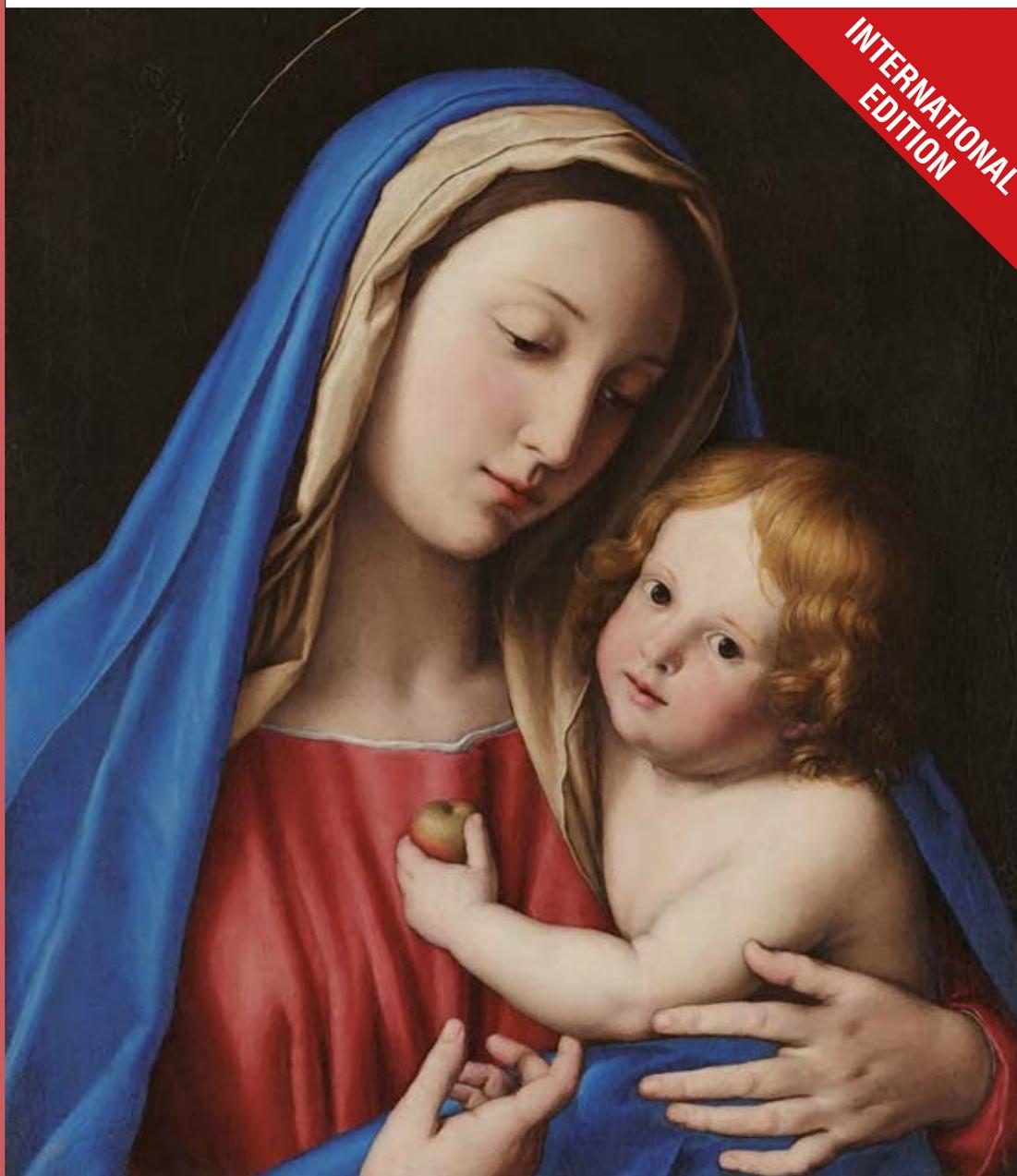


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A year of complexities draws to a close

