

CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



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On the cover: Graphic elaboration of the painting "The Wine Glass" (oil on canvas, circa 1659-1660) by Jan Vermeer, on display at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.

Television, cinema and the “terrible” guides which disseminate joy and pain

*Between myth and reality, they shape the life of restaurants.
The Academy is entrusted with a mission of reliability and constant commitment.*

BY PAOLO PETRONI
President of the Academy

Both on television and on the silver screen, the topic of cooking attracts an enthusiastic audience. We have already discussed at length the success of the television series *Joséphine, ange gardien* in France and Italy, especially the episode in which the eminent, embattled chef struggles to retain his third Michelin star. Well-received films have included *Chef*, *No Reservations*, *The Secret of the Grain*, *Julie & Julia*, and the autobiographical French film *Haute Cuisine*, not to mention the 1996 cult film *Big Night*, directed by and starring Stanley Tucci. Far more recent is the film *Burnt*, directed by John Wells and written by Steven Knight. The main character Adam Jones (Bradley Cooper) is a former *enfant terrible* of the restaurant world, with two Michelin stars, whose restaurant in Paris fails because of drugs and alcohol. After disappearing for three years to shuck a million oysters in New Orleans, he steps back into the game by joining a restaurant in London where an old friend was once the chef. He fervently desires a third Michelin star, and to this end he enlists the finest team of chefs available, including the talented and beautiful Héléne (Sienna Miller). Over several months he must confront his alcohol problems and live up to the standard set by the former chef, his old friend, who succeeded in obtaining the third Michelin star during his absence. He tries by employing his tried and tested recipes and ‘taste explosions’, but Héléne points out that during his three years of absence, cuisine has changed and now there are new machines and techniques in the kitchen. She shows him the mysterious “Roner” (in fact the Roner has been commonly used in professional kitchens for fifteen years or so, and consists mainly of an electri-

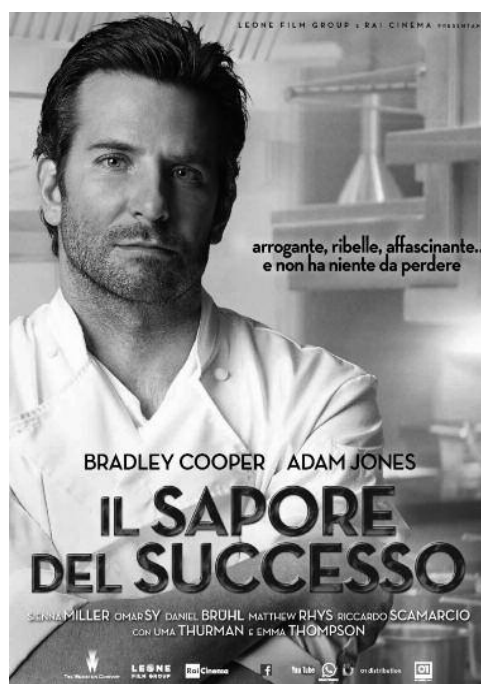
cal resistor and a thermometer for low-temperature cooking). Everyone anxiously awaits the Michelin inspectors, who always arrive incognito. How, then, to recognise them? It is said in the film that they are always in pairs (one may even be female); one orders the tasting menu and the other orders *à la carte*, and then they ask for a half-bottle of wine and some tap water. At a certain point they place a fork under the table to gauge the waiter’s reaction.

Aside from urban legends about the inspectors’ behaviour, the Michelin “Red Guide” certainly gains vastly in image and, therefore, popularity from the film. Winning a third star, irrespective of how it is obtained, is not only a medal for the chef but a source of significant income and media notoriety worldwide. Losing it can be a real catastrophe. But Michelin is no longer solely responsible for the fate of restaurants: these days, a wraith is abroad among gour-

meats, one both loved and loathed, spawned by the internet; loved by the chosen, loathed by the underdogs, and accused of various iniquities.

Even the British newspaper *The Guardian* has squared off against TripAdvisor, maintaining that it has “brought the restaurant business to its knees”. From reviews of closed businesses to bribery attempts and fictitious local top-ten lists, it’s a system which undermines restaurateurs’ activities. Or so they say.

The Academy’s restaurant guide will not spark dramas or decree successes with attendant economic advantages, but is certainly prepared honestly, without constraints, with an eye to identifying our best cuisine. For this reason it must be compiled with ever-greater precision and dedication with an awareness of our considerable authority.





Curcuma longa: the golden spice

Its versatility makes it interesting in the kitchen and beyond.

