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On the cover: *Graphic elaboration of* Maschera *(Mask, 1911) by Ulisse Caputo; private collection*

A slow reboot

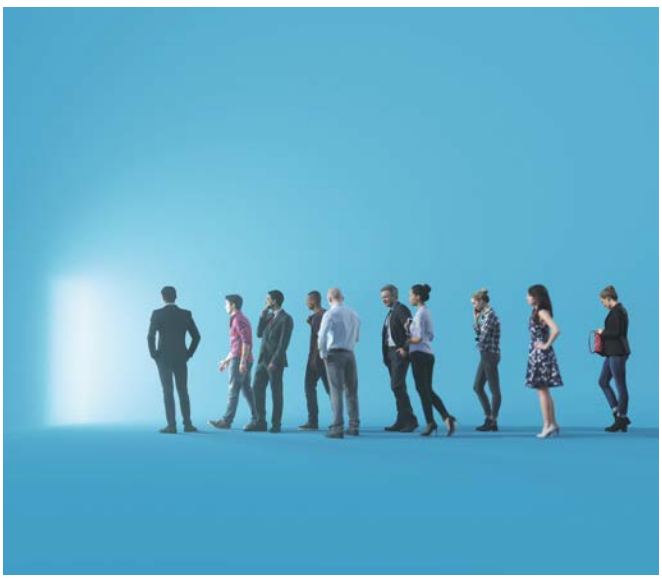
by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

Despite reopening permissions, emotional motivation is clearly lacking, and a 'waiting mood' prevails.

There are **buzzwords, expressions, idioms which we hear so often that they grate on us (linguists call them 'worn-out phrases')**, and they often lose their meaning and importance. Indeed, sometimes we aren't fully aware of their meaning. In recent months, newspapers and televisions have bombarded us with 'resiliency', 'sustainability', 'stimulus' and 'surges', and exhortations to 'keep our guard up', 'stay grounded' and withstand the 'change of pace', and to 'square the circle' without resorting to 'sleeve-tugging'. A long-standing classic is 'there's light at the end of the tunnel', now gradually mutating to 'we're on our way out of the tunnel'.

Long have we desired an escape from the tunnel

The long-awaited 'way out' **now seems truly imminent**. Exactly a year ago, we wrote: "We trust that the vaccines will swiftly solve all these problems, hoping that after a slow start, vaccination campaigns will pick up speed". We know how things went: speed was picked up and vaccines were administered, even thrice, to the vast majority of the population. The Omicron variant, though highly contagious, is often asymptomatic or causes only mild symptoms. Nowadays, a light cough or minor sore throat suffices to frighten us: we've almost forgotten that formerly, the yearly 'flu kept us bedridden for a week with fever, muscle aches and lethargy, not to mention the infamous 'Asian 'flu' which confined half of Italy to bed in the late 1950s. So the light, this time, is decidedly visible: **indicators are more promising, and even virologists appear optimistically inclined**. For the moment, however (this is a particularly long tunnel!), we remain somewhat in the dark, because fear and our many infected friends and relatives forced into boring quarantines have stoked considerable unease which, notwithstanding re-



opening permissions, has emptied cities just as, and sometimes more than, the 'hard lockdown' did.

Restaurants are open but, with few exceptions, empty

Restaurants are open but, with few exceptions, empty. Several thousands have preferred to close, whether for multiple days a week, or for lunch, or permanently. To add insult to injury, **raw material costs have skyrocketed** unexpectedly and unjustifiably (the paper on which our magazine is printed now costs twice as much), alongside those of petrol, gas and electricity, further bludgeoning many businesses. This has gone in step with **rising restaurant food prices and falling ingredient quality**. Beleaguered by scarce clientele, housebound Covid-stricken staff and higher costs across the board, restaurateurs **increasingly resort to cost-effective dishes: hence uninteresting, repetitive, abbreviated menus**. There's a palpable **absence of emotional motivation and a 'waiting mood'**, alongside the hope of a recovery which must be just around the corner, next spring. These are some of the reasons why the Academy will wait a few months before revising and printing the new 2022 edition of the *Good Table Guide*. **We take heart: it's almost over**. As Eduardo de Filippo said: "*ha da passà 'a nuttata!*" - "hard nights must pass!".

