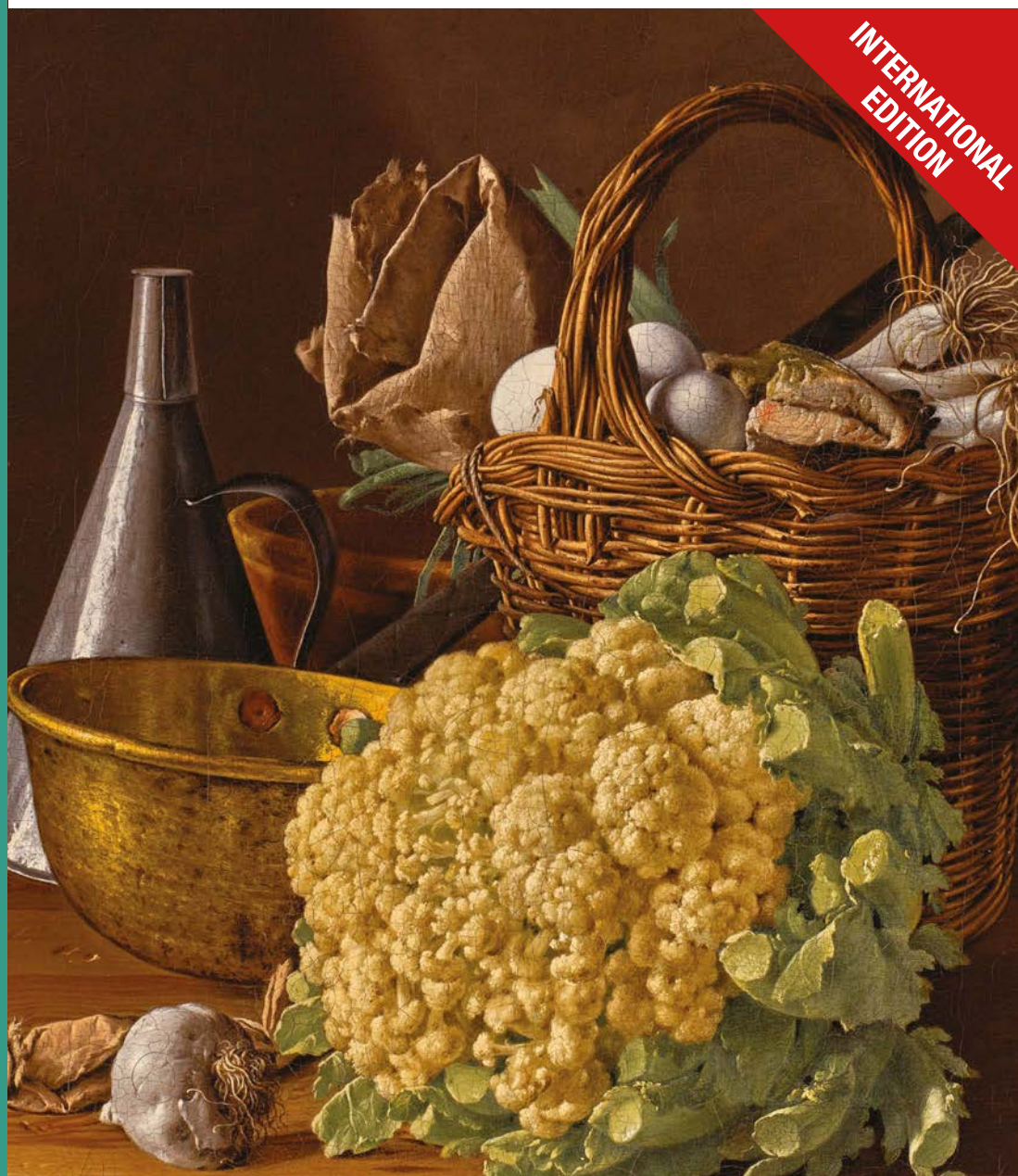


# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL  
EDITION



**ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA**

ISTITUZIONE CULTURALE DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA  
FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI

[www.accademia1953.it](http://www.accademia1953.it)

**INTERNATIONAL EDITION**

APRIL 2026 / N. 391

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

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all'Unione Stampa  
Periodica Italiana



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EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,  
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



**On the cover:** *graphic elaboration of Still Life with a Cauliflower, a Basket, Eggs and Leeks (circa 1770) by Luis Egidio Meléndez; Prado Museum, Madrid*

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# After molecular gastronomy