BY GIANNI ZOCCHI

Nutritional biologist and specialist in food science
"Franco Marengi" Study Centre



Turmeric derives from the plant *Curcuma longa*, with elongated oval leaves and an abundance of clustered. It originates from south-eastern Asia (particularly India and Pakistan) and belongs to the ginger family (*Zingiberaceae*). The spice itself is obtained from the plant's dried and powdered rhizome, prevalently used as a basic ingredient of curry, a well-known and commonly used spice blend with widely varying regional versions. For instance, in addition to turmeric, some curry powders contain black pepper, nutmeg, ginger, cumin, cloves, coriander, cinnamon, and chilli pepper. The name *Curcuma* derives from the Indo-Persian word *kour kour*, meaning 'saffron', which is why turmeric is often termed 'saffron of the Indies'. In the East, where the concept of food as a nutrient and nutraceutical or 'functional food' has been established for centuries, turmeric has long been used in the kit-

chen and beyond, as a medicinal plant. Studies confirm its numerous therapeutic properties. It is described in Ayurvedic texts even as far back as 3000 BC as a remedy for various conditions including obesity. In 1949 its antibacterial characteristics were identified for the first time. The rhizome of *Curcuma longa* is boiled and dried and then ground into a powder almost as fine as talc, which has an intense ochre-yellow colour and constitutes a natural colouring agent designated as E100. There are tens of different *Curcuma* species, but only a few have organoleptic properties.

Turmeric is a highly adaptable spice, able to flavour soups, broths, rice dishes, stews and even drinks (such as Golden Milk). The Indian culinary tradition uses it in meat, fish or vegetable curries or in brines. It also appears in sweets, not only as a colouring agent (in puddings, custards, shakes, pickles, butter



and vegan pastries, where it is used as a cream substitute), but also to create a flavour contrast. Given its effects on glucose and lipid metabolism, these uses of turmeric are surely helpful. It is an interesting addition to dishes based on legumes (chickpeas, beans, lentils, grass peas etc) combined with grains and vegetables to form a complete meal. Turmeric is notably delicate (in common with most aromatic spices) and therefore tends to lose its organoleptic properties quickly: it is therefore advisable to purchase it in small quantities and keep it away from light, heat sources and humidity. To maximise and preserve its organoleptic, aromatic and beneficial characteristics, it is important to add it to dishes raw or in the final few minutes of cooking. It is useful to combine it with black pepper, which increases its bioavailability and ease of absorption. Turmeric has been used, especially in certain Eastern countries, for its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and cleansing powers, and now its qualities are also increasingly appreciated in Europe. A sufficient dose is approximately a teaspoon with some pepper or other spices, added near the end of cooking or, as above, used raw. It is also an interesting addition to eggs or boiled or stewed potatoes as well as yoghurt, smoothies, freshly squeezed fruit and/or vegetable juices, or creamed vegetables; it gives pasta a yellow hue when added to its cooking water. Added to honey, black pepper, ginger etc, it can be used in tisanes; an excellent and highly thirst-

quenching drink is freshly squeezed pineapple and ginger juice with turmeric. Its absorption can be facilitated through combination with a fat (in the Mediterranean tradition, extra-virgin olive oil is the best choice) and, as discussed earlier, with a high-quality black pepper, whose piperin maximises its bioavailability. The isothiocyanates of Brassicaceae (the cabbage or mustard family: cabbage, broccoli etc) likewise favour its absorption. It has been demonstrated that its bioactive component, which produces its golden colour and beneficial qualities, is curcumin, which, together with other curcuminoids, such as demethoxycurcumin and bisdemethoxycurcumin, forms an array of polyphenols with manifold health-giving properties. Turmeric is among the spices most studied for its potential as a potent pharmacological agent. Extracts containing over 95% curcumin are now commercially available. The varied properties of curcumin are all very intriguing, and are the subject of many studies and experiments. The effects attributed to curcumin, in brief, are of the following types: choleric (favours bile secretion, rendering it more fluid), cholagogic (facilitates the flow of bile from the gallbladder to the intestines), and hepatoprotective (may favour liver regeneration by cleansing the liver and gallbladder, thereby detoxifying the liver). It is a powerful antioxidant (superior to vitamin C), anti-inflammatory and antiphlogistic agent, and seems to have interesting properties in preventing he-