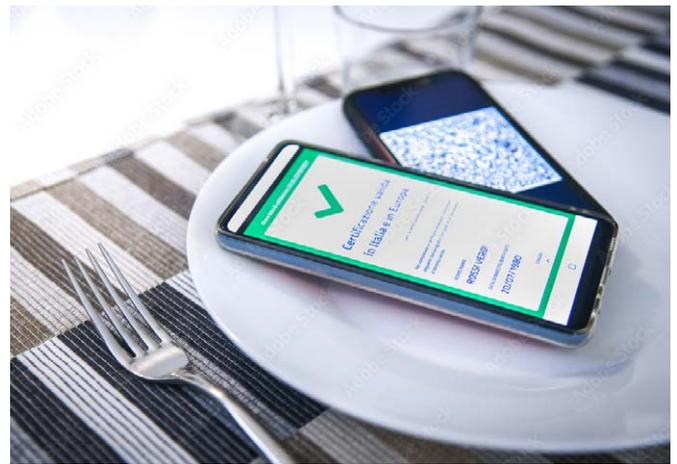
*Despite uncertain prospects,
life today is not comparable
to that of 12 months ago.*

FOCUS, December 2020: a year ago. The riskiest 'red regions' endured maximum lockdown; we left home only for food-shopping and work; we never left our municipalities; no cinemas, theatres, stadia, gyms. Beleaguered restaurants survived through unglamorous carry-outs. We lamented bar and restaurant closures at 6 PM and on Christmas and Boxing Day, and a 10 o'clock curfew even for New Year's Eve. The virus has not disappeared: it remains at large, but **how much has changed!** Holders of a Green Pass denoting recovery or vaccination can live almost normally, at least for now. Of course, with social distancing and masks indoors, we shouldn't delude ourselves: we'll have to bear these precautions for many months yet, but apart from that, our wise Academicians have attained the mythical 'herd immunity', being almost all multiply vaccinated. **We're free, therefore, to hold convivial gatherings, conferences,** meetings and so on. It's not complete freedom, but it's a fair amount, considering the ongoing pandemic. What hasn't changed, and has indeed worsened, is the homeless encampment which now, even during daylight, coalesces under the arcades in front of our Academy's headquarters.

*Delegations are intensely active,
including those abroad*

This year, the Italian Academy of Cuisine has demonstrated admirable engagement worldwide, including that connected with the **VI International Italian Food Week**. Liaising, as always, with our diplomatic network and Italian Cultural Institutes, Delegations organised seminars, round tables and interesting, well-attended conferences. In Italy, the traditional convivial festive gatherings are taking place with enthusiastic participation by Academicians and their friends and families. In many locations, booking is difficult because venues are, luckily, full; but prices have often risen enough hinder the selection of menus and accompanying wines. We have previously noted the three principal problems of restaurants: absurd price hikes, substandard service, and standardised

by **Paolo Petroni**
President of the Accademia



food. A large percentage of menus from our various Delegations include, for instance, 'low-temperature beef cheeks'.

Few changes in the two guides released this year

In this 'transitional moment', so to speak, two guides have been released: the **Michelin Red Guide for 2022**, launched in person this year, recommends the very same 11 3-starred restaurants: not one more, nor one less. Not much movement among the 2-starred restaurants, which include only two newcomers, both in Campania; and 33 new restaurants with 1 star. 26 restaurants are out: 15 because their star was not confirmed, and 11 because they have closed. **Gambero Rosso** has also released the 32nd edition of its **Guide to the Restaurants of Italy**, with reviews of 2,700 venues. Points and assessments have returned this year, but with few changes. 41 restaurants have 3 forks: only 4 newcomers since the 2020 guide. Our **Good Table Guide** will be meticulously checked over January and February to be released, at long last, in the spring. Last year's editorial ended by hoping that we could soon meet again: this has come to pass, dear Academician friends, and once more I wish you and your families a Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year and excellent health.



The battle over wheat

by Gigi Padovani

Honorary Academician for Torino Lingotto

Sky-high prices: will pasta disappear from the shelves?

Among Italian lovers of our flagship food, some have already predicted catastrophic scenarios: sky-high durum wheat prices worldwide, combined with scarcity, could cause packaged pasta to disappear from supermarket shelves. Can it be true? At least on this point, **Riccardo Felicetti**, president of an industrial pasta manufacturers'