*and puddles on plates, now there's transparent food*

*This viral fad is causing a stir on social media and, naturally, involving 'starred' chefs.*

A recent survey by *Unione Italiana Food* and *AstraRicerche* reveals that Italians' favourite pasta is **carbonara**, not only prepared at home but also ordered in restaurants: a 'recent' Roman dish adored throughout Italy and abroad. This recipe, created after the Second World War, has become an ambassador of Italian cuisine worldwide over the past 70 years (it so happens that the most popular dessert in Italy and abroad, namely **tiramisù**, also emerged around the same time). Runners-up, according to Italian preferences, are spaghetti with clams and pasta (tagliatelle, but also spaghetti) with **Bolognese-style ragù**. **Cacio e pepe** and **amatriciana** are gaining ground. Returning to our carbonara, being highly desired, it has been multifariously reinterpreted, both by traditionalists and by major prize-winning chefs, with mostly disappointing results. Several years ago, the guru of molecular gastronomy, **Ferran Adrià**, gave it a go, proposing a version composed of tiny spheres containing an egg yolk emulsion designed to 'explode' in the mouth alongside the pasta: a sort of 'cook as you chew' process. The fate of that dish is well known.

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*A new type of cuisine is peeping into innovative chefs' repertoires*

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A new type of cuisine is now peeping into innovative chefs' repertoires: **transparent food**, apparently a viral fad which is making a stir on social media and, of course, involving prize-winning chefs. And thus, **transparent carbonara was inevitable**. The restaurant responsible has been **Disfrutar** in Barcelona, 3 Michelin stars, using jellied Iberian ham broth. Since it is available for a mere 315 euros, if air fares don't surge too much, one could undertake the voyage to sample this stroke of genius.

Besides the poor beleaguered spaghetti alla carbonara, the new transparent food craze includes **bread** by **Albert Adrià**

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



(brother of the more famous Ferran) and **crystal potatoes** by the Québécois chef and 'food creator' **Mouhcine Bahassa**.

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*This trend is expensive, limited to fine dining, and... transient*

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There are transparent versions of fried chicken and hamburgers, made using filtration, agar and centrifuges. This fashion, very pricey for now and limited to fine dining, will surely find a few more modest epigones and then vanish. Meanwhile, the 'three textures' fad persists, as do oil poaching, miso-smothered foods, yuzu, wakame, nori, pearls of something-or-other, caviare of something-else, flavoured airs, extracts... and finally, as they say on TV, **'let's plate is up'**. Above all, let's go and learn to cook properly!



# We increasingly talk about food, but in what way?

by **Giorgio Maria Rosica**, Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Delegate  
and **Maurizia Debiaggi**, Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Academician

*A barrage of recipes, diets, superfoods, nutritional panics and alleged miracle cures.*

food or health, in a relentless barrage of recipes, diets, superfoods, nutritional panics and alleged miracle cures. Videos promise 'debloating in three days'; articles demonise common ingredients; posts acclaim the latest exotic food as a panacea. This is evidence of an ever more prominent phenomenon: **the food infodemic**.

*The food infodemic is an ever more prominent phenomenon*

**W**e inhabit an era of unprecedented food-related conversation. It is daily discussed through social media, television, podcasts and magazines, even those not specifically about

**The term, a portmanteau of 'information' and 'epidemic', describes the excessive, uncontrolled spread of information,** which is often biased or distorted, hindering the distinction between what is reliable from what is not. We are exposed every day

to an enormous volume of often contradictory statements about food, health and nutrition, which end up confusing more than they inform.

**This phenomenon frequently involves traditional Italian staples.** Pasta is often indicted as a main cause of weight gain, as it is 'rich in carbohydrates', while bread is contraindicated because of its refined flour content. Yet both have been part of a balanced diet for centuries, each consumed as just one of its elements, in sensible proportions.

**Even certified products** which represent Italy's food heritage, such as PDO Altamura bread or PGI Gragnano pasta, are sometimes **judged exclusively by their calories**, overlooking such fundamental elements as the quality of raw materials, production techniques or the context of consumption.

*Many foods are panaceas one day and health hazards the next*

The same dynamic applies to many other foods. One day, they are presented as panaceas; the next, as health hazards. Eat eggs! No eggs! Milk: indispensable or harmful? Animal proteins are exalted as crucial to well-being or accused of favouring inflammation, chronic illnesses or premature ageing, depending on the perspective du jour.