patic steatosis (fatty liver disease). It also reduces levels of triglycerides and cholesterol. Turmeric has also been shown to have relevance in various illnesses such as neurodegenerative, inflammatory, cardio-vascular and metabolic diseases. Interest in turmeric apparently knows no bounds, and many recent studies appear to confirm various interesting health benefits and preventive effects of this plant, especially in the metabolism of sugars and fats. Its near-absence of significant side effects has led to the inclusion of turmeric (including its culinary uses) among the substances "generally recognised as safe" (GRAS) by the National Cancer Institute, thereby paving the way for possible therapeutic uses. Obviously for therapeutic purposes it is necessary to take a standardised supplement whose production is monitored by experts, though until now no therapeutic protocol has been established for medical use. Nevertheless, even though including turmeric in food is an effective way to help the organism in manifold ways, possible side effects must not be overlooked: because of its choleric and properties, its use is contraindicated in the presence of gallstones and serious liver diseases.

A final note, which is not very relevant to cooking, is that because of its extraordinary colour, turmeric is used as a dye for the robes of Buddhist priests, inter alia. Its versatility makes it an interesting spice in many ways.

GIANNI ZOCCHI

THE ACADEMY SILVER PLATE



*An elegant silver plated dish engraved with the Academy logo.
This symbolic object may be presented to restaurants that display exceptional service, cuisine and hospitality.
Delegates may contact the Milan Headquarters
(segreteria@accademia1953.it) for more information and orders.*



Courgettes: from appetiser to dessert

A delicate vegetable to enjoy throughout a meal, if sufficiently fresh.

BY GIUSEPPE ANASTASIO
Delegate for Salerno



The courgette is one of those vegetables that everyone likes. It's available in shops and markets all year round, but of course it tastes best when grown in an open field, rather than in a greenhouse or imported from other continents, and picked between May and October, since it is sensitive to cold and especially frost. Productive and easy to grow, it offers innumerable culinary possibilities: raw, fried, grilled, steamed, boiled – and furthermore its flower (known in some dialects as 'sciu-rillo' or 'fiorillo', meaning 'little flower') is highly prized and often fried or stuffed. Courgettes come in many shapes from cylindrical to round, an ideal shape for being stuffed, and in many colours ranging from emerald green to white or yellow.

Nutritionally, courgettes are mostly water, low in calories, and rich in vitamins A and C as well as potassium. Known

scientifically as *Cucurbita pepo*, the plant originated in Mexico, where it has been cultivated for over 5000 years; it arrived in Europe in the 16th century and is part of the Cucurbitaceae (gourd) family which includes other vegetables and fruits such as cucumber, pumpkin, melon and watermelon.

When purchasing courgettes, one must ascertain their freshness, as they deteriorate swiftly: the skin should have a vibrant colour and no blemishes, and the flower must not show signs of wilting. Smaller courgettes are advisable because they contain fewer seeds. By and large they are easily digested, though one must bear in mind that their digestibility depends to some extent on cooking method, since they are prone to absorb other ingredients. They are lightest when steamed or boiled. A hundred grammes of raw courgettes are almost 95% water and contain between 1 and 1.5 grammes

of protein and about the same amount of carbohydrates as well as approximately 0.1 grammes of fat.

Courgette variants fall into two main categories, namely the light-hued courgette, which can be cylindrical while tending towards a rounded or ovoid shape, and the dark-hued courgette, which is elongated with dark green skin. Among the most common cultivars are the striped Neapolitan (elongated with marked striations), the black Milanese (elongated, firm-fleshed and uniformly dark), the Florentine (club-shaped, light-hued and striated with pronounced longitudinal grooves) the Sicilian (somewhat pear-shaped with skin of a very light green colour), the round Piacenza courgette (dark green), and the round Nice courgette (light-coloured and flattened at the 'poles'). They are cut in different ways depending on the method of preparation: sliced lengthwise (for grilling), sliced crosswise (for pan-frying or inclusion in rice dishes or soups), diced (for stews or soups), brunoise cut (to eat raw), or julienned or matchstick cut (for frying or inclusion in sauces).

Italy, always an abundant courgette producer, even entered the Guinness Book of World Records a few years ago for the largest courgette in the world (over 2 metres long), harvested in the province of Ferrara.

For the table, we can suggest several easy and flavoursome recipes ranging from appetisers to desserts: courgette *carpaccio* with pecorino scales; *tagliatelle* with courgettes and crispy bacon; anchovy and courgette flan; and the most whimsical, a courgette and chocolate cake which is worth recommending.



D'Annunzio at the table

Surrounded by caviare, goose pâté, Champagne and beautiful women.

