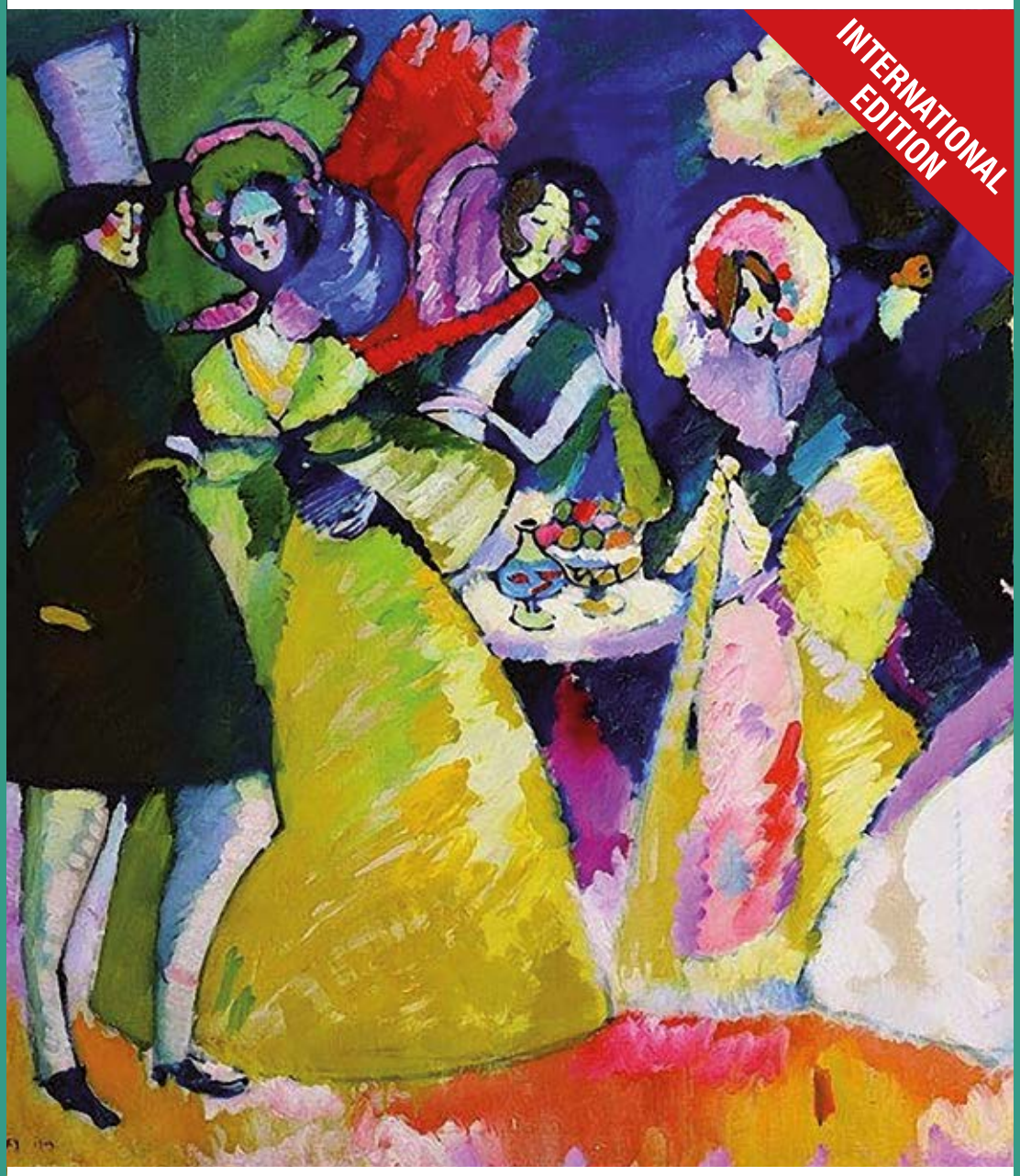
# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL EDITION



**ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA**

ISTITUZIONE CULTURALE DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

**FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI**

www.accademia1953.it

N. 344, JANUARY 2022

CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA
ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

JANUARY 2022 / N. 344

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MONTHLY MAGAZINE
REG. N. 4049 - 29-5-1956
TRIBUNALE DI MILANO



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***On the cover:*** *Graphic elaboration of* Group in Crinolines *(1909) by Wassily Kandinsky; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York*

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# What is a dish worth?