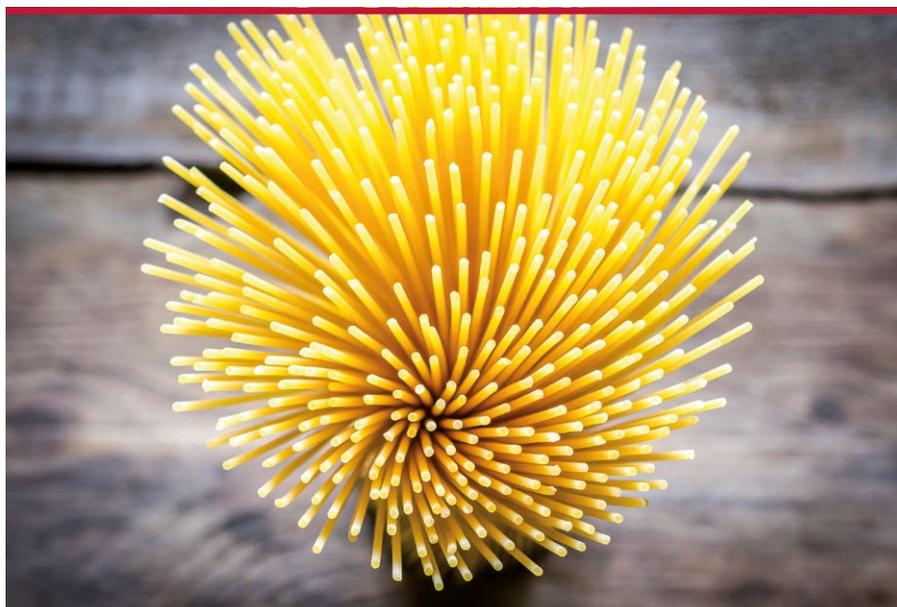
association and a native of Trent, pronounces categorically: "I rule out spaghetti and rigatoni shortages in 2022. But **we must remain confident about upcoming harvests, because the situation is truly dire**, and in the short term, I would say, alarming". Another entrepreneur, who produces egg and durum wheat pasta in the Marche region, is **Enzo Rossi**, who owns La Campofilone, a 'circular economy' business with 120 hectares of wheat and 10 thousand hens. Worried, he adds: "Our agriculture can't even yield the wheat necessary for the 'Made in Italy' products that consumers love so much. We can function, because we are locally supplied, using crops from the fields of our own Aso Valley. But **those who must purchase wheat find its price doubled**: we have now reached 50 Euros per hundred-

weight, as against the 26-27 of a year ago". Will there be a need for another "Battle for Grain" as in the days of Mussolini? The fascist regime used that phrase for its dream of grain self-sufficiency: the photographs of the Duce threshing, and later of Milan's Cathedral Square transformed into a wheat field during the autarkic period, have remained engraved in the popular imagination. In reality, that goal was not reached. The economist **Luigi Einaudi**, later the first President of the Italian Republic, criticised the fascists' agricultural policy at the time, because it had protectionistically reintroduced grain tariffs without bringing about any true improvement in cultivation techniques and uncultivated land reclamation.

Consumption has doubled in the past decade, with Italy in the lead among producers



A plate of 'macaroni', as the Americans call them following the diction of our own ancient culinary texts, has never been more popular, both in Italy and worldwide. Data from the Italian Food Union (the entrepreneurs' association headed by Felicetti) indicate that consumption has doubled over a decade, and Italy leads world producers, with 3.9 million tonnes annually (followed by the USA, Turkey, Egypt and Brazil). **We export 62% of our pasta, but must import 40% of our grain.** While the Italian cereal harvest for 2021 was generally stable with respect to the previous year, the grain quantity arriving in North



American silos (USA and Canada) was halved. This has had two consequences: soaring prices, also buoyed by speculation - apparently, the first to hoard large quantities of grain were Japanese investors who subsequently sold it with a markup - and increasing difficulty obtaining wheat *semola* flour.

The Felicetti company was founded in 1908; in its 'model plant' in Rovereto (Trent), it produces 60 tonnes of pasta each day, in a hundred formats, using *duro matt* wheat from Puglia for its *Mono-grano* (single-wheat) selection. Riccardo is the third-generation president of UnionFood, and has clear ideas on responsibility for the current crisis. "**Climate change**" - says Felicetti - "**affects us all** in its severity, even in the domestic food market. We must not simply delegate the Cop26 agreements to respond to climate problems, because **the environmental situation affects everyone** and touches our pocketbooks directly. We are now in the fourth year of harvests with volumes inferior to world consumption".