Foraging

by Tullio Sammito
Ragusa Academician

Roving through fields or forests in search of wild edibles: a new fashion with an archaic feel.

Today, Italians who read or hear the borrowed English term 'foraging', which literally means 'roaming through fields and forests in search of wild edibles', may be tempted to inveigh against the diffusion of superfluous Anglicisms. Here, however, we'll discuss another theme. Since the 19th century and for decades thereafter, our forebears wandered into the countryside picking rocket, dandelion and wild chicory for their salads. Grandmothers did it through necessity, to avoid wasting anything, especially something that grew for free without prior efforts with spades and rakes. Gathering is within human nature, and until widespread industrialisation in the late 19th century, **rural daily meals were 70-80% wild**. Indeed, looking back over the centuries. we encounter an etymologically erudite, now obsolete word once much in vogue, though clearly just among scholars and aristocrats: ***alimurgia***, meaning **the science which acknowledges the usefulness of eating certain edible wild plants**, especially during famines or simply for health reasons. More recently, for instance in the past few decades, with increasing urban density, the economic shift to mass consumerism and the consequent abundance of shops of any type and size, all the bounty from forests, fields, bluffs and slopes has been 'demoted' to simple 'weeds', **forgetting not only our familiarity with our closest natural habitats, but also tastes and textures**.

Scandinavian chefs have given the undergrowth a starring role

Today, youth accustomed to supermarkets, convenience and consumerism are **reversing course**: using the trendily Anglophone term 'foraging', **they've returned to searching through the undergrowth. It all began with the establishment of the New Nordic Cuisine (as espoused by the Noma restaurant in Copenaghen, where lichens, berries and barks are exalted to haute cuisine)**.
Scandinavian chefs have upended the gastroverse. It is through this particular tendency of theirs that the undergrowth has attained a starring role, in the wake of Nordic cuisine but also ancient, and now newly re-explored, traditions. **Fir pesto, bark broth, lichen beer**: following in the footsteps of New Nordic Cuisine, chefs around the world are engaging in reflections on food biodiversity, all seeking the advantages of a diet based on mosses, conifers and pollens. This was enhanced by the effects of the econom-

ic crisis and new ideas about wellness and food hygiene.

Today, the culinary uses of wild foods are garnering ever-growing interest

In Italy, this phenomenon has taken a particular form, obviously shaped by its specific social, economic, natural and geographical environment.
The movement has diverged into two main directions: one, more consonant with traditional foraging, involves searching in fields or forests; the other, which has taken root and is flourishing in vast urban centres, consists of frequent refuelling at 'hives', meaning structures, shops or other areas in some way bound to and directly supplied by producers. Followers of the new tendency include **celebrated restaurants, whose dishes have recently bloomed with multicoloured plants: crunchy daisies, fragrant acacia blossoms and sweet wood sorrel. A new palette of organoleptic sensations and novel ingredients awaits discovery**; the preservation and uses of wild food is rapidly gaining interest among every social class.
Everyone's priority is to **improve dietary health**. There are different and varied methods of so doing, with ever more proselytes: some, inspired by Nordic cuisine and modish primitivism, erroneously believe that eating wild food is invariably healthier; others dive deep and investigate cultural and anthropological dimensions. Psychology is a determining factor in both cases, and many are fascinated by the active approach to procuring food: a 'do-it-yourself frontier' leading from supermarket shelves to farmers' markets and then, passing through restaurants, to the woods.