**by Paolo Petroni**
*President of the Accademia*

*Ingredients don't count for much, especially at a New Year's Eve dinner.*

What's a restaurant dish worth? **At first sight, reading the menu, it would seem to depend on the cost of the raw ingredients**. Pasta with *ragù* costs a bit more than tomato pasta; *fruits de mer* spaghetti cost even more because of the seafood, but only by a few euros. The situation changes radically if, instead, we encounter prized ingredients, for instance white truffle, Belon oysters, lobsters from our own seas, and Kobe beef. Yet it is not always thus; indeed, it almost never is in celebrated so-called 'starred' restaurants. There, **prices vary according to the chef's notoriety** and marketing strategies. A pigeon is a pigeon and costs very little, but, if transformed into the celebrated 'pigeon three ways', its menu price is astronomical. The same goes for the three- or five-tomato spaghetti so fashionable at the moment. A simple prawn may swell in price by the addition of one exotic ingredient with a strange or obscure name, or by proximity to smoked leek, liquorice and caper leaves.

*There's no relation between taste, ingredient cost and final price*

There's no relation, therefore, between taste, ingredient cost and the final price of a dish. Superlative *tagliatelle* masterfully complemented by a spectacular *ragù* cannot cost over 15 euros in an ordinary restaurant or *trattoria*, but could cost thrice that, perhaps with a snazzy added ingredient, in exalted restaurants. A noted three-starred restaurateur told me that **diners** don't pay for what they eat, but **pay to have hundreds of wine bottles available** (whether or not they order them), **crystal glasses, the finest tablecloths, qualified wait staff, 15 cooks in the kitchen, flowers** everywhere, staggering investments, and so on - but especially, pay for the chefs' mastery. That dish contains all this, not only *foie gras*, beef cheek, pigeon or coffee powder. **The same, perhaps a fortiori, applies in the wine world**. A bottle's value is due not only to vintage, production area and ageing, which clearly count for something; often, the cost is arbitrarily determined by the producer based on many factors including reviews in guides and newspapers and rarity of production.

*During the holidays, prices per dish have soared*

Prices per dish have especially soared during the Christmas and New Year holidays.
The custom of offering fixed menus for Christmas lunch and New Year's Eve dinner causes **all restaurants to increase prices**, and big names have vied in creating imaginative menus, whether innovative, classical or both, but always of excellent quality. A telegenic Milanese one-starred chef offered **a 650-euro New Year's Eve menu** that seems expensive, but cost barely half of what another famed Roman three-star chef concocted for his illustrious clients: **a 9-course meal costing 1300 euro per person**, which obviously, since New Year's Eve is not an evening to spend alone, means at least 2600 euros overall.
A happy new year to all!

# Oceans of Love

**by Vincenzo Lionetti**
*Budapest Academician*

*Advice for sustainable use.*

Underwater life has fascinated us since childhood, from **Jules Verne** with his *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* and the giant squid to **Herman Melville** with *Moby Dick* and the struggle between Captain Ahab and the huge white whale, a splendid literary metaphor for the inner battles which mark the life of every individual. Even above water, however, maritime fascination remains undiminished: the sweet melody of waves metronymically breaking on beaches; the vast flat horizons silhouetted over azures, greens, turquoises and cobalts flawlessly painted by the sea. But at table, too, the sea can be loved. How many precious gifts it offers: it is our planet's main habitat, in fact, occupying approximately 70% of its surface. Humans have learnt how to harvest and efficiently transfer these gifts to the table in an efficient manner - but not always.
**The FAO report *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture*** estimates that fishing will reach 204 million tonnes by 2030 (it accounted for 179 million in 2018: 15% less). **The most overfished seas are the Mediterranean and the Black Sea**, with 62.5% of their stock overfished; the south-eastern Pacific stands at 54.5%; the south-western Atlantic, at 53.3%. **In 2018, the most fished species was the anchovy**, with 7 million tonnes caught (out of 84.4 million tonnes fished overall). **Small-scale artisanal fishing pollutes less and creates more work than industrial fishing**, and is therefore more sustainable.

