

CIVILTÀ TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

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L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

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DINO VILLANI, EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
WHIT MASSIMO ALBERINI AND VINCENZO BUONASSISI.

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On the cover: Graphic depiction of a detail from the painting "Autumn" (1896) by Alfons Maria Mucha, on exhibition at the Mucha Museum in Prague.

Perfection in the kitchen: utopia or reality?

The questionable ranking of the new restaurant guides.

BY PAOLO PETRONI
President of the Academy

In addition to falling leaves, autumn brings the hypermedia presentation of restaurant guides. As usual, the talk is all about the top establishments and chefs who strive to secure that fraction of a vote, sometimes for the better and rarely for the worse. This year, the most talk was about the score 20/20, the very top score, given by *L'Espresso* guide to Massimo Bottura, of the *Osteria Francescana* in Modena. An enthusiastic review, so much so that it was signed by the Editor, ended in this fashion: "Massimo Bottura is the best chef who was ever born in Italy and I am happy to live in his time". The statement that Bottura "has changed forever the way we eat" gives the impression that we have reached the top and that there is no way to further improve unless of course in the future we can embellish the score by giving it 20 with honors. Right behind Bottura, with a sliver of score, at 19.75/20 on the way up, comes Enrico Crippa of the restaurant *Piazza Duomo* in Alba. The new guide *Gambero Rosso* is in agreement in assigning first place to Massimo Bottura, in conjunction with Heinz Beck's *La*

Pergola in Rome, with a score of 95/100, a very high score indeed, but not the top, most importantly the same score given to Beck's restaurant last year. As we wait for the emergence of the queen of restaurant guides, the red *Michelin*, the criticized and reviled *TripAdvisor* has put to work its mysterious algorithms to produce the ranking of the restaurants that are preferred by the thousands of users of its celebrated online guide. In other words, the voice of the people vs. the élite of specialized gastronomes. To our great surprise, we find that *TripAdvisor's* top restaurant is one that is not even mentioned by the guides, the *Riviera* of Venice, opened a few years ago by the musician Giovanni Pietro Cremonini (1,333 reviews). The second spot belongs to *Pipero al Rex* in Rome. *Piazza Duomo* of Alba turns up in fourth place. Massimo Bottura and other highly regarded restaurants such as *Le Calandre* of the Alajmo brothers, *Casadonna-Reale* of Niko Romito and *Villa Crespi* of Antonino Cannavacciuolo do not even appear on the list of the Top Ten. Obviously, the different criteria of evaluation and mea-

surement instruments are not comparable. It is true that we are discussing the same subject matter, which is easy enough; in other words, the discourse is about how we eat in a restaurant, and yet a perfect dish for one guide inspector can nettle or fail to impress another inspector or a common client. In the past, we made the point that quite often the guides are self referential, that prizes make the recipients happy, but that free criticism and most of all the various ways that one can evaluate modern Italian cuisine are values that must be jealously preserved. When we sit at a restaurant's table, we must evaluate it according to our own tastes, with intellectual honesty, without adulation, or personal antipathy. Guides are a useful prop, while representing somebody else's judgment: to dissent is legitimate and called for, but ignoring them and shrugging one's shoulders is not the correct behavior. Curiosity is the engine that moves the world. If there is nothing new to discover, if nothing can stir up an emotion, going to a restaurant is merely a costly way nourishing ourselves.



Massimo Bottura



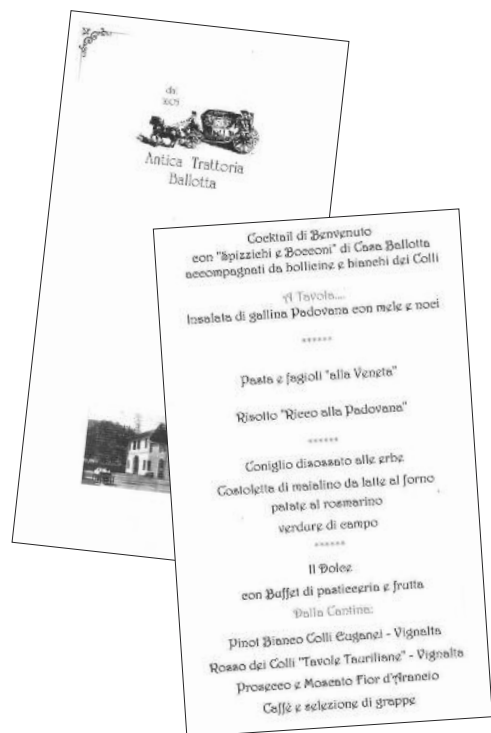
Enrico Crippa



An increasingly dynamic Academy

The Academy's new initiatives were introduced during the meeting in Albano Terme, and the participants shared them with great enthusiasm.