Italian foraging follows the so-called 'conservative' pattern

Italian foraging follows the so-called 'conservative' pattern. In the past decade it has **found its maximum expression in Brianza**, thanks to a researcher, **Valeria Mosca**. She began by organising **tastings of dishes based on wild edibles** and promoting the sustainable philosophy of the 'original' foraging. Ethnobotany and environmental sciences are the foundations of her work. **In this endeavour, one must be a well-prepared, expert forager**: adding wild edibles to food could even be dangerous, writes Valeria Mosca. We all know the famous fungal aphorism serially attributed to various caustically witty luminaries throughout history: "All mushrooms are edible, but some can only be eaten once". It's true. We must tread carefully through this field! For example, *Polygonatum multiflorum* (Solomon's seal, David's harp) is a toxic plant, but through specific fermenting methods it can become edible and even a delicacy. And the **rhizomes (roots) of many plants can now be made into crunchy crisps** to serve as finger food. A final pertinent example in this intriguing category: the flagship dishes from Valeria Mosca's Food Lab include **risotto with a fresh extract of ribwort plantain**, which flourishes in the undergrowth of every park from Monza to Milan, rich in vitamin K, whose coagulant effect allows it to replace butter or cheese in making the rice creamy.

Nature in the service of cuisine

Nature in the service of cuisine! In every Italian region one can walk through fields and woods looking for wild food and find, for example, rocket or dandelion in central Italy, or, in the South as far as Sicily, around two hundred species of edible plants, whose best-known include borage, chard (silverbeet), chicory, wild cardoon, cress, purslane, wild asparagus, black mustard, Mediterranean mustard, wild radish (*raricedda*) and wild spinach (*agghiti*).
In the past and since time immemorial, gathering wild herbs and berries was part of a necessarily bucolic subsistence economy. However, **today foraging is exceedingly 'cool'**. This revival has two different phenomena as its main motivators: the first, bound in a sense with the past, has roots in the economy, specifically the crisis which, since the first decade of the 21st century, has mutated but still seems never to have ended; the second, social and cultural, is the **new-found conscientiousness about raw materials, biodiversity and sustainability**. It's a bit like how children first visiting a farm discover that they aren't lilac as in Milka ads: a revelation. For young couples it may mean visiting farms outside town, perhaps for a tasting of zero-food-mile products. Indubitably, the concept of eating 'weeds' and even trees no longer raises eyebrows: even towering trees, such as linden, birch, spruce or beech. They surround us; to be sure, **they have unfamiliar flavours**, but few would have imagined that **inner bark, leaves, lymph and resin** are not only edible but **also delicious**!

Tullio Sammito

Dining with serendipity

by Flavio Dusio
Novara Academician

Chance gestures and discoveries that revolutionised food and cooking.

The term 'serendipity' is a **neologism describing the discovery of something unsought and unexpected** while seeking something else. 'Serendip' is an ancient name for Ceylon, today Sri-Lanka. The word was coined by the writer Sir **Horace Walpole**, 4th Earl of Orford (1717-1797), famous for his voluminous correspondence replete with erudite and well-researched disquisitions. In one of these, within a letter written on 28 January 1754 to **Horace Mann**, an English friend residing in Florence, Walpole notes the discovery of a curious Persian fable called *The Three Princes of Serendip*, wherein the three sons of **Jafer**, king of Serendip, undertake voyages to explore the world and thereby discover, by chance or intuition, things that they hadn't been seeking. The story describes the three princes' discoveries as intuitions triggered by chance but aided by their keen powers of observation. It was in the 1930s that **Walter Bradford Cannon**, who taught philosophy at Harvard Medical School, adopted the term 'serendipity' in the scientific field.