Farmers will sign supply agreements if they can rely on guaranteed prices

In 1998, the Rossi family - led by the entrepreneur Enzo, who insists on calling himself a 'peasant', with his wife **Maria** and their daughters **Federica and Maria Vittoria** working alongside him - took

over the business founded in 1912 by Mrs **Adorna Albanesi**, whose *trattoria* offered the famous *maccheroncini fini* ('fine macaroni': in fact these were fine egg *tagliatelle*) of Campofilone. These were already cited in documents from 1560 as "angel hair, so fine as to melt in one's mouth". Today, La Campofilone is represented in markets worldwide and continues investing in land, showing the determination typical of people from the Marche region. "Before the pandemic, many children would come to visit our factory", remembers Enzo Rossi. "Can we do without these? I would ask, pointing to my mobile and the car in the courtyard. 'What about water, bread, pasta?' This was a way to teach them respect for agriculture. Farmers understand money, and will continue signing supply agreements only if they can count on a guaranteed price. After these peaks, **I think we could reach 35 Euros per hundredweight: only then will more wheat be sown**". **A law that recently came into force incentivises three-year supply agreements**, offering growers a 'bonus' of 100 Euros per hectare: according to a report to Parliament, this "favours collaboration and integration between producers and refiners of durum wheat, and better products and supply planning". Felicetti comments: "In truth, supply agreements have not worked correctly". We ask whether another 'battle for grain' will be necessary. "The fact is that Italian agriculture exists on a knife-edge: increasing durum wheat cultivation, which is partially happening

now, would mean shortages in soft wheat for other uses, from bread to pastry... The supply chain should be considered as interconnected, rather than the sum of individual agreements, which unfortunately don't halt speculation".

Will grain shortages and price hikes cause retail price increases?

Will wheat shortages and price hikes raise the cost of spaghetti in supermarkets? For now, producers are staying the course, though **climatic effects and scarce raw materials** - even paper and cardboard for packing are lacking - **are clearly stoking an inflationary flame**. This will mean **an increase of 30-40 Eurocents per kg of dry durum wheat pasta** on the price of every packet, which currently varies from 50-60 Eurocents for mass-market quality to 3-5 Euros for top-quality pasta. A hearty plateful of spaghetti, after all, costs no more than 50 Eurocents, tomato sauce included. So **the wheat crisis shouldn't frighten Italians excessively**, and we should remember that 'autarkic' choices aren't always the best. Mandatory raw material origin labelling on pasta packets lapses on 31 December 2021, since it depends on a renewable decree. But producers, led by Felicetti, already commit to indicating origin on their labels. We will retain the prerogative of choosing *fusilli* and *paccheri* made from grain strictly 'Made in Italy', though that may not automatically be the finest. We will, however, undoubtedly agree with what **Giuseppe Prezzolini** wrote in *Maccheroni & Co* (1957) when celebrating the results of grain production in our *Bel Paese* ('Beautiful Country'). According to the Umbrian author, spaghetti have a rightful place in Italian civilisation "equal to, or greater than", that of the pre-eminent Florentine poet: "Dante's work is the product of a single genius, while **spaghetti are an expression of the Italian people's collective genius**, transformed into a national dish".

Gigi Padovani



Lucky foods

by **Morello Pecchioli**

Honorary Academician for Verona

*From cotechino to rice,
from pomegranates
to grapes: auspicious
New Year's Eve foods.*

In Mantova they call it *pistùme*; in Brescia, *pestòm*; in Verona, *tastasàl*. Numerous other dialectal variants exist: *pisto*, *pistùm*, *pistàda*, *tastasàle*, *tastàsàl*... **Each refers to the ground pork to be salted and made into sausages.** The *tastasàl* ritual is as old as hog butchery in farming life. The mixture was (and still is) tasted, *tastato* (hence *tastasal* etc), to

determine the correct proportions of meat, salt and crushed garlic (our ancestors weren't squeamish) before filling the gut casings which would then become *salami*, *salamelle*, sausages, *sopresse*, *lucaniche* and a hundred other porky delights. The proportions must satisfy the preferences of the family who butchered the hog after raising it for an entire year.