**Not even iconic 'Made in Italy' products escape this weathervane of opinions.** PDO cheeses including parmigiano reggiano, grana padano and buffalo mozzarella from Campania may be criticised for their fat content without considering portions, frequency of consumption and overall nutritional value.

Yet we already have at our disposal a nu-





tritional model that is internationally recognised for its benefits: **the Mediterranean Diet**. It is not just a nutritional plan but a true cultural model, founded on solid scientific evidence and millennia of culinary traditions.

Its pillars are pasta, bread and grains, fruit, vegetables, legumes, extra-virgin olive oil, fish, moderate consumption of animal products, and conviviality. This model has regional versions all sharing a common structure based on equilibrium, variety and moderation.

### *How has the food infodemic arisen?*

How, then, has this food infodemic arisen? Social media are largely responsible, as they allow immediate, capillary, **unfiltered spread of information**. **Algorithms** also tend to show content confirming our fears or convictions, creating **'information bubbles'**.

Another problem is **the oversimplification of scientific data**. Nutritional research is complex, requires time and often produces nuanced results which must be interpreted within overall dietary and lifestyle contexts. When such results are reduced to sensational headlines, such as "Pasta is bad for you" or "Cheese is unhealthy", their original significance is lost.

So a single study which analyses overconsumption can be taken as an absolute decree affecting even typical regional products without differentiating between abuse and moderate consumption as part of a balanced diet.

### *Communicating on social media using reliable information*

Such a scenario raises the inevitable question: **how to combat the food infodemic?** Ignoring social media is not a solution. Rather, it is necessary to **use the same channels, but with a different language**. Nowadays food is often presented just as the sum of its nutrients or a tool for obtaining immediate results: weight loss, purification, detoxification. In this reductive narrative, food loses context, history and meaning, becoming **fertile ground for fears, guilt and extreme claims**.

It is precisely this oversimplified vision that **requires a new perspective on food talk**, reinstating the central role of the Mediterranean Diet not only as a nutritional model but as food culture: the same culture for which Italian cuisine has gained

UNESCO Intangible Heritage recognition. **The paradox is that the Mediterranean Diet is famous, but often misunderstood**. **Counteracting the infodemic** does not mean screaming louder than those who spread sensational messages, **but building clearer, more coherent, reliable communication over time**.

One can describe a plate of pasta not merely as 'carbohydrates' but as the result of an agricultural chain, a process, a culinary tradition, and as an element of a balanced meal. One can present bread as a living product, associated with territories, grains, yeast and daily customs, **explaining the difference between conscious consumption and abuse**.

In other words, one can communicate clearly on social media without oversimplifying or catastrophising, by employing reliable information.

**Giorgio Maria Rosica  
Maurizia Debiaggi**





# The delights of nettles

by **Morello Pecchioli**

*Honorary Academician for Verona*

*Spring herbs contain poetry, flavour, and centuries of history and rural culture.*

“È primavera, svegliatevi bambine...”: “It’s spring: awake, o maidens!” So sang **Alberto Rabagliati** in 1941, warbling like an infatuated chaffinch as the warm weather arrives. 85 years later, nobody sings “Mattinata fiorentina” (“Florentine Morning”), but I’d like to remember it today, **as we stride purposely into spring, brandishing baskets to gather those marvelous herbs** which, washed and boiled or

pan-fried, will be the main ingredient in extraordinary risotti, scrumptious omelettes, superb salads, thrilling timbales and sensational soups. Spring herbs contain poetry, flavour, and centuries of history and rural culture. **Tables are enriched with wild, spontaneous freshness:** chicory, chard, ramsons, hops, fennel, dandelions, wild asparagus, borage.

*A stinging plant which turns delightful when cooked*

The springtime menu offers recipes and pleasures of the palate, infused with the delightful flavour of Her Highness, the Nettle. Yes indeed. **The nettle is a prickly princess**, but it is precisely this pungent plant that becomes delicious when cooked, **a star of many dishes** aforementioned and more besides: tortelli, pies (**nettle spinach leek pie is particularly recommended**), meatballs, lasagne with

grana and pine nuts, **soups, sweet fritters** and a thousand other delicacies. Alongside walnuts, parsley and olive oil, nettles **also yield and excellent pesto** which, of course, we recommend enjoying on *trofie* pasta. At the end of the meal, instead of coffee it is better to have **a herbal infusion or a slightly bitter tea**, to favour digestion.