BY SILVIA DE LORENZO



One was instantly aware of the relaxed and friendly atmosphere that characterized this second meeting of the Academic Council, following last year's event in Florence. And with his opening remarks President Paolo Petroni emphasized this warmth and conviviality. He defined it as a significant moment for the Academy characterized by the great enthusiasm that the Delegations demonstrated in carrying out the recently celebrated Ecumenical dinner. The positive reception of the latest volume of the *Itineraries* about condiments and the large number of members of the Council that were present were signs of their commitment and participation in the many subjects on the agenda.

The President also expressed his own satisfaction in seeing the Academy evolve thanks to the broad sharing of the initiatives that have been undertaken in

line with the program he presented during his candidacy. Among them was greater diffusion of the magazine, with a more modern and up to date style. With its expanded print run and distribution it will reach a larger institutional audience both in Italy and abroad: its success has been demonstrated by the numerous thank-you emails not only from cultural institutes, libraries, mayors, city councilors and hospitality institutes but also from the Delegates around the world who now have another instrument to help spread awareness about the Academy in their own territories.

Petroni also reported on a recent meeting with the Director General for Cultural Assets, who is ready to examine and embrace some specific Academy proposals and projects, along with other Ministers and Government Entities. Then he described another successful initiative: the Newsletter that is now being sent to all Academicians. It contains recent news, and its timely and colorful design help provide a context and give a face to some of the protagonists to help all recipients better participate the life of the Academy.

Only five months have passed since his election, but other instruments have been deployed to increase the visibility, authority and cultural vocation of the Academy. An excellent example is the "Franco Marengli" Study Center, comprised by worthy professors, journalists, writers and ambassadors in the world of Italian gastronomy, all experts in their fields. Among them, Paolo Petroni focused on the name of Gualtiero Marchesi, emblem of modern Italian cuisine, and how moved he was to be part of the

Academy's Study Center. Their sense of belonging is apparent by the articles they contribute to our magazine each month.

The new institutional brochure constitutes another technique for reaching out to institutions in the various territories in which our Delegations operate. Hot off the press, it illustrates our objectives, structure and activities with the goal of increasing the awareness and authoritativeness of the Academy as a partner in cultural initiatives.

In order to look outward it is still necessary to operate with authority and coherence internally, always allowing for individual opinions. Petroni affirmed that for this reason the new Code of Ethics was established, presented and subsequently approved unanimously. This document represents the founding values upon which the Academy bases all of its actions and activities. These values must be recognized and shared by all participants in the Academy at all levels. It constitutes yet another element for reinforcing the Academicians' sense of belonging to the institution.

And speaking of a sense of belonging to the Academy, here is a brief digression on something that took place on the night before the Consulta meeting. Thanks to excellent organization on the part of Pietro Fracanzani, the Delegate of Eugania-Basso Padovano, all the participants, including the regional and territorial coordinators, were gathered together at a restaurant that was much beloved by Orio Vergani: the *Antica Trattoria Ballotta* in Torreglia. The evening took the guests back to the roots of the Academy. There were photographs on



the walls immortalizing our founder at work behind the stove and posing with menus containing traditional regional dishes which, as President Petroni has emphasized, never get old.

Returning to the subject of the meeting, Secretary General and Treasurer Roberto Ariani presented the Proposed 2016 Budget, which he compared with the 2015 preliminary budget and he explained the content line by line and the variations between the two fiscal years. He also pointed out the criteria that were applied to the document that was sent to the participants before the meeting for their advance perusal: prudence when estimating expenditures and caution regarding income. He concluded with satisfaction that even during a critical period the Academy managed to consolidate its structure by increasing its membership by 400.