The mixture was tasted raw, either with grilled chops or, delight of delights, with rice. In the quadrilateral area of the lower Po Valley (*Bassa Padana*) between lake Garda and the rivers Mincio, Adige and Po, where Carnaroli and Vialone Nano rice fields abound, the similar rice dishes known as *risotto col tastàsàl* (salt-tasting risotto) and *riso alla pilota col pistùme* (rice polishers' rice with sausage meat) are so typical as to be iconic. **These dishes are**

doubly auspicious: pork and rice, according to immemorial customs handed down the generations of augurs and astrologers, bring **abundance, wealth and fortune.**

*From a symbolic perspective,
pigs have a rosy view
of the future*

From a symbolic perspective, pigs have a rosy view of the future. **They root around facing forward, never turning back, representing progress.** For this metaphorical reason, soothsayers predict **prosperity for those who eat zamponi** (pork's trotter sausage) **or cotechino** (New Year thick pork sausage) or any pork product for the **New Year's Eve dinner.** Pork has been considered auspicious since antiquity. An amulet representing a pig was held to bring fortune and fertility by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Celts. Those who had good, almost absurdly good, luck were told "you have a hog" in the Middle Ages. At New Year's Eve, the higher the triglycerides, the more Lady Luck will smile upon the hopeful eater of greasy porcine flesh. *Zamponi* and *cotechini* (the respective plurals) must be **accompanied by lentils.** No Italian, superstitious or otherwise, in all recorded history has failed to view these round flattened legumes as **the food which augurs well-being and prosperity par excellence.** The reason is their flattened spherical shape, reminiscent of coins. **Each lentil represents a coin.** The more lentils we eat, the more dosh, wonga, spondoolicks will arrive.





*Rice also brings abundance:
many grains, much wealth*

Rice, like lentils, brings abundance. The symbolism is the same: many grains, much wealth. Do we not throw massive amounts of it over bridal couples? **The more grains we eat on New Year's Eve, the more fortune will arrive during the new year.** And this applies beyond Italy. Many peoples, especially in Asia, share the conviction that rice brings well-being and abundance.

In Japan it symbolises spiritual riches as well as material wealth. **In China, rice, especially red, is considered symbolic of immortality.** It's useless to demand a certificate of authenticity, but it's a beautiful illusion to imagine eating a potent amulet-food. Believers in this talisman enhance its benefits by sprinkling it over tablecloths or setting the table with a small bowl containing a few grains of raw rice for each diner.

Another doubly auspicious risotto is with pomegranate. This queen of fruits brings good fortune thanks to the six-hundred and more ruby-coloured seeds enclosed in its leathery cuirass as in a sturdy safe.

The pomegranate is rich in symbolic significance since remote antiquity. For the Egyptians, Phoenicians and Mesopotamians it symbolised fertility, abundance, regeneration and life. The Greeks raised it to Olympus by placing it in the hand of Hera, protectress of marriage. The Romans did the same with Juno (same goddess, same fruit, same protec-

tion) and adorned brides' heads with coronets of pomegranate flowers to attract good fortune. For the Jews, it represented holiness. It was applied to the high priest's ritual vestments and carved on the capitals of Solomon's temple. Same for the Christians: the fruit appears on priestly apparel as a symbol of the perfect Christian, and between the acanthus leaves on the Corinthian capitals of church columns. **It also symbolises the beauty and numerous virtues of the Virgin Mary.** Thanks to this rich symbolism, pomegranates eaten at New Year's Eve do much good. And they truly are good for us, being rich in vitamin C, potassium and antioxidants which protect the heart and arteries by counteracting free radicals. Pomegranate is also an antidepressant.

The prosaic followers of no other god but Mammon are uninterested in all of this. They see in pomegranate seeds what they see in lentils and rice: money. For them, the more grains they eat, the more they'll earn in the coming year.

If the forward-rooting hog symbolises progress, rear-swimming prawn symbolises regression, looking to the past. In brief, hogs are progressive; prawns, regressive. The former is an optimist; the latter, a pessimist. Animal augurers suggest avoiding prawns at New Year. The Japanese swim against this tide, eating the carp, which strongly swims upstream, for New Year. Eating it means incorporating its strength for facing and overcoming challenges. Avoid fowl too, astrologers recommend: Fortune is blindfolded, but if she sprouts wings, she might fly away.

*Grapes, a biblical
symbol of rebirth,
are also highly auspicious*

Grapes, a biblical symbol of rebirth and abundance (remember the explorers who returned from the Promised Land with a huge bunch of grapes?), are also highly auspicious. "Whoever eats grapes at New Year", says an old proverb, "will count money all year". Thus, when fresh grapes were not available through imports as they are now, **farmers would hang them in their granaries at the end of the grape harvest: they would find them dried, but still edible, for New Year's Eve.** In some Italian regions, tradition requires that **12 grapes, one for each peal of the bells, be eaten at midnight.** An extinct tradition, alas: the requisite grapes would be available, and in abundance, but the New Year chimes are drowned out by firecrackers, petards, bangers and other assorted fireworks.