Ice lollies, teflon and saccharin were discovered thanks to fortuitous events

Several episodes are germane to our main topic, starting with the **discovery of the ice lolly** by an 11-year-old boy, **Frank Epperson**, of San Francisco, who forgot a glass of water mixed with soda powder with a stirring stick in it on his porch one winter, and came back to find an ice lolly. It was patented only in 1924, twenty years after that episode. In 1878, the German chemist **Constantin Fahlberg** was investigating the chemical composition of coal tar. Returning home for dinner, perhaps without washing his hands, he bit into his bread, finding it very sweet and then bitter. That same evening he realised that the substance he'd inadvertently ingested was produced by oxidation of o-toluenesulphonamide. This was **the birth of saccharine**: the first sweetener that gladdened the hearts of diabetics for many decades, until the discovery of aspartame as an alternative. It was the chemist **James Schlatter** who was testing a potential anti-ulcer drug when he unexpectedly discovered a very sweet substance on his finger. It was 1965, and

that sweetener, which conquered the world, was indeed **aspartame**.
Another example of serendipitous discovery is **teflon**, the non-stick pan coating. In 1938, working for DuPont, the chemist **Roy J. Plunkett** was trying to find a new refrigerating fluid besides the well-known freon. He was convinced that he would succeed by polymerising tetrafluoroethylene, but the cylinder used for his experiment became unexpectedly coated in a waxy powder which proved "heat-resistant and chemically inert". This was the birth of teflon, the non-stick wonder, patented in 1941.

Saffron and rice also allegedly met serendipitously

Yet in our opinion the most sensational and perhaps best-known such discovery is the **yellow 'Milanese risotto'**. The story is set in the second half of the 16th century. At the time, a famous glass painter from Leuven, **Valerius Diependale** (also known as 'Valerius of Flanders'), was working on the stained-glass windows of Milan Cathedral depicting the life of St Helen, mother of the emperor **Constantine**, left unfinished by **Rainaldo d'Umbria**. The master had an apprentice nicknamed 'Saffron', due to his habit of adding a pinch of saffron to any colour to render it more vivid and brilliant. One day, Valerius, irked by this habit, allegedly told the boy, convinced of saying something implausible: "With your insistence on adding saffron everywhere, you'll end up making us eat it". Saffron secretly loved Laura, his master's daughter, but she loved the son of the owner of a tavern that she and her father frequented, where their wedding preparations were under way. On 8 September 1574, everything was ready at the Betolin del Pret, in the Camposanto, behind the cathedral, where the workshops were, when the young assistant, consumed by envy towards the innkeeper's son and embittered by unrequited love, thought he might ruin the party by spilling some saffron into the white, buttery risotto as it cooked. Instead of disappointment, this **produced amazement and admiration in the diners confronted with such a delicious, golden dish. This was the unintentional birth** of what will always be a gastronomic icon: Milanese risotto.
Some gastronomists date the birth of saffron risotto thirty-odd years earlier, attributing it to the scholarly cook **Cristoforo di Messisbugo**, *scalco ducale* (overseer of the ducal kitchens) at the Este court in Ferrara, where he also served as a steward and financial administrator of court activity. Of his tractate *Banchetti, composizione di vivande e apparecchio generale* (*Banquets, Victual Preparation and General Arrangement)*, published posthumously in 1549, the third and final part contains 323 recipes in six categories, and some would like to scry the birth of saffron risotto in one of these. **In fact, what we find is a risotto *"alla ciciliana"*** ('Sicilian-style'): rice boiled in fatty broth, enriched with egg, sugar and saffron.
We can readily perceive that this is quite far from a real risotto, whose rice is toasted in fat and cooked through absorption of broth and addition of saffron, and finally rendered creamy (*mantecato*) with butter and grated *grana* cheese.

Flavio Dusio

The wonders of avocado

by Giancarlo Burri
Padua Academician

A splendid combination of delectable flavour, gastronomic versatility and health benefits.

Eating avocado is, by now, almost a fad: thanks to a wildly successful marketing campaign upheld by the influential imprimatur of several nutritionists, it has become Italy's best-loved tropical fruit in recent years (and has been in the 'shopping basket' of ISTAT, Italy's National Institute of Statistics, since 2018). A fruit-bearing plant in the family *Lauraceae*, the avocado *(Persea americana* Mill.) was encountered by Europeans while exploring Central American areas now known as Mexico and Guatemala, where it was already part of the local Aztec and Maya diet.