Regarding the initiatives proposed in the expenditure column, Paolo Petroni brought up the new *Cookbook*, which the Delegations are presenting and promoting in their respective territories with events and displays which have met with great success on the part of the public which has expressed appreciation for content over imagery. He also announced that the United States requested an *ad hoc* edition.

The President of the Board of Auditors, Gianni Limberti, reported that after having carefully reviewed and compared the 2015 Preliminary Budget and the income and expenses for 2016, the Board expressed a favorable judgment. The proposed budget was unanimously approved, including the annual dues rate which will remain unchanged. Then the

Assembly tackled the final item on the agenda: the changes to several articles of the ByLaws, largely owing to the adoption of the Code of Ethics. The Consulta unanimously approved the changes.

Then it was time for individual speeches by participants, including several by Territorial Coordinators. They were not only very pertinent and precise but also concrete and contained some specific proposals. They symbolized not only a desire on their part to “construct” and continuously improve relations with the individual territories, but also to better manage initiatives to be undertaken. To that end, for example, Guido Schiaroli (Territorial Coordinator for Umbria) requested that the magazine also be sent to institutions in those towns with fewer than 30,000 inhabitants that host a Delegation (request accepted); Mauro Magagnini (Territorial Coordinator for the Marche), in addition to speaking of the recent success of the 50th edition of the conference “Golden Verdicchio”, asked for greater participation by the Territorial Centers in the flow of communication with the President and broader access to Academy publications in order to have the materials at hand to spread awareness of the Academy’s activities (principle accepted); Pier Paolo Veroni (Territorial Coordinator for Emilia) and Berardo Paradiso (Consulta member) expressed a desire for greater dialogue among Delegates; Victor Pablo Dana proposed that new English definitions of Academic titles (Academician, Simposiarca) be established with the goal of better understanding of their role; and Mario Tuccillo (Territorial Coordi-

nator for Eastern Piemonte) hoped that the Academy would be able to uphold its founding principles even as it evolves.

And now we arrive at the convivial dinner, which played a significant role because it centered around the dishes of the region (Orio Vergani would have been pleased). Organized with care and dedication, the dinner was greatly enjoyed by the participants. We have already

mentioned the welcome dinner at *Bal-lotta*, the oldest trattoria in the Euganean hills where both a piazza and a street are named after Orio Vergani. But the traditions of the Veneto also pervaded the working lunch at the *Abano Grand Hotel*, with a selection of local appetizers including sardines “*in saor*” and a second course with a fantastic mixed fish fry from the lagoon and Venetian style liver. For the gala dinner, which was also wonderfully organized by the Eugania Delegation, guests were taken to the beautiful Bishops’ Villa in Luvigliano di Torreglia, designed in 1500 by Alvise Cornaro. Today it belongs to the FAI which restored it and opened it to the public. Here the guests enjoyed an original cup of broth seasoned with Tabasco sauce followed by a rich menu based on the cuisine of the Veneto, which was also enjoyed by all.

At the end of each of the three convivial meetings President Petroni congratulated the restaurateurs and presented them each with the Orio Vergani medal. And at the gala dinner, after a brief discussion of Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce in homage to the 2015 theme, the President thanked the participants and in turn Delegate Pietro Fracanzani and his Vice-Delegate Angelo Masso for their excellent organization and their gifts commemorating the event, including an invaluable edition of Antonio Todaro’s *Tra le pieghe delle erbe*.

In closing, Paolo Petroni emphasized the spirit of friendship and cordiality that marked the working sessions and convivial moments all in the name of the values that inspire Academic life.

SILVIA DE LORENZO



An open debate on food

We must confront various problems with wisdom and depth of thought, and not through the veil of information that Pope Francis calls “Wasteful Noise”.