*The sea's need for protection is, by now, alarmingly clear*

The sea's need for protection is, by now, alarmingly clear. **The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines 17 Goals** to reach by that year. Goal

*Favignana tuna fishery*

n.14, regarding 'marine resources', aims to protect and favour sustainable use of oceanic and maritime resources, eliminating the causes of their growing degradation. Increased greenhouse gases heat oceans, changing their chemical composition. This phenomenon's worst consequences are water acidification, sea level rise, extreme weather and coastal erosion. The situation is aggravated by overfishing and pollution of marine habitats.

*Tuna fishing rates appear to be undergoing a beneficial reversal*

A small digression on tuna. The same FAO report states that harvesting of all tuna species has peaked, reaching approximately 7.9 million tonnes in 2018. However, in a beneficial apparent reversal, **two thirds of tuna stocks are now sustainably fished** (excellent news): a 10-point net increase in only two years, confirming the **efficacy of scrupulous fishery management** in a sector characterised by a high-value resource and a substantial excess in the capacities of some fishing fleets. Tuna, one of the 'kings of the sea', still provides work and a livelihood for thousands of fishing families and processing enterprises in our 'Beautiful Country', especially in Sicily. In the late 19th century, the Sicilian **Ignazio Florio** (a famed producer of Marsala wine) **revolutionised tuna fillet preservation methods** in the Favignana tuna fishery (now a museum) by replacing brine in glass jars with oil in tins. He also invented the famous twist-key tins (one of the successes at the Italian National Exposition of 1891 in Palermo). That innovation was highly beneficial to tuna preservation, transport and consumption.

*Some advice for sustainably and responsibly indulging our love of the sea*

In conclusion: **we love the sea** for its incredible beauties and the emotions it gives us, and for **its most precious gift: the immense variety of delicious fish** enlivening our tables. Fish is among the healthiest, most nutritious and least environmentally damaging foods in the world. To continue enjoying this love and allow the future generations to enjoy it as well, here are some modest but important 'user's guidelines': **habits which we all can, and should, adopt to protect the seas**, improving the health and sustainability of underwater habitats and therefore the safety and availability of the fish on our tables. We consumers can crucially affect the state of our seas through our habits and choices.

- **Never throw refuse**, especially plastic, into the sea.
- **Buy locally**, or at least as close to home as possible (for example, in Italy, favour Mediterranean mussels over frozen, packaged South American ones).
- **Respect minimum sizes** (for example, mackerel should be over 18cm; sole, 20cm; sardines, 11cm).
- **Experiment** with less-known species (e.g. garfish, amberjack, bonito).
- **Favour short-cycle species** (e.g. molluscs or smaller, fast-breeding fish, promoting swifter species regeneration than is possible for deep-sea fish with longer life cycles).
- **Be curious and responsible**. When possible, talk to your fishmonger, restaurateur or fisherman about these topics and assume responsibility for staying informed.

Sustainable Development Goal n.14, covering underwater life, is reachable if we take action. The sea and its fish thank you and are counting on you.

**Vincenzo Lionetti**

# Mulled wine:
## *the 'surprising aromatic'*

**by Morello Pecchioli**
*Honorary Academician for Verona*

*It warms the stomach and the heart; it fortifies while fighting infection and inflammation.*

It is blasphemy to disparage mulled wine as a mere 'hot wine' or dismiss it as a watered-down plebeian winter beverage. Mulled wine prepared according to hallowed protocols is a magic potion, a balm for the soul. **This fortifying draught is beloved nationwide and enjoyed between Advent and Carnival**, sold in Christmas markets, prepared by the Alpini mountain infantry under tents in city squares to raise money for charity or quaffed in mountain lodges where skiers warm themselves between a red track and a black one. Mulled wine ('mulled', etymologically uncertain, possibly means 'mixed' or 'crumbled', referring to the spices and other ingredients mixed into it) represents a doctrine with a priesthood and worshippers: the hope of a fragrant future to fortify all our hearts.

