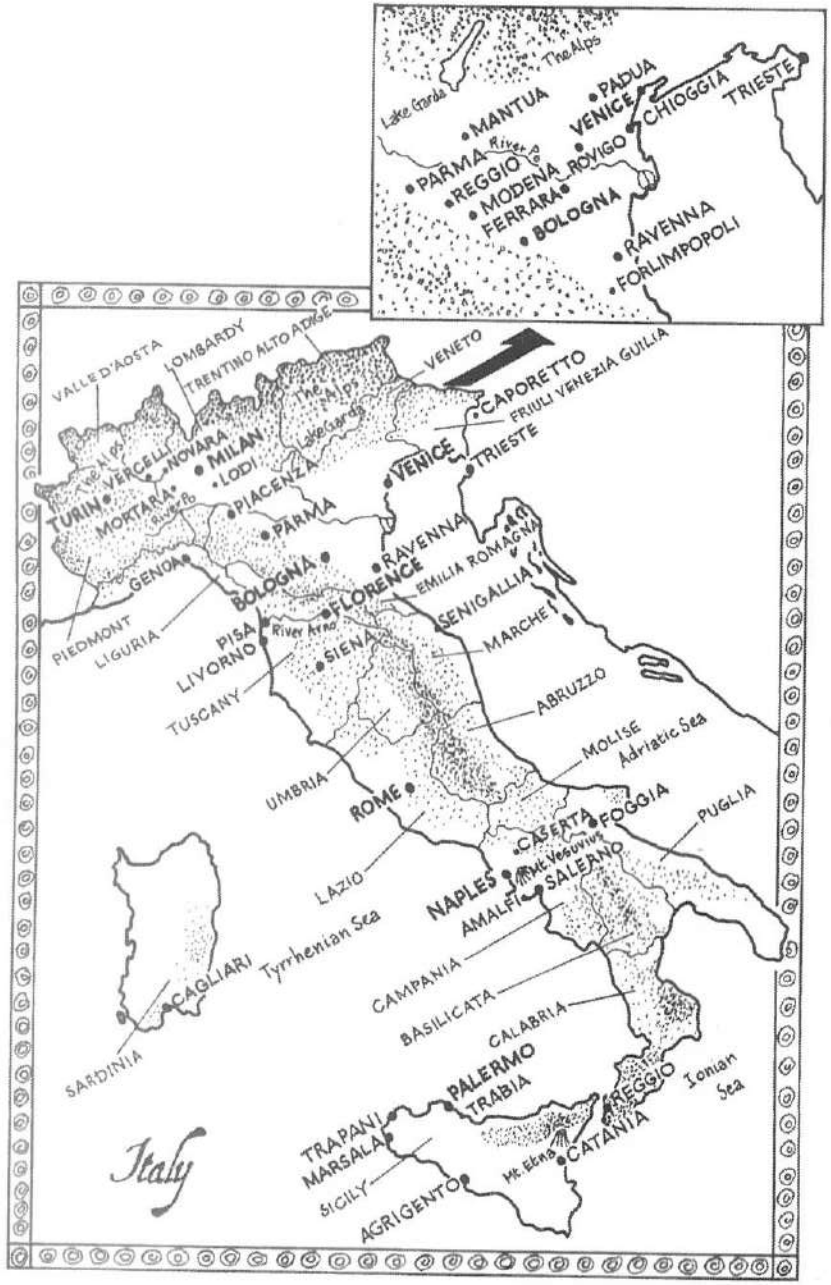

Delizia!

The Epic History of the Italians and Their Food

JOHN DICKIE

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For Sarah, Elliot, and Charlotte

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Delizia!

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Tuscany

Don't Tell the Peasants . . .

A drive through the country between Siena and the sea in the sunshine of an autumn evening. The Tuscan hills undulating past the car window become harsher, shading from vines and olive groves into pockets of dark forest. The destination is remote, yet it is a place where you can hear accents and dialects from across Italy. Here Venetians mix with Neapolitans, Palermitans with Turinese. In this quiet corner of Tuscany a people divided by ancient local rivalries comes to pay homage together at an altar to their common cult of food.

The building lies in the valley below the perfectly preserved medieval town of Chiusdino, but it is not easy to find. Not long ago, the track leading to it was nearly lost in thick scrub. Even now many people miss the discreet road sign. When the more observant visitors have negotiated a tight, descending corner and nosed over the narrow, parapet-less bridge, they are rewarded with the sight of a riverside field of Jerusalem artichokes—yellow flowers craning toward the setting sun.

Then it appears, unwelcoming at first, resolutely turning its worn back to the outside world, as if hiding its famous face among the poplar trees. But recognition chimes the moment the corner is turned: a simple brick and stone structure, with a shallow roof and an unassuming tower; at its flank a mill wheel is gently propelled by the limpid waters

of the river Merce. It was built by monks from the nearby San Galgano Abbey in the early thirteenth century. Even today one can easily imagine a friar emerging from the beamed kitchen with an armful of cheeses and *salami* for his brothers. Or a peasant patriarch, his shoulder bowed by the weight of his hoe, trudging through the surrounding glade at the end of his day's toil. Perhaps the plates and glasses on the table under the pergola were set by his homely wife for their extended family. Dinner is still awhile away, but already the air is laced with appetizing smells.