BY MARIA ATTILIA FABBRI DALL'OGGIO
Rome Academician

Gabriele D'Annunzio has his place in the literary pantheon. He was a highly regarded poet and man of letters, but also a controversial character who led an intense and tumultuous life. He loved beautiful women with an intense, mad passion pervaded by overwhelming sensuality. He combined romantic passion with a visceral dedication to the pleasures of the table, considering the latter an invigorating conclusion to amorous encounters. His existence was punctuated by such passions until the day he died. He was not interested

in the act of eating as an end in itself: "it seems... bestial and humiliating... to feed and gorge voraciously". Any social gathering, whether it occurred in a rustic setting, outdoors, or in the elegantly refined salons of his own homes, had to have a ritual significance dictated by the occasion, and must be planned with meticulous care. He claimed to be restrained in eating, to love frugal repasts, but in truth he had a healthy and formidable appetite over which he often exerted considerable mastery. He claimed to be a teetotaler, but could appreciate an ex-

cellent glass of fine wine and especially an effervescent chalice of Champagne, if drunk in the company of a beautiful woman. He was a splendid host. He loathed slovenliness. He wanted tables to be elegantly and luxuriously set, so that they shone with silver cutlery and the most sumptuous and precious crystals; they should be adorned with porcelains, floral decorations and fruit, because only this would satisfy the burgeoning aesthetic sense which permeated every aspect of his life.

He was an adept connoisseur of the feminine soul, whose weaknesses, desires and cravings he was able to comprehend. He never neglected to offer bonbons, marrons glacés, fondants and chocolates to the winsome ladies; he felt a subtle pleasure in observing how slowly and sensuously they savoured these delicacies. He used food to marry love and pleasure, as a seductive weapon and a potentially erotic force. Woman, for him, was always an idealised figure to be conquered. Nothing delighted him more than to sit at a carefully prepared table by candle light, in the company of his beloved, in order to win over her heart, overcome her every scruple and hesitation, and envelop her in the heady coils of "love's extreme drunkenness", whispering beguiling and insinuating words of love, surrounded by goose pâté, sliced pheasant, lobster, caviare and Champagne. Upon every dish he presented, he bestowed a specific significance which contributed to the crescendo of the amorous ritual. His dining hall was always worthy of a sultan. He often welcomed his ladies





in the music room, where he offered them exotic sweetmeats, chilled wine, and ripe, fragrant fruit. Following the music, the food, “which becomes a mystical prelude” to love, had to be prepared by the rules and artfully presented.

The dishes of his native Abruzzo occupied a special place in his heart. When visiting Abruzzo, he enjoyed sitting at the dining table on the balcony “overlooking the countryside” and savour the flavoursome ‘maccheroni alla chitarra’ prepared by the resident maids. He was particularly passionate about Abruzzo broth. He never forgot the peasant-style soup, the suckling pig with fragrant Abruzzo herbs, and the *parrozzo* cake, which he considered the heart of his native land and hailed as “the weightiest boulder of the Maiella”. When he resided at the Vittoriale, Abruzzo foods always made an appearance at his table, to remind him of his origins and familiar flavours. He was also highly partial to cannelloni, which Albina, his beloved cook, often prepared for him. He had many culinary preferences, and seafood was among these. He had a veritable passion for all sweets. In every circumstance he felt an uncontrollable desire for ice cream; if he knew that nobody was watching, he was likely to devour ten or twelve in a row, or so claims Tom Annigoni in *Vita segreta di Gabriele D’Annunzio* (*Gabriele D’Annunzio’s Secret Life*).

First and foremost, however, was his craving for meat, especially game of all types. His friend Jarro (Giulio Piccini) always presented him with gastronomic surprises. The dinner parties he organised for his friend Gabriele at the villa La Capponcina have retained untarnished fame. The dinner table was dominated by game, and in particular, hare à la Gabriele D’Annunzio.