It is delicious in any winter, at any latitude - at least those where the cold creeps in. The Germans warm themselves with *glühwein* ('glowing wine'); the French, who should call it *vin brulé* ('burnt wine') as the Italians do, instead call it *vin chaud* ('hot wine'); the Nordics call it *glögg*, *gløgg* or *glögi*: spelling and inflections change, but the substance remains the same. In Denmark, the term *gløgg* indicates both cause and effect: the Yuletide mug of hot spiced wine, and the thoroughly intoxicated recipient of several. The same applies in the nearby Netherlands: *bisschopswijn* ('bishop's wine') indicates the drink and its drinker. North Macedonian mountain folk drink *vareno vino* ('boiled wine'); the Portugal, *vinho quente* ('hot wine') often includes Madeira or Port. In Turkey, piping-hot *sicak şarap* ('hot wine') is made with sweet red wine, sugar and citrus fruits.

*Red wine, sugar, cinnamon, cloves, lemon or orange zest*

**Various mulled wine recipes exist**, but the classic version includes red wine, sugar, cinnamon, cloves and lemon and/or orange zest. **Star anise and grated nutmeg are also accepted**. Water? Never. Whether hot or cold, watered-down wine deserves the name the Venetians give it: *vin putanèla* ('whore's wine').

The recent rehabilitation of mulled wine, liberated from its unjust reputation as a plebeian beverage, was accomplished by the authoritative British wine magazine *Decanter*, whose contents are treated as Gospel truth by wine buffs. In an article called "Sassicaia for your mulled wine", *Decanter* suggested making mulled wine from a 2003 Sassicaia, a wine whose current cost (including Amazon discount) is €395 per bottle plus €4.99 for shipping: approximately €50 per glass. **Recommending exceptional, exorbitantly priced wines, the British magazine 'ennobled' mulled wine**, redeeming the popular winter folk drink that granny or auntie once gave to children at the first hint of a cough or a runny nose: **a more effective remedy than paracetamol or aspirin**. The blast of

spice and booze left the zonked-out kid smiling with comatose bliss, but also defeated the microbes. Those were times when one didn't obsess over wine quality, also because the only kind available was whatever came out of the demijohn bought from the local grower: wine born of dubious grapes, sold affordably by measure.

The international recognition conferred by *Decanter* has vindicated the sublime 'burnt' wine, with its long history, besides improving its visibility and sales in person and online; but its imprimatur was not necessary to understand that **excellent mulled wine comes from excellent wine: full-bodied** and able to hold its own despite a barrage of fire, sugar, spices and citrus threatening to overwhelm it. A great mulled wine is like an orchestra conductor who ensures harmony between all the instruments. Thus **highly acidic wines are unsuitable**, especially white ones which are marvellous chilled but slug it out with citrus fruits when 'burnt'.

*The benefits of hot spiced wine were already known two thousand years ago*

The benefits of hot spiced wine were already known two thousand years ago and more, when the **Roman empire was crazy for *conditum paradoxum*, the 'surprising aromatic'**. Its 'label' was Roman, but its origin was Greek.

Did Spartan mothers not assiduously rub wine and other ingredients into their children's skin to promote robust growth? In his *De Re Coquinaria*, **Gavius Apicius**, the Pellegrino Artusi of the Caesars, included a recipe for *conditum paradoxum*, meticulously specifying the amount of wine and the proportions of honey, resin, saffron, finely chopped dates including the stones, and pepper involved. He suggested it for guests at the end of a meal, as a digestive: the equivalent of *sgroppino*, a modern Italian digestive lemon sorbet cocktail.

**Centuries later, in monastery kitchens**, monks were busy stirring hippocras in cauldrons: the selfsame *conditum* was thus christened in honour of **Hippocrates**, the Greek physician from the 5th century BC. Its nature and purported properties remained unchanged: **a medicinal, anti-inflammatory, disinfecting and carminative wine that warms the heart and stomach**. Its ingredients were cinnamon, ginger, honey, cloves, cardamom and galangal, a rhizome closely related to ginger and cardamom.

