish). Various technologies produce kitchen rolls with different characteristics according to intended use. **A unique and innovative method produces** the particularly strong and absorbent **air-laid paper** (ordinary paper is manufactured using water and then dried). Air-laid paper shares the texture and resilience of cloth, can be re-used at least 9 times and can absorb up to 7 times its weight in moisture.

Paper is clearly not limited to cooking, but has expanded into **additional restaurant uses**, including table setting and arrangement.

An increasing number of restaurants **are now replacing their cloth napkins with paper ones**: a valid and more hygienic alternative. Restaurateurs, of course, choose napkins according to their preference, which reveals their priorities,



whether economic, environmental or aesthetic. Besides being cheaper than cloth but not qualitatively inferior, paper napkins are clearly **more hygienic, as they are not re-used**, so they carry fewer bacteria than items used many times, despite washing.

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*Paper products, importantly,  
are biodegradable*

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In times when, finally, we seem to have developed an increased ecological awareness, we should note a fundamental characteristic of paper products: they are biodegradable; that is, they will break down into simpler substances through

the enzymatic activity of micro-organisms. **This is different from solubility**, namely a substance's ability to dissolve at a certain temperature and within a given time (toilet paper, for instance, dissolves quickly to avoid unpleasant blockages, unlike the napkins currently under discussion).

Table arrangement is a manifest 'signature' of a restaurant, revealing much about its food and the service. Hence restaurateurs should select with care, without dismissing the option of paper napkins, which, besides potentially contributing to style and ambiance, are associated with cleanliness in the minds of diners who are discomfited or even embarrassed by obstacles to hygiene during a meal.

**Omar Balducci**