Is belief in lucky foods a faulty theory? Yes, but we welcome it if it helps us to embark on a new year with greater confidence. Indeed, the author **Gianni Rodari** was right: "Tell me, o soothsayer / who reads our destinies: / how will the new year be? / Good, bad or half and half? / My heavy tomes inform me / that it will have four seasons, / twelve months, each in its place, / a Carnival and a Midsummer, / and the day after Monday / will always be Tuesday. / More than this I can't find written / on the fate of the new year: / perchance it will be, once again / what people make of it".

Morello Pecchioli



Cacciatora: rustic and delicious

by Giancarlo Burri
Padua Academician

A home-cooking classic.

Whether white or tomato-red, the many delicious regional interpretations of *cacciatora* ('hunter stew') share two defining features: **intense seasoning, and the creation of a tasty sauce at the end of the**

cooking process, in which to dip bread or polenta.

Its name could originate in the habit, among the hunters of old, of bringing rosemary and garlic on long hunting expeditions to flavour the game they caught when cooking it on the fly.

There is also a possible association, especially regarding the crucial element of the sauce, with the **civet stews made from prized game** (hare, venison, roe deer, boar) **in the kitchens of mediaeval aristocrats.**

The meat, cut into chunks and marinated in wine aromatised with garlic, rosemary and bay leaves, was gradually brought

to a boil in that marinade, adding toasted bread soaked in vinegar. The final addition of honey, minced liver and fried onion gave the preparation a soft creaminess and a particularly intense flavour.

It is difficult to trace the origin of this delectable cooking method

Featuring tamer ingredients and more prosaic meats, the *cacciatora* of our days is, according to the **Treccani** Encyclopaedia, "...a descriptor for dishes especially typical of the Tuscany and Latium



regions, based on the aromas of sage, rosemary, wine and vinegar: *chicken, lamb, goat, abbacchio* (young lamb), etc". It is challenging to ascertain the origin of this delectable cooking method, but since it has **true cult status within our gastronomic heritage**, it can be pleasurable to explore **its intriguing interpretations** found here and there throughout Italy.

Take the example of chicken (traditionally 'free-range', with firm, flavoursome flesh capable of withstanding prolonged cooking). In the oldest **Piedmontese version** (published in Turin by the food writer **Francesco Capusso** in 1851), the fowl pieces are pan-fried in butter, thinly sliced lard, rosemary and bay leaves; then Grignolino or Freisa wine is added, with a generous handful of fresh or dried rehydrated mushrooms. To finish, abundant minced garlic and parsley are added, alongside three or four desalted anchovies, and a spoonful of flour mixed with fresh butter to form a paste, cooking for three or four minutes.

A protocol credited as the original **Tuscan country recipe** begins by pan-frying fowl pieces in oil, salt and pepper. A mirepoix of onion, celery and carrot is gently fried in a casserole with a bay leaf and finely minced rosemary and sage; the chicken is added, and a glass of red wine, which is allowed to evaporate. Peeled tomatoes are added and the stew is cooked on a moderate flame, with closed lid, for approximately 30 minutes, and seasoned with salt and pepper. It is served piping hot with added fresh minced parsley.

Interpretations from Latium, Sicily and Sardinia

Though **Latium** has its own version of chicken *cacciatora* (with vinegar, as well as wine, evaporating to flavour the meat), as **Ada Boni** writes: "Roman cuisine has distinctive recipes which flavour *abbacchio* to the maximum extent, and the foremost of these is ***abbacchio alla cacciatora***". A legendary offering of,

among others, the unforgettable **Sora Lella** in her eponymous restaurant on Rome's Tiber Island, it has as its bedrock the tender and rosy flesh of the *abbacchio* (ennobled with PGI recognition since 2009). Having fried garlic in oil until golden, one gently fries the *abbacchio* pieces in a casserole, adding roughly crumbled rosemary and sage and a small piece of chilli pepper. One then adds a glass of white wine, or better, a wine-and-vinegar mixture. After this evaporates, one adds a handful of flour mixed with hot water to form a thin batter (to thicken the stew), lowers the flame and closes the lid, mixing from time to time and adding more hot water if needed, if the sauce reduces too much; one allows the mixture to cook for approximately 45 minutes, adjusting flavour with salt and pepper. A few minutes before cooking is complete, one adds a 'broth' obtained from soaking 3 anchovy fillets in hot water, letting the flavour accumulate briefly before serving.