**The British have adored mulled wine** ever since the Roman legions brought wine and vineyards as far as Caledonia, modern Scotland. There's no 'Merry Christmas' without a hearty cup of mulled wine. Through the centuries, its recipe has gradually evolved, changing names and adapting to the preferences of the time. **In Victorian Britain, spiced wine was a ritual, a celebration**. It was not yet 'mulled wine' but 'smoking bishop', celebrated by **Charles Dickens** in *A Christmas Carol*. When Ebenezer Scrooge, reformed by the spectres, abandons the petty avarice that would have damned him and embraces an incredulous Bob Cratchit promising him a raise, he adds: "and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob!"

Not only bishops smoked in **Victorian Britain**. Every variant of hot aromatised wine bore the name of some exalted prelate, probably because of the scalding drink's purpureous hue. If 'smoking bishop' was made of red wine, Port, sugar, and mixed spices including the indispensable cloves and candied orange and lemon peel, 'smoking archbishop' used Bordeaux. The higher the priestly rank, the better the wine: 'smoking cardinal' used champagne and Rhenish wine; 'smoking pope' used Burgundian Pinot Noir. Lowest in the hierarchy was the 'smoking beadle', with ginger and raisins.

*Tasting criteria in mulled wine contests*

Contests judge mulled wine according to the following parameters: it must have restorative, warming, disinfecting and expectorant effects, and combat colds as a medicinal remedy. **The tannins in the wine perform an antiviral action; cloves are potent antibacterials**, and **citrus zests are antiseptic and fortifying**. Fashion victims may drape it in gold leaf, affordably available online. Gold is flavourless, doesn't alter taste and is non-toxic, but pleases the eye and introduces a certain ritual flair. It also has the advantage of stoking one's imagination and enthusiasm.

**Morello Pecchioli**

# Pantelleria: its terraces, *its gardens, its wines*

**by Federica Rossi**
*Franco Marenghi Study Centre*

*This rocky, windy volcanic isle has become a large and productive garden.*

In certain areas, agriculture is difficult, arduous and almost 'extreme', but when it works, it bears impressive fruit, rewarding all those efforts.
**Agriculture in Pantelleria produces not only crops but also beauty**, while forming the landscape in a highly distinctive manner exemplifying true sustainability and adaptability to adverse conditions. This rocky, windy volcanic isle's strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean has favoured centuries of settlement, transforming it from a sterile place of delirium and expiation, as described by **Ovid** and **Seneca**, to the enchanting, fertile garden island found in 19th-century descriptions by **Andrew Bigelow** and others. How this happened is explicable through human ingenuity and the innate capacity of those who work the land to invent adaptive strategies for even the most challenging situations. In this case, **adaptation to scarcity and a hostile climate occurred 'unconventionally'**, yet, upon reflection, **in full harmony with our most modern principles of salvaging and using what we already have**, transforming potential obstacles into prodigious resources.

*Terraces made with volcanic rocks act as windbreaks*

80% of the island's surface is covered with terraces and walls built with volcanic rocks which, left where they lay, would have occupied precious fertile soil. The

function of the terraces on Pantelleria goes beyond creating and maintaining plots, and includes their wind-breaking action, which **protects plants from mechanical wind stress**, reducing evaporation and **thereby limiting water consumption**. Wind speed is dramatically reduced, increasing the humidity of the air surrounding the **crops, chosen among low-vigour species: capers, vines, and often olive trees**. Caper bushes are naturally low-lying, while **the growth of olive trees and vines is expertly manipulated to keep them low** using experiential but physiologically rooted knowledge. This empiricism is only apparently untutored, being based on a **profound understanding of basic physical and physiological processes**.

Pruning, which usually rejuvenates plants by eliminating old growth, instead simulates ageing in these cases, reducing vigour and water conduction. Olive trees, which could react badly to aggressive pruning, are instead laterally trained.