BY MASSIMO VINCENZINI
*Academician, Empoli Delegation
“Franco Marengli” Study Center*

Food is an undeniable protagonist of our times, at least when portrayed as an object of interest on television and the media in general: dishes created on live TV or described in detail in magazines or online, cooks and aspiring chefs who illustrate the harmony of taste and balance of ingredients, nutritionists who certify quality, experts who make favorable pronouncements. The show is on the air and its success is guaranteed! Too often, however, there is no trace of a foundation that serves to establish certainty or knowledge. Contributing to an already uncomfortable situation are those disputes, or better defined “verbal brawls” that revolve around food and diet, between propo-

nents or supporters convinced of their own infallibility that would be more appropriate to a debate over soccer than to a scientific subject that is directly related to our health and wellbeing.

Several years ago our Honorary President Giovanni Ballarini wrote in the pages of this magazine: “We are living in a period during which the avalanche of increasingly confusing and often contradictory information, even in cuisine, is not able to replace knowledge”. And continuing on the subject of information, in a recent Encyclical entitled “*Laudato si*”, even Pope Francis expounded on the “dynamic of the media and the digital world that, when they are omnipresent do not encourage the development of a capacity



Cartadi
Milano

The “Charter of Milan” will stand as the intangible inheritance of Expo. Unlike the traditional universal exhibitions, the Milan Expo intends to leave a concrete memento because “safeguarding the future of the planet and the right of future generations of the whole world to live a prosperous and rewarding existence is the great challenge to the development of the twenty-first century. To understand the links between environmental sustainability and fairness is essential if we care about expanding human freedoms for the present and future generations”. With the

authoritative wish expressed by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella who conceives of a collective asset for the nation that will emerge richer but also the fruit of labor that will continue in time because “the right to food and water can be achieved on all continents”.

The Charter of Milan, underwritten by all countries that took part in the Universal Exhibition, and officially handed to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, sets a series of international objectives on themes connected to nutrition and sustainable development. It is a commitment with the contribution of many national and international institutions “aimed at bringing deep change to the daily behavior of individual persons and to the strategic choices of policies aligned with the next objectives of the millennium”.



to live wisely and think profoundly. In this context, the great minds of the past would have run the risk of seeing their knowledge suffocated by the wasteful noise of information". Harsh words that convey an unequivocal sign of deep concern, but also a life sentence without appeal: in the case of information, our current use of innovative technology is tantamount to "wasteful noise"!

In all honesty, however, we must recognize that in a global context, the subject of food's greatest problem is not disinformation (or the wasteful noise of information, as accurately defined by Pope Francis). Objectively the main priority regarding the subject of food must be to confront and resolve problems deriving from behavior and a reality that are worlds apart, such as the wasting of food on the part of a large portion of the world's population, and the hunger and malnutrition that are still dramatically persistent in an equally large portion of the population of the planet.

In the face of these enormous problems, Italy seized upon the opportunity offered

by the Universal Exposition in Milan, whose theme was "To Feed the Planet", and brought to the table over 500 experts tasked with reflection on such fundamental questions as the right to food and food waste, and to establish the main points upon which to focus the global debate. Thus the "Milan Charter" was born. This document was officially presented by Minister Martina April 28 at the State University of Milan, 48 hours before the official opening of Expo 2015. With this document, Italy - a country this is traditionally very sensitive and attentive to the topics inherent in food - officially put forth an international food act that consists of a list of responsibilities and concrete undertakings that can be underwritten by citizens and institutions of every country. The document was presented to United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Thus the Charter proposes itself as a nontangible collective patrimony of the Universal Exposition and at the same time, as a contribution of major importance to the discussion of the Objectives for Sustai-

nable Development, promoted by the United Nations and scheduled for November 2015.

At this point we should point out that among the final requests presented in the Charter there is one that seems to have come directly from the goals of our Academy since its founding. The text states: "Therefore we, men and women, citizens of this planet, in signing this Milan Charter, forcefully ask governments, institutions and international organizations to consider food to be a cultural patrimony and as such to defend it from counterfeiting and fraud, protect it from deceptions and unethical business practices, to value and prioritize place of origin and freshness with transparent regulatory practices".

The debate over food, with all its implications, from accurate information to important questions that threaten all prospects for sustainable development (both at the national and international levels) is officially open: Let us hope that Culture is heard!

MASSIMO VINCENZINI

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MAGAZINE

Academicians' contributions to the magazine are not only welcome, but essential. However Academicians should keep in mind some important guidelines so that their contributions, which are the fruit of their passion and dedication, are expeditiously published.