The Sicilian interpretation is distinguished for its Mediterranean flavours: chicken pan-fried with oil, garlic and chilli pepper is then enriched with capers, black olives and wild fennel, and white wine is added to evaporate. Juicy plum tomatoes are chopped and added, alongside a good spoonful of water, and the cooking is completed on a low flame. Among regional variants for **rabbit *cacciatora***, the **Sardinian *conillu a succhittu*** (rabbit in sauce) stands out, with its preliminary marinade of salt water and vinegar to render the meat even more delicious and flavoursome. After marinating for approximately two hours, the pieces of meat are drained, dried and browned in olive oil; finely minced garlic, onion, rosemary and bay leaves are added, and flavour is adjusted with salt and pepper. The lid is closed; olives, desalted capers and minced dried tomatoes are added, and the stew cooks for about 30 minutes, with occasional stirring.

Giancarlo Burri

Chicken cacciatora from Artusi's cookbook (recipe n. 208)

Preparation: *Chop a large onion and keep it in fresh water for over half an hour; dry it and pan-fry it in oil and lard. Set aside when cooked. Carve a cockerel into pieces, fry it in the remaining grease, and, when it is browned, add the aforementioned onion; season with salt and pepper and irrigate it with half a glass of San Givese or another red wine of the best quality; add abundant tomato sauce, and serve it after boiling it for five minutes. I warn you that this is not a dish for delicate stomachs.*





‘Novel foods’: choices proliferate...

by **Andrea Vitale**

Honorary Academician for Milano Navigli

The European Union has now also authorised human consumption of migratory locusts.

After EFSA’s (European Food Safety Authority) positive opinion regarding the **edibility of the insects commonly known as ‘yellow mealworms’** and scientifically termed *Tenebrio molitor* (‘night-prowling miller’), the European Union has now authorised human consumption of **migratory locusts: insects of the order Orthoptera and the family Acrididae**. This authorisation, as for the mealworms, followed an examination by a group of EFSA **scientists with expertise in nutrition, ‘novel foods’ and food allergens (NDA) invited by the European Commission to express an opinion on the safety of dried and frozen migratory locust preparations** to include them as a ‘novel food’ as defined by regulation (EU) 2015/2283. It seems superfluous to point

out that if a flour, such as that produced from the aforementioned mealworms, does not visually repel viewers to the point of deterring consumption (meaning that without perusing labels, anyone could easily eat a snack made of such flour), finding a large ‘grasshopper’ on one’s plate would clearly give pause even to the most ‘open-minded’ or ‘food-adventurous’ eaters.

Safely broadening the nutritional palette

This is for evident cultural reasons in respect of which human consumption of insects in Europe has heretofore not been contemplated: **indeed, they have relentlessly been fought for their invasive tendencies** or the propensity of some of them to proliferate in environments with poor hygiene. However, times change and **food needs increase**; hence there is no reason not to safely expand the nutritional palette. On the subject, it seems appropriate to point out that, if we transcend ancestral prejudices and the aesthetic shortcomings of a locust on our plates, **its principal components are protein, fat and**

fibre, particularly chitin, found in all crustaceans and even mushrooms (hence, entirely conventional ingredients); and that **consumption of these insects has been approved in three forms: frozen** without legs or wings; **dried** without legs or wings; and **ground** with legs and wings, but, in this case too, less visually repellent.

Locust consumption is not nutritionally disadvantageous

The EFSA has observed that contaminant concentrations in insects depend on the presence of such substances in their food (as with most foods that we eat), that **the novel food produced from locusts could be high in protein, and that being destined for sale in frozen, dried or ground forms, as a snack and/or an ingredient** in various food products, its consumption is not nutritionally disadvantageous. The panel of food safety experts also emphasised that considering the composition of this novel food and its suggested uses, use and toxicity studies present in the literature **do not raise safety problems**, though its consumption could activate a primary sensitivity to migratory locust proteins and could **cause allergic reactions in those allergic to crustaceans, dust mites and molluscs**. In light of the aforementioned EFSA opinion, the European Commission has therefore qualified the migratory locust as a novel food, authorising its human consumption but, as with all known allergens, requiring **mandatory allergen labelling** where ingestion could provoke allergic reactions. After mealworms and locusts, which insect will we ‘savour’ next?