Naturalists in the entourage of the *conquistadores* gave rave reviews, such as that of **Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés** (*Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, 1526): "On dry land, there are certain trees called pears, which are unlike those in Spain... but no less appreciated, and in colour and form, [the fruits] do resemble pears, and their skin is rather thicker, but softer, and in the middle they contain a seed like a peeled chestnut… around the seed there is a delicate membrane, and between that and the skin is a liquid or paste very similar to butter, which is a good food with a delicious flavour, such that those who obtain such fruits value and store them. These

pears go very well with cheese; they are gathered early, unripe, and kept; and thereafter they ripen and attain the perfect condition to be eaten".

"It nourisheth and strengtheneth the body, corroborating the spirits and procuring lust exceedingly"

W. Hughes, physician to **Charles II**, visited Jamaica in 1672, and wrote that avocado was: "One of the most rare and pleasant fruits of the island. It nourisheth and strengtheneth the body, corroborating the spirits and procuring lust exceedingly". The reference to lust is not casual: in the Aztecs' language, Nahuatl, the word *ahuacatl*, whence derives 'avocado', means 'testicle', because of the fruit's suggestive shape; and **it was credited with aphrodisiacal properties, such that it was also called 'the fruit of love'** (in Spain, archaic Catholic priests prohibited it for this obvious visual innuendo).

The two most widely sold avocado varieties are the **Hass**, with rough skin tending towards a brown/black hue when ripe, and buttery, intensely flavoured pulp; and the larger, less aromatic **Fuerte**, with thinner dark-green skin. Both are **also grown, with excellent results, in Sicily and Calabria**. Commercial availability begins between late October and early November and continues until April, and it is wise to pay attention to labelling regarding transport method: by ship or by air.

By ship means that the fruit was picked unripe and **ripened during the voyage**, whereas **by air** indicates that the fruit **was picked at the right moment** and very quickly transported: **its final flavour is clearly affected by these transport systems**, with air being advantageous.

It has decidedly interesting nutritional properties

Besides it pleasant flavour, the avocado possesses decidedly interesting nutritional properties: it contains **minerals** including potassium, magnesium and calcium; it is a good source of **vitamins** C, D and K and all B-group vitamins, and though low in sugar, it is **calorie-dense**: 238 Kcal/100g, deriving predominantly from its fat content. This should not be worrisome, since those fats are mostly **omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids** (also present in fish), with well-known health benefits: cardioprotective, anti-inflammatory, neuroprotective and, thanks to its antioxidant action, useful against the formation of 'bad' cholesterol (LDL). For its fat content, 23g per 100g of fresh fruit, **avocado pulp was used on many ships as a butter substitute in the 18th century**, spread on hardtack, and thus named 'midshipman's butter'.

Avocado-based sauces dress the dishes of many starred chefs

If **guacamole**, made of avocado, lime, green chillies and salt, **is its most internationally known gastronomic interpretation**, the renowned creative flair of Italian chefs give avocado a role in many delectable preparations. Chef **Stefano Baiocco**, whose restaurant Villa Feltrinelli in Gargnano (Brescia) has two Michelin stars, has **a recipe for trout salad with avocado** and green apple, *guanciale* (cured pork jowl) and puffed quinoa, while in the starred restaurant Joia in Milan, **Pietro Leemann** prepares his dish 'Wild': **white asparagus segments over avocado paste** with ramson foam and a green asparagus and tapioca sauce, surrounded by meadow herbs and edible flowers.

Moreno Cedroni (Madonnina del Pescatore, Senigallia), among the most innovative starred chefs on the international level, prepares **octopus tentacles** seasoned with *salmoriglio* (a lemony garlic-herb sauce) and briefly grilled, served with miso-marinated cauliflower topped with octopus mayonnaise, all **on a bed of avocado sauce**.