● **Articles:** it is essential that the **text of articles be sent via email**, in MS Word format (not pdf) to the following address: redazione@accademia1953.it

● **Article length:** it is important that articles are **between 3,500 and 7,000 characters** (including spaces); this is the best way to avoid cuts that are bothersome for both the editors and those submitting the texts. All computers should be able to provide character counts..

● Each issue of the magazine is printed one month ahead of the cover date so that it can be delivered to the Academicians by that date. Those submissions that are time sensitive should be sent in ample time.

● **"From the Delegations" Section:** In order to facilitate reading, please **limit articles to a maximum of 2,500 characters including spaces**.

● Please remember that in the "From the Delegations" section as well as elsewhere, **descriptions of meetings held outside the territory of the Delegation or in the homes of Academicians, unless they are associated with an important event, will not be published**. Also, **please do not include a list of dishes and wines**. Such listing should appear on the appropriate rating form regarding convivial meetings.

● **Rating forms for convivial meetings:** should be sent to the Secretariat (segreteria@accademia1953.it). It is also important to limit remarks in the "notes and comments" section of the form to **800 characters** (maximum 1,000) spaces included in order to avoid cuts. Rating forms that reach the Secretariat more than 30 days after the event will be discarded.

● We also request that you not submit reports on convivial meetings held **outside the territory of the Delegation**, or that take place in the **homes of Academicians**, or are otherwise not held in restaurants or public venues, as they will not be published.



Saint Martin: celebrating wine, stirring life

The fermentation of grapes is a metamorphosis of content. Moments that mark the synergy between man and nature.

BY STELIO SMOTLAK

Academician, Muggia-Capodistria Delegation



At Saint Martin's time the must becomes wine! It is a very well known adage expressed in the Venetian dialect. The celebration is held on November 11th and traditionally articulates a timely event with great symbolic value. "The boiling of the vats" subsides to make room for the mysterious whiffs of the delicious wine nectar. The process of transformation of the must (the pressed grapes) into wine still is surrounded by an aura of mystery. The whole affair is not entirely understood, nor is it perfectly controlled or controllable. The fermentation of the grape, and not only that (one example among others: milk) is a metamorphosis of content. The basic food becomes prominent.

The Mediterranean civilizations have always celebrated two fundamental events in the life of the community: the gathering of the fruit - the grape

harvest and its transformation: the must becomes wine. These are salient moments that tell us about the productive merger of man with nature. It was like that in the Christian era and before then in the preceding ages. One is reminded of the *Vinalia* of Roman times when the new wine was tasted and the future harvest was propitiated. And again one goes back to the day when the casks were opened in old Greece (*Pitégia*). Fernand Braudel referred to the Mediterranean not just as "civilization, but a series of civilizations, piled up one on top of the other" signifying the successive replacement within the same essential values. "The swollen juicy bunches, symbol of prosperity, are a precious gift to man, as he is capable of favoring the evolution of must into wine and enjoying its vital contribution". The principle of donation indeed defines the personality of At. Martin (from Tours). Sandro Sangiorgi writes that the grape "contains a silent potential destined to evolve once it becomes must".

What do we make then of must? Water, some sugars, some acids, and a myriad of micro elements. Luca Gardini, named sommelier Number One in the world in the year 2010, in his Encyclopedia describes six hundred components and 2,500 different aromatic substances! There is, however, something else, what Sangiorgi calls "the fertile community of micro-organisms": the ferments, more properly yeast, the breath of life.

Is wine a miracle of nature or an invention of man? One could well call it

a communion with Mother Earth!

Sangiorgi goes on to say: "Wine is an ecosystem that is complex and only partially explored, the nexus between action and reaction that cannot ever be taken for granted". Unquestionably, making wine is not a mechanical process.

Wine is prodigious. It is present in all rites, including even those celebrations that exclude it. Wine is amazing. It brings an inebriated vision, as in a blind meandering. It is a spirit. One cannot speak of wine without mentioning spirit. A divine nectar. "Wine is God's piss", as goes the peasant expression cited by Ulderico Bernardi.