**Nettles are doubly good.** They **satisfy the palate and invigorate the body** with their health benefits: amino acids, proteins, vitamins and minerals in such quantities as to outweigh the sting of their furry leaves, which can be avoided anyway by using gloves rather than touching them directly. The nettle is both food and medicine. It has antihemorrhagic, diuretic and purifying properties. **It stimulates digestion and is naturally energising for those who feel stressed and sluggish.** But, returning to the table, let us read the thoughts of **Gabriele Ferron**, a cook and risotto expert from Isola della Scala, an area known for its Vialone Nano rice, in his book *Il riso in cucina (Rice in the Kitchen)*: “Though nettles have stinging hairs, their young shoots are a delicacy.” Ferron is an authority on risotto. He has travelled the world spreading knowledge about the excellence and creativity of Italian risotto. He has even given a memorable cooking demonstration on the Great Wall of China, in the presence of local journalists and attendees in traditional clothing: he prepared risotto with Amarone, an excellent wine from Valpolicella.

**Here is his nettle risotto recipe.** Four people need 400 grammes of Vialone Nano rice, 9 decilitres of vegetable stock, 150 grammes of nettle shoots, extra-virgin olive oil, a spring onion, a clove of garlic, a knob of butter, grana cheese, ground chilli pepper and salt. Wilt the



minced spring onion and the garlic, with its inner skin still on, in a frying pan; add the nettles and simmer for 2/3 minutes, seasoning them with salt and chilli. Meanwhile, toast the rice with some olive oil in a saucepan. Add all of the stock, piping hot, and mix. Cover the pan and keep over minimum heat. Once the rice is cooked (18-19 minutes), add the nettles, mixing everything into an emulsion with butter and cheese.

### Nettles have been used as food since the Bronze Age

Nettles have been used as food since the Bronze Age. Archaeologists at Cambridge University have unearthed a bowl with food residue **while excavating a village from three thousand years ago**. Analysis revealed that the food was **a sort of nettle stew**.

*Urtica dioica*, as Linnaeus named the common stinging nettle in 1753, was much appreciated by the ancient Greeks. The Athenian comic playwright **Aristophanes** (c. 446 - c. 386 BC) suggested nettles **picked before the arrival of swallows** (in early spring) as an aphrodisiac: a hollow suggestion in areas where one swallow does not make a summer because they no longer visit at all. This advice was reiterated five centuries later by the Greek physician **Galen**, who lived in Rome and was the family doctor to four emperors: **Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus, Commodus and Septimius Severus**. As a contemporary viagra, Galen suggested **a potion of nettle seeds and cooked wine**. He cured impotence by mixing the same seeds, pulverised, with honey, prescribing one *lingulae mensuram* (teaspoon) per day. **Gaius Petronius Arbiter**, a contemporary of Nero and author of the *Satyricon*, suggested nettles **against rheumatism**. The poet **Catullus cured coughs and colds with nettle broth**; once his airways were clear, verses could freely travel the ways of the heart: "Until I fled to your embrace/ and I restored myself both by leisure and nettles". **Apicius**, in *De re coquinaria*, suggests



eating female nettles (*dioica*, 'of two households', means 'biparental') to combat illness in general. However, they must be picked on the day when the sun enters Aries, namely the spring equinox: "*Urticam feminam, sole in ariete posito, adversus aegritudinem sumes*" ("Against disease, take female nettles picked when the sun enters Aries"). A simpler recipe is *patina urticarum*, a timbale of nettles, eggs, fish sauce (*garum*), and oil for cooking, dusted with ground pepper before serving.

### Positive literary portrayals

Though widely considered a weed to be eliminated - in Italian 'throw to the nettles' means 'get rid of' - the nettle is often positively presented in literature. In *Anna Karenina*, **Leo Tolstoy** portrays Anna's brother, Stiva Oblonsky, drinking nettle soup. In the story "The Wild Swans", **Hans Christian Andersen** has the princess make nettle shirts to break the spell that has turned her eleven brothers into swans. Thus nettles are not only twice but thrice good: **for centuries** they have also been a source of **fibre** to be spun into thread and then woven into cloth or twisted into ropes. **Victor Hugo** was well aware of all this. In *Les Misérables*, he **praised the bitter herb**: "One day he saw some country people busily engaged in pulling up nettles; he examined the plants, which were uprooted and already dried, and said:

'They are dead. Nevertheless, it would be a good thing to know how to make use of them. When the nettle is young, the leaf makes an excellent vegetable; when it is older, it has filaments and fibres like hemp and flax. Nettle cloth is as good as linen cloth. Chopped up, nettles are good for poultry; pounded, they are good for horned cattle. The seed of the nettle, mixed with fodder, gives gloss to the hair of animals; the root, mixed with salt, produces a beautiful yellow dye. Moreover, it is an excellent hay, which can be cut twice. And what is required for the nettle? A little soil, no care, no culture. Only the seed falls as it is ripe, and it is difficult to collect it. That is all. With the exercise of a little care, the nettle could be made useful; it is neglected and it becomes hurtful. It is exterminated. How many men resemble the nettle!' He added, after a pause: 'Remember this, my friends: there are no such things as bad plants or bad men. There are only bad cultivators.'" **Hugo knew the merits of nettles**. The diligent farmers of yore would feed nettles to hens to make them lay more eggs, hogs to make their flesh more flavourous, and horses to make their coats shinier. Later, modern feed and tasteless battery chickens arrived. On a fantastic, generous, kindly planet such as only **Gianni Rodari** could imagine in his nursery rhymes, even nettles are poetic: "Even the nettle,/ which, rather than stinging,/ holds on each leaf/ a silver bell/ bouncing in the breeze". A spring breeze, naturally.

**Morello Pecchioli**

# The 'cure'

*prescribed by Dorrit Blumenkranz*

by **Maurizio Pedi**  
*Caltagirone Delegate*

*A victim of the Shoah, she recounts how cuisine allowed her to rebuild her life.*

In one of many 'normal' stories emerging from the horror of the Shoah, a little girl who lived in refugee camps, first in Italy and then in the USA, merely because of her ethnicity later became a brave entrepreneur, opening a restaurant in New York.

**Dorrit**, born to a Jewish family in Vienna, was forced out of Austria as a child by the events of the Second World War. Italy was the only country that gave her family a visa, and its fascist regime chose Guardiagrele (Abruzzo) as a suitable town for interning refugees. A climate of affection and solidarity nonetheless made 1939 and the ensuing five years happy for little Dorrit, who soon acquired fluent Italian. She would always vividly remember "granny" Rosalia, a village girl aged only 17 who offered affection through the Italian language of food, preparing



*Dorrit at Fort Ontario, the only Holocaust victim refugee camp in the USA (1944-1946)*