The Bard has left us unforgettable recollections of Rome. He arrived in the Eternal City aged nineteen, remaining for six years (1882-1888), and writing in the society pages of the capital’s

newspapers, especially the *Tribuna*. He always returned to Rome, whose beautiful artworks, pleasant climate and alluring women he valued. His journalistic career kept his finger on the pulse of city life, portrayed in his famous work *Il Piacere* (*Pleasure*). He was enthusiastic about going on day trips to the Roman Castles. Sitting at the table of an inn located in Albano Laziale, he would be heartily welcomed by the old innkeeper who would prepare all the dishes he loved the most, particularly, in addition to game, “artichokes, peas, broccoli, roast lamb, pullets, fruit and especially grapes”. In this limited space one cannot even do justice to a representative selection of his amorous encounters and the dinners where he was hosted by the Roman aristocracy, but it is worth recalling the meal which D’Annunzio describes in the *Tribuna*, drawn from the onager-skin diary of Donna Claribel (a recurring fictitious character in his society articles, based on a real ac-

quaintance) and reproduced in his book *Cronache romane* (*Roman Chronicles*). This is an account of a sumptuous feast following a lengthy hunting expedition which ended near the Shrine of Our Lady of Divine Love, where the hounds had finally flushed out the fox. “What a formidably strong appetite comes from hunting!” The participants’ hunger was of a calibre which required succulent victuals. The banquet served was unforgettable, and consisted entirely of game, fish and wild fowl, including “a hare exuding the fragrance of the thyme and rosemary it had nibbled all summer”. To follow there was a glazed goose pâté infused with truffle, partridges prepared in manifold ways, flawlessly aged sliced pheasant “doused in the liquors of beef marrow and sprinkled with truffle”, delicacies which led his protagonist to declare: “What a delight! May the Good Lord forgive my sin of gluttony”.

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Vegetarians and vegans

Italy has become the second most vegetarian/vegan country in the EU after Germany.

BY NICOLA BARBERA
Milano Duomo Academician



Both of these food choices exclude all animal flesh, but though all vegans are by definition vegetarians, not all vegetarians are vegans, who abstain not only from meat and fish, but also eggs, milk, dairy products and even honey, since it is derived from animals!

In the past, vegetarianism spread as a religious principle, as in India's Jain religion (from the 6th century BC, in the same period as Buddhism), which represented a lifestyle aspiring to human perfection, based especially on non-violence, and therefore on not killing animals or harming any life form. For instance, in addition to being strict vegetarians, some Jains filter their breath through a piece of cloth

to avoid harming even the organisms in the air! Veganism, a neologism coined in 1944 by the Briton Donald Watson as a contraction of "Veg(etari)an Society", found its 'Bible' with the publication of *The China Study* by the American nutritionist Colin Campbell. The book presented the results of a vast epidemiological study begun in 1983 and lasting approximately 27 years, investigating the habits prevalent in 128 Chinese villages and published in Italy in 2004. Without going into detail about Campbell's conclusions, it is noteworthy that in its assessment of dietary and other causes of serious health problems, the study did not consider the effect of environmental pollution, smoke, alcohol and a sedentary lifestyle.

Though it is indubitably healthy to limit the consumption (especially in terms of quantity) of certain foodstuffs, excluding them altogether from one's diet (in other words, in today's parlance, one's lifestyle) is another matter entirely. Today strict vegans wear only clothes derived from vegetable or synthetic fibres; they also oppose experiments on animals, hunting, fishing, horse or dog races, zoos and aquaria. If "pure" veganism is well-nigh impossible, one should exercise common sense, avoiding extremism, in part because rigid limitations in one's diet can cause serious and even irreversible harm. There are different vegetarian variations: semi-vegetarians, who avoid only red meat but not white (fowl, rabbit); ovo-vegetarians, who avoid all animal products except eggs; lac-

to-vegetarians, who eliminate all animal products other than milk and its derivatives; raw vegetarians or vegans, who eat only raw food; and fruitarians, who feed exclusively on fruit. In a nutshell, it can be argued that vegetarians abide by a specific diet, while vegans follow a lifestyle.

Let us recall some famous "vegetarians": Pythagoras, considered the founder of vegetarianism; Epicurus; Leonardo; Einstein.

Today, not only for health reasons, the modification of traditional dietary habits has become a fashion, but above all a mass phenomenon: the Italian vegan and vegetarian population increases by 1% each year and represents almost 8% of the population. Italy has become the second most vegetarian/vegan State in the EU after Germany. It is not possible, as has been stated recently, to establish a causative nexus between dairy, egg and meat consumption and degenerative diseases, because there are many variables at play, and these also depend on amount consumed, cooking method, age, gender, lifestyle and physical activity level.

From a nutritional and health-conscious perspective, the Mediterranean diet and its food pyramid (with a reduced consumption of meat, especially red and cured meats, and an increase in fish, vegetable and fruit consumption) is the most recommended, combined with maintenance of an adequate body weight and moderate regular physical exercise; finally, it is advisable to seek variety in meals, consume small portions, and be sparing with salt (replacing it with spices) and sugar.