Wine as food...for body and spirit. And also a brutal potion. Sacred and profane. Conscience and lack of conscience. Always strongly duplicitous. How can we manage it? One is reminded of the "sober inebriation of Ambrogius (Doctor of the Church). *In vino veritas*: knowledge is not free but a gift painstakingly cultivated.

Finally, an interview should be recalled that posed the question to a wine worker: is wine made in the vineyard or in the cellar? The answer went something like this: "It is made in the cellar but most of all in the fields". This answer is almost to be expected but it is worthy of a comment. For sure, wine is made in the vineyards, breaking one's back (in truth, it still happens). What is needed is "applied" intelligence in order to bring the best of nature to our table, at the disposal of our wellbeing. Wine is perfected, however, only by the meeting with the soul that tastes it.



It's time for an *aperitivo*

It should mark the moment of the meeting among people who wish to talk, leading to a serene state of mind and good disposition toward the food that will be coming.

BY ANTONIETTA STROILI
Academician, Udine Delegation

From the French *aperitif*: to wit, those drinks that make it easy on your spleen. Today, however, we call *aperitifs* a few alcoholic stimulants that are supposed to stimulate our appetite. Keep in mind that a healthy stomach does not require tonics or cordials; if it is full, water, swimming and diet are the best prescriptions, to which one should add: the heart is happy when it is possible. Alfredo Panzini commented on the word *aperitif* in the *Modern Dictionary* devoted to those words that are not found in common dictionaries. He wrote that between 1905 and 1935 picking up all the new words, no matter their origin

or nature, “floating” around the modern Italian language and ignored by other dictionaries. The term originates in late Latin with the term *aperitivus*, meaning “opening”, that was absorbed by the French *aperitif*.

Its history is indeed ancient: in the fifth century B.C. the Greek physician Hippocrates advised people who suffered from poor appetite to drink the *vinum hippocraticum*, a sweet white wine that contained macerated flowers of absinth, rue and burning bush. The Romans drank it to prepare their stomachs for the repast by mixing aromatized wine and honey, a formula they had acquired from the Greeks,





and by adding rose petals; when rosemary and sage were also added, they called it *vinum absinthiatum* to improve the taste.

During the Middle Ages it was decided that bitter substances were the most appropriate for stimulating both a better appetite and good digestion, starting with a good wine base and adding herbs, roots, leaves, citrus and spices. The taste of the liquor was thus modified with choices and doses of preparation that were kept secret by the distillers. Commerce with the East and the discovery of new worlds encouraged the use of essences, using aromatic herbs to transform the medicinal into a pleasant drink. The Italian *aperitif* was not intended just for medicinal use. It

came to life in Turin in 1796 in a boutique of wines and liquors owned by Arturo Benedetto Carpano. He had the brilliant idea of preparing vermouth, from the German *Wermut* or absinthe, by using as a base a wine, Moscato d'Asti, with the scent of herbs and spices, plus absinthe as an ingredient. King Victor Emmanuel II enjoyed it and called it "vermouth of aristocracy and legality". Garibaldi loved it. Other enthusiastic consumers were Cavour, Verdi and Giacosa. Ottavio Carpano took over the business and found a way to merchandize the product in 1870 as *Punt e Mes*. The baptismal name was due to a stock exchange agent who ordered the drink by calling out the points that he won or lost.

Traditionally, Turin considers itself as the capital of *aperitif*. Piedmont originated a score of similar products that are still sold, even though some are no longer owned by Italians. Milan boasts important labels and so do Padua and other centers.

Leaving aside the story of the name, which has nothing in common with the firm that produces vermouth, special mention is due to the *Dry Martini*, an international brand that falls under the category of *aperitif*, although it is



quite different from the traditional products and is popular in the countries of Northern Europe and North America. The Dry Martini marries dry vermouth with an alcoholic distillate, gin. Our Paolo Monelli was fond of it, Ernest Hemingway even more so. They had their own formulas in which the quantity of gin prevails over that of vermouth that at times is held to a few drops. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the futurist, called it "*polydrink*" (*polibibita*) and "*inventina*", a generic name that signifies slightly inebriating drinks that are helpful in generating ideas.

A good Italian *aperitif* should not be highly alcoholic or too sapid, lest it influence the taste thus spoiling what is coming with dinner that quite often begins with delicate flavors.