*The island's most distinctive peculiarity is 'u jardinu'*

But the island's most distinctive peculiarity is *u jardinu*, as the **local dialect calls the Pantelleria garden**, of which there are numerous examples with varying degrees of maintenance. **This round wall, created from the same dark rocks used for terraces, encloses a single orange or lemon tree**. These were originally planted near their homes by emigrants from nearby Sicily, who, away from their homeland, transplanted them as sources of fruit, vitamins and symbolism. Unable to reduce their fronds because citrus trees resist this, they protected these precious plants with walls. The idea was extraordinarily ingenious: **the microclimate inside the garden is completely isolated from the surrounding atmosphere**. Irrespective of external circumstances, however extreme, wind is absent: this greatly reduces water consumption. **The rocks' dark hue and thermal inertia also affect the diurnal and nocturnal energy balance**. During the day, the sun warms the external rocks, while the internal ones remain colder, allowing the still air inside the wall to condense. At night, instead, the heat accumulated by the external stones throughout the day is dissipated by the internal ones, which remain warmer than the outer ones, reducing temperature changes within the enclosure.

**Nature and humans have thereby formed a winning partnership** which has made the island into a place where the sea complements the beauty of the landscape, attracting not only seaside but also food and wine tourism. 80% of the island is now a National Park.

*Stringent rules regulate the production of CDO Moscato from Pantelleria*

**UNESCO has even elevated Pantelleria's head-trained bush vines to the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage**, recognising their environmental, productive and social value. The extraordinary organoleptic properties of **Zibibbo wines** from the **island's main cultivar**, also known as 'Muscat of Alexandria', are enhanced by intense sun exposure and late ripening.

Stringent regulations govern the production of **Pantelleria's CDO Moscato and CDO Moscato Spumante (sparkling), exclusively produced by the island's famed wineries, and of the ancient and fragrant Passito** in its various denominations. The grapes are allowed to dry on the vine or on frames to maximise sun exposure and concentrate their sugars to the level required by the exacting production protocols.

Quality, beauty and sustainability characterise this isolated territory which, through multicultural traditions and *genius loci*, embodies a very timely model of resilient 'climate-smart' agriculture combined with the versatility deriving from the ecosystem services developed in that environment.

**Federica Rossi**

# What is a blast chiller
## *and how does it work?*

**by Roberto Zottar**
*Gorizia Delegate*

*An appliance in high demand, even for domestic use.*

The blast chiller may have a daunting name - no less in Italian (*abbattitore*, with its abattoir overtones) and German (*Schnellabkühlerschockfroster*) - but merely **chills food swiftly**: a custard or a consommé just off the boil can be quickly brought to 3°C ('positive chilling'), thereby preventing bacterial proliferation, which is highest between 70°C and 20°C. **This thermal shock also halts evaporation from the food, preserves its quality**, fragrance, colour, flavour, texture and organoleptic properties, and **triples its fridge life**. Its operative principle is simple, though it contradicts the dictum of never placing hot food in the fridge but waiting until it has cooled. Home fridges are indeed not designed for cooling hot foods, but for preserving foods below 10 degrees. However, the blast chiller is specialised in rapidly cooling hot or warm foods to low positive or very low negative (-20°C / -40°C) temperatures. It replaces neither fridges nor freezers, but can rather be defined as **a device for preparing food for storage in fridges or freezers**.

*Inside, it harbours temperatures able to cool or freeze hot foods*

Externally, it resembles an ordinary freezer, but its interior in fact harbours **temperatures potentially below -45°C** which can cool hot foods or freeze them **very rapidly**. Powerful ventilators internally circulate air, preventing water from evaporating and crystallising. **Food** cooled or frozen within a blast chiller **keeps its original physical features**, making this an ideal tool for all kinds of desserts as well as vegetables and fish.
Until recently, they were only used in professional kitchens; but **various domestic-use models have lately been commercialised**: around the size of a large microwave oven, they are quite expensive, retailing for €1500 and above. To appreciate their use more fully, however, one should clearly understand the differences between refrigeration, freezing and flash freezing.