In Glicine, a restaurant in the Hotel Santa Caterina in Amalfi (Salerno) with one Michelin star, **Giuseppe Stanzione** presents his fascinating **squid tagliatelle**: thin squid strips steamed sous vide, arranged in a nest and **drizzled with avocado mayonnaise**, resting on cubes of fresh cucumber and salted lemon pulp, garnished with coriander and parsley sprouts and dusted with powdered squid ink and raw oil.

Pet owners beware: avocado contains the **fungicidal toxin persin**, considered generally harmless to humans but dangerous for domestic animals.

Giancarlo Burri

Hooked

by Claudio Tarchi
San Francisco Delegate

In his new book, Michael Moss develops the theme of addiction to foods that the large multinationals foist on unknowing consumers using sophisticated techniques.

Michael Moss, winner of the 2010 Pulitzer prize, wrote a very successful book in 2013: *Salt, Sugar, Fat*. It described how fried potatoes, sugary drinks and breakfast cereals are scientifically designed to make consumers addicted. His new book, *Hooked*, further develops the theme of addiction to foods which large multinationals foist on unknowing consumers by using sophisticated techniques.
In America, food habits have radically changed in the past 40 years, since **enormous portions with low nutritional value are common. This combination has brought the obesity rate to 42%**. Highly processed food has two salient features: affordability and convenience. Then again, these two characteristics by themselves don't appear to explain the speed of the changes which have so swiftly upended food habits. There must be more.

Fast food is as addictive as alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs

Researching the causes of this phenomenon, Moss discovered that fast food is as addictive as alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs: 23% of those who try heroin become addicted to it, the figure being 17% for cocaine and 15% for alcohol.
Could the food that we hurriedly ingest have been designed, produced

and promoted with the very goal of making us addicted?
The tobacco directors at the Philip Morris multinational had already warned their counterparts in the food business that they would face lawsuits because of the obesity caused by their products, just as they had done for the carcinogenic effects of cigarettes. Their advice? They must strive to reduce consumers' dependence on salt, sugar and fat, which rendered their products irresistible: make their snacks less delicious! Inhaled nicotine reaches the brain in ten seconds or so, but with **sugar, for example, the effects are felt** 20 times faster, because nicotine must enter the bloodstream, whereas the effects of sugar and salt are perceived **approximately half a second** after their contact with taste buds on the tongue. While taste is assuredly important (we have 10,000 taste buds), Moss reminds us that smell is even more so (10 million smell receptors): taste perception derives from that combination, with smell playing the larger role.

The food industry is not solely responsible for obesity

Yet how can we blame only the food industry for this problem? Very few children participate in physical activity in school now; and are the national pastimes, watching television or playing on a computer, not directly correlated with weight gain? Scientific studies indicate that 'lean' people sit for two fewer hours per day than 'fat' people, and therefore to avoid obesity one must simply... stand more. Also, those who eat in company consume 44% more: hence we had better eat alone. **Beware of the full moon, which facilitates overeating!** When in the early 1980s fizzy drink consumption heavily increased, obesity in the same population rose in a more or less parallel fashion, obscuring the distinction between solid and liquid 'food'. It is truly difficult to avoid gorging and consuming soft drinks when what is on offer provides immediate and intense pleasure. **Over a quarter of daily calories derive from snacks eaten at any time** or place without thinking for a moment about their negative health effects.

Nutritional labels create the illusion of food designed for our benefit

The author believes that, throughout the developments of the past forty years, we've trailed behind the food industry, capable of churning out constantly changing products and satisfying any request, even for dietary information labels, which create the illusion of health foods designed for our benefit, though they retain the calories of 'regular' foods. The food industry knows that we eat what we remember, and Stanford researcher **Eric Stice** is investigating technologies to develop memories about foods which we have difficulty eating frequently and which are good for us, such as vegetables.
It is imperative to remain aware that the food industry offers affordability and convenience whose true cost remains hidden: will it take another 40 years to improve our dietary habits?

Claudio Tarchi