At times when professional categories kept separate, professionals, army officers, state supervisors and industrialists, all the way to employees and workers, had their own meeting venues and places of social aggregation for their ritual before dinner in a certain café or bar of the city, each of them know for its "*americano*" (that was the generic name). The differences were represented by the choice of the

starting wine and the bitter that was used to give it a particular scent.

In another part of Italy - Friuli - Venezia Giulia and indeed the entire Veneto region - the most popular *aperitif*, well appreciated and drunk by the people, is the spritz (apparently the name comes for the German-Austrian "*spritzen*" (squirting) that is made by adding water to the wine, a habit of the soldiers of the Hapsburg empire posted around Venice).

With limited alcohol, the *aperitif* needs as a base a good wine, white and dry. In this regard, we fear no competition because Venetian wines are excellent and most of all they lend themselves to watering with seltzer, with the addition of a lemon peel or a few drops of

bitter that do not alter its characteristics.

There was a time in Friuli, and to some extent this is still the case, when the choice made by men leaned toward the "*tajut blanc*", a glass of pure white wine that worked as a breakfast offered by the *ostarias*, or taverns, with an invitation to drink a second glass. The "*tajut*", simple, genuine and grape colored, is now drunk by the gentler sex as a token of parity and pleasure, and is served by bars as well. It has evolved and is gentler, better known now as *prosecco*, a wine that has scored great success.

The classic *aperitifs* have been replaced by the younger crowd with drinks containing less alcohol (alco-pop) or by binge drinking, a mixture of beverages with foreign names that do not belong to Italian tradition or history, and do not represent an evolution of taste or a culture of drink.

Most of all, the hour of the *aperitif* should mark the moment for a meeting of people who have something to say to each other, leading to a serene state of mind, that is appropriate to better appreciating and enjoying the food that is about to follow.

ANTONIETTA STROILI



Food and painting

Fish has inspired some extraordinary artwork, but was still considered an unusual subject for artists of all eras.

BY ALDO ANDREOLO
Academician, Venice Delegation

The depiction of food in painting is usually associated with still life, a pictorial genre that includes the inanimate world of objects but also fruit, flowers, game and fish, as we can see from the numerous paintings of “sumptuous tables” by the artists of the Low Countries in the 1600s. And indeed, starting from the second half of the 16th century food abandoned the marginal role it had played in the painting of the preceding centuries,

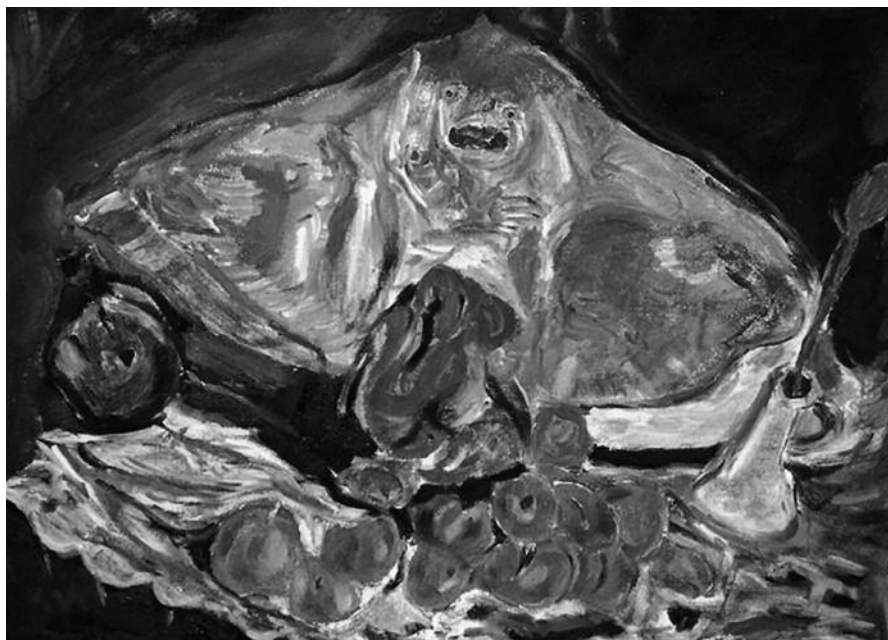
which had been almost exclusively dominated by religious and mythological iconography, and became a protagonist of painting.