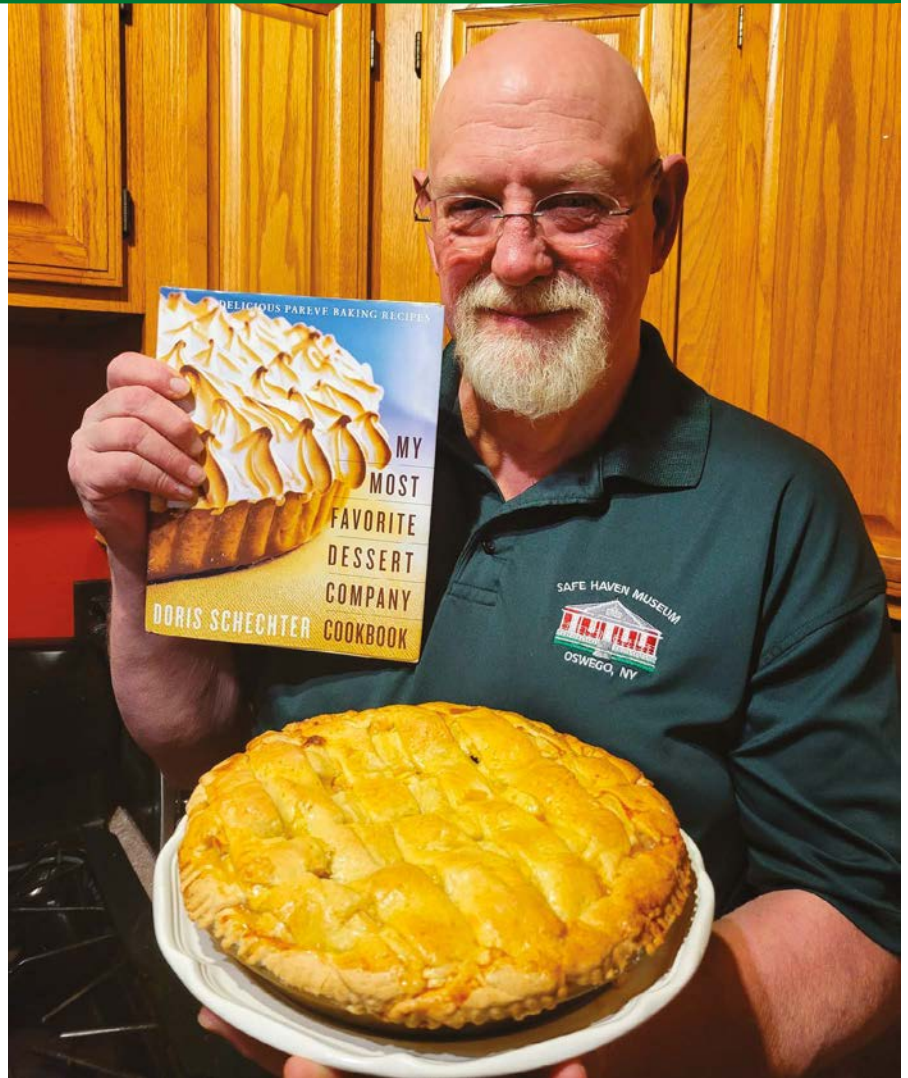
*Dorrit showing her childhood photo*



a daily hot lunch and dinner for everyone. **Dorrit heavily imprinted on this culinary language of care and affection, remembering the recipes of Rosalia**, who remained a lifelong reference point. This 'comfortable' existence in the backwaters of Guardiagrele was interrupted, for the Blumenkranz family and their compatriots, in 1944. Their safety was no longer certain in Europe, so they made the risky sea voyage to America: their only chance of sanctuary. Dorrit and her family were fortunate, as not all were, to gain a new life as refugees in the Fort Ontario barracks for the next 18 months.

The war ended, and **Ephraim**, Dorrit's father, fell in love with New York despite some difficulty integrating, though he soon died of sudden spinal meningitis. Dorrit and another thousand Jewish refugees obtained their much-desired American citizenship visas in January 1946.

Paul Lear, Director of the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum, holds the cookbook written by Dorrit (now Doris Schechter) and a pie: one of the recipes that she prepared for the Museum



### *Dorrit's life was rebuilt in a home in Queens*

Her life was rebuilt in a home in Queens, after brief periods of residence in the Bronx and the Lower East Side. In a delightful development, **she was reunited with her grandmother Leah**, known as Oma ('granny' in German). Having escaped Austria for dear life, after a hair-raising journey she had arrived overseas. **Thus the 'fable' was stitched back together** as Dorrit found and rejoined what was left of her family. Oma **cooked relentlessly to reinstate a sense of security**. She shopped for fresh ingredients each day, **creating meals that fed memories**. Food was sufficient and never wasted: at 6 every evening, without question, the family ritually gathered around the table for **a delicious hot meal that healed their scars**.

Along her painful journey rendered happy only by a child's uncomprehending cheer, Dorrit **soon learned that a table set for a meal, if properly enjoyed, brings joy**, affection, identity and fortitude through sharing.

As an eighteen-year-old student at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, she met Marvin Schechter, aged 24, whom she soon married.

Her new life, though burdened, inevitably, with past baggage, called her to be a mother of five with a home first in

Queens and then on Long Island. It would seem, thus described, like a happy rebirth, although the echoes of the past come knocking daily at the door of Dorrit's mind. She sought the help of psychoanalysts for years to tie up the loose ends of the past and rejoin them with her present.

### *She began baking cakes for several restaurants in New York*

In the early 1980s, Dorrit began baking much-loved cakes for various restaurants in the metropolis. She applied her firm conviction: make the most of the human bonds established through food. **Her hobby became a job**: first came her small bakery, My Most Favorite Dessert Company, in Great Neck on Long Island; then she took **the great leap to a restaurant-bakery on Madison Avenue in the wealthy Upper East Side area of Man-**

**hattan**. Making rent at ten thousand dollars a month was a real challenge for the new businesswoman. She started, naturally, with her already popular cakes, but her memories of Rosalia in Abruzzo resurrected **the philosophy of her first Italian dishes, garnished with immense warmth and affection**.

With mounting success in the Big Apple, **the New York Times dedicated an article to her. This was her big break**: Dorrit was now in the public eye.

**Today she is an elegant elderly lady** with the aplomb of a mellow personality underlain by an eventful, complex past. Her eyes retain a trace of disillusionment, but her face still lights up when she prepares food for others just as she would for her loved ones.

Her secret? The heart of her cuisine is built on memories. **Hers is one of the many strands woven into the Italian cuisine recently honoured by UNESCO.**

**Maurizio Pedi**