*The differences between refrigeration, freezing and flash freezing*

In the food preservation context, **refrigeration** means bringing foods to **a temperature between 0°C and 10°C**. This slows, but doesn't halt, spoilage, so refrigerated food **only keeps for a few days** or a fortnight at most. This is what we do daily with home fridges.
**Freezing** is a **sub-zero preservation method**: food is brought to temperatures **between -7°C and -12°C** (this can reach -18°C for fish and meat). **Thawing frozen food partially erodes nutritional** and organoleptic properties, especially in foods with a less resilient cellular structure. Freezing, though an effective method for extending food storage times, **cannot block 100% of enzyme activity**, gradually decreasing food quality. Our fridges' 3-star freezer compartments can indeed implement the freezing process, which is not instantaneous or even swift (many hours may elapse before the food's core temperature equals that of the freezer compartment) and may cause **ice macrocrystals** to form inside frozen foods, damaging their molecular structure, causing **loss of nutritional value** upon thawing. This explains why thawed food often releases a considerable amount of water, deriving

from those large ice crystals and containing the food's nutrients. On the positive side, **almost any food, raw or cooked**, can be frozen and therefore swiftly made ready to eat, so freezing may be an acceptable solution for certain household foods. The **difference between freezing and flash freezing** mainly centres on temperature and time. Perfect **flash freezing**, which mostly requires **an industrial setting**, rapidly brings food to at least -18°C (or much lower): cooling speed causes the formation of water microcrystals which do not damage the food's biological structure. Its organoleptic and nutritional properties (proteins, vitamins, carbohydrates etc), structure and flavour thus remain almost identical to those before freezing. Any **fresh food** can be flash-frozen, e.g. freshly picked **vegetables** and freshly caught **fish**. **Once thawed, flash-frozen foods are as fresh and flavoursome as they were before freezing**. Thus flash freezing means ultra-fast, efficient freezing and is the best preservation method if combined with a scrupulous respect for the 'cold chain' throughout the food's journey to the consumer's table. **3-star domestic freezers allow us to preserve already flash-frozen foods**.

*The spread of household blast chillers is partially due to increased raw fish consumption*

So much for technicalities. The recent spread of domestic-use blast chillers is due not only to passionate home cooks but also to increased raw fish consumption, **whether in carpaccio or sushi and sashimi form**. **Parasites which may lurk** in fish **are destroyed by a minimum of 24 hours at -20°C or below**.

The best household blast chillers go beyond refrigeration and flash freezing, and can deploy various temperatures from -30°C to positive temperatures even up to +80°C. Thus users could **have reliably creamy home-made ice creams by setting a constant temperature of -12°C** or make yoghurt at +38°C or maintain a perfect home leavening chamber with a stable temperature of 27°C, ideal for complex leavened goods such as panettone. **A blast chiller is indispensable for creating the so-called 'modern desserts'**. By manipulating temperature, one can use inserts which may be creamy or gelatinous when consumed, but which, in order to be positioned within a multi-layered cake incorporating different consistencies, must be flash-frozen and suspended in layers of *namelaka* (a highly fashionable Japanese milk, gelatine and cream froth with other flavours e.g. chocolate etc) or **custards or other cold creamy substances**; the entire cake is then flash-frozen to prepare it for final decoration (extremely glossy, brightly coloured icing is often used). Blast chillers are also very useful even for making **simple boiled courgettes or spinach**, which, if rapidly chilled to +3°C right after cooking, **will remain bright green** and stay perfect **up to 4 days after being cooked**.

## *Other functions of blast chillers*

The ability to maintain stable positive temperatures can even allow blast chillers to serve as **low-temperature ovens** (between +50°C and +80°C) or drying chambers.

Another very useful function is **controlled thawing**. Mismanaged thawing may sometimes undermine efforts to protect quality during preparation: we run this risk when we thaw food in a microwave oven or other device for lack of time, causing food to be partially cooked in some areas but still frozen in others. Controlled thawing is **ideal because it preserves appearance, texture and colour, reinstating food to its pre-frozen condition**.

**For wine lovers, there is a function which can chill a bottle by one degree per minute**, permitting immediate tastings without advance planning.

The latest blast chiller models **even have 'ready-to-eat' programmes**: we leave a flash-frozen dish, such as a previously made lasagna, in the machine, programming it with a consumption time. The system keeps the food frozen and then automatically begins thawing it and returning it to an ideal temperature for consumption, subsequently keeping it warm if we're late. A function designed with all of us in mind, since it is always wonderful to return home and find food ready and waiting for us, especially if we have prepared it with our own hands.

**Roberto Zottar**