The opulence of the “sumptuous table” created by Floris van Schooten, Pieter Claesz and other Dutch masters of still life reflected the easy lifestyle of a bourgeois Protestant society that found the source of its wealth in commerce. This is why these still lifes, in which the extraordinary ability of these virtuous il-

lustrators reached staggering heights, contain images of rare and precious foods, ostentatiously displayed upon the table, often including oysters, mollusks and fish.

It would be a mistake, however, to see these paintings as purely mimetic, as they also contain hidden allusions and symbols that can easily be overlooked at first glance. The image of fish, for example, often appears as a symbol of Christ in paintings and mosaics, and as portrayed in depictions of *The Last Supper*. In the mosaic of *The Last Supper* that is housed in the church of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (early 6th century) the Eucharistic meal is represented solely by seven loa-





ves of bread and two large fish that lie at the center of the table.

The 2nd century B.C. floor mosaic with fish that came from the so-called House of the Faun in Pompeii and is now housed in the National Archeological Museum of Naples is instead one of the most extraordinary examples of illusionary realism of which we have many pictorial examples in the frescoes of Pompeii and the area around Vesuvius. This mosaic featuring an octopus battling with a lobster amid a multitude of other fish, crustaceans and mollusks (we can recognize a gilthead, spotted bass, mullet, a skate and a scorpion fish), actually is every bit as good in terms of mimetic value as the famous still lives of the (presumed) villa of Poppea a Oplontis, the original *ante litteram trompe-l'oeil*.

Returning to the initial subject of this brief essay, we cannot forget to mention a work that is completely anomalous to the painting of the 1500s but still very picturesque, by an artist who painted splendid still lives but still does not number among the better known painters of that artistic genre. We are speaking of Giuseppe Arcimboldi, known simply as Arcimboldo, the creator of the bizarre anthropomorphic heads composed of flowers,

fruit, vegetables and animals that so enchanted the European royalty and aristocracy of the era. Even modern art historians have fallen victim to the fascination of these paintings in which they have found surprising precursors of surrealism.

Born in Milan in 1527 (the date is not certain), after having worked with his father, who was also a painter, in the Duomo of Milan, Arcimboldo was hired by the Royal Court of Vienna in 1562 as portrait copyist. In Prague he became the favorite painter of Emperor Rudolph II.

One of his most emblematic works is certainly *Water*, which was part of the *Four Elements* series: This painting depicts a hideous face composed of fish, mollusks and crustaceans, in which a seashell becomes an ear embellished with a splendid teardrop pearl; a shrimp becomes an eyebrow and a small shark provides the teeth of the repulsive mouth of this incredible character. And even coral becomes a sort of crown set jauntily atop the monster's head. A monster that Rudolph II jealously guarded, along with other strange objects and artifacts, in his astonishing *Wunderkammer* (Chamber of Wonders).

Of a totally different nature we have

the work of Jean-Siméon Chardin, an 18th century French painter. His still lives depict the silent world with a poetic intensity that places him alongside the great painters of the 1700s. One of his most famous paintings, *The Skate* (1726?) housed at the Louvre in Paris, consistently fascinated other artists, including Cézanne, Matisse and Soutine who never tired of copying or taking inspiration from it. The work is truly a bravura piece that can hold its own with the greatest still lives of the Dutch Masters of the 17th century. The composition develops on two planes: the horizontal (the table, where cooking utensils, oysters and fish are scattered with studied disorganization) and the vertical (the wall, upon which the skate hangs - the focal point of the work). Chardin even allowed himself an unedited aside - a cat (this time alive) that eyes the tempting oysters on the table with evident interest. Still, it is the flattened and bloody skate that bewitched writers such as Diderot and Proust. They asked themselves how such a "disgusting" subject could transform itself into an image of sublime beauty simply by the hand of the artist.

I could continue to name many examples but our brief look at some extraordinary, unusual and genuine masterpieces inspired by fish, and painting by artists of every era must end here. I will address another study on the artistic work from the 19th century to present day in another specific essay.

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