To the foreign visitor, *Il Mulino Bianco*, the White Mill, seems to typify everything that Italian food should be. To Italians, it is one of the most iconic buildings in the land.

Yet it is also Italy's best-loved fake.

ITALIANS eat lots of biscuits (cookies), mostly for breakfast. In 1989, the leading biscuit brand, Mulino Bianco, was looking for a set for its new advertising campaign. The White Mill shown on the biscuit packets was about to become a real place. The industrialized Po valley—flat and featureless—had distinctly the wrong image, thus ruling out locations in the region around Parma where the biscuits were actually made. Instead set researchers found what they were looking for, abandoned and almost derelict, off the Massetana road near Chiusdino in Tuscany. The old building was given a coat of white paint and a new mill wheel powered by an electric motor. In a short time it was ready to receive its imaginary family of owners. Dad was a square-jawed journalist; Mum, a pretty but prim teacher; their children, Linda with curly hair and a bonnet, and Andrea in slacks and a tie, were as smart-but-casual as their parents; a marshmallow-eyed grandfather completed the group. This, as the company Web site would have it, was a "modern family who leave the city and choose to live healthily by going back to nature." Their story, to be told in a series of mini-episodes, was to embody the second-home aspirations of millions of urban consumers. And to tell it, the agency hired two of the biggest talents in Italian cinema: Giuseppe Tornatore, fresh from winning the Oscar for best foreign film with *Cinema Paradiso;* and Ennio Morricone, famed for his scores to the spaghetti westerns (among other things).

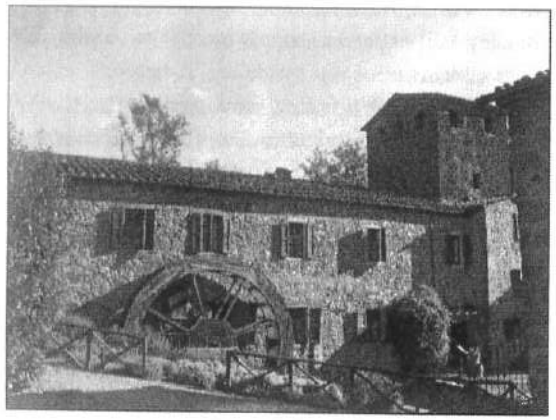
The result, between 1990 and 1996, was perhaps the most successful campaign in the history of Italian television. So successful, in fact, that droves of people from traffic-clogged Naples, Rome, and Milan started to search the hills of Tuscany for the White Mill they had seen in the biscuit ads. Queues of cars stretched back to the ruins of the San Galgano Abbey. Visitors approached the site in reverential silence as if they were entering a shrine. The mill's owner recalls: "There were real processions. Hundreds of people came to visit the mill at weekends. Most of them were disappointed because obviously it wasn't like it was on television. Only the kids were happy: they ran around enthusiastically amid all the plasterboard and polystyrene."

After the last Mulino Bianco advertisement had been filmed in 1996, the White Mill changed again; it was transformed into another, more tasteful manifestation of the Italian rural idyll. The owner spent four years restoring it and converting it into an *agriturismo*—the kind of rustic hotel-restaurant that has become so popular in Italy over the last twenty years or so. The building reverted to its old name, *Il Mulino delle Pile*—the Battery Mill (it used to supply electricity to Chiusdino before the war). A swimming pool was put in and the stonework sandblasted clear of paint. But even if it is now no longer white, the White Mill still answers to the same nostalgia for country food as does the brand that made it famous. It still attracts plenty of people who want to hold celebratory banquets for their weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries where the ads were set. Children still ask the owner whether he is the one who makes all the biscuits.

The rooms in the *agriturismo* Mulino delle Pile conform to an ideal of simple country elegance. The menu in its Old Grindstone Restaurant conforms to current canons of what is good to eat: "authentic, typical Tuscan cuisine, based on fresh, seasonal produce." An *antipasto* of Tuscan sliced *salami* and hams, or *pecorino* cheese with honey. A *primo* of *tagliatelle* with wild boar *ragù*—boar is a speciality. A *secondo* of Sienese entrecôte, or beef braised in Morellino wine, or local sausages with beans. A dessert of Vin Santo and *cantucci* biscuits.

It is not the best restaurant you could find in Italy. Nor is its menu quite as authentic as it claims: there are some concessions to fashion (fillet of beef in balsamic vinegar and green peppercorns), and some

The historical home of Italian food? Known to millions of Italians as the White Mill, *Il Mulino delle Pile* is set in a beautiful valley in Tuscany; its Old Grindstone Restaurant serves delicious local fare. But it is not quite the embodiment of rustic traditions that it claims to be.



national and international favorites, such as *penne all'arrabbiata*, eggplant *alla parmigiana*, and veal escalopes. Maybe the persistent memory of those famous biscuit commercials makes it all just too kitsch. But I can personally attest that the food at the Old Grindstone is, without a trace of doubt or irony, delicious. One can eat twice as well here as anywhere one could find in London for four times the price. The restaurant

is evidence of the indisputable fact that gastronomic standards in Italy are as high as anywhere in the world.

How did the Italians come to eat so well? The story of the White Mill has a simple lesson for anyone trying to find a historical answer to that question: it is possible to love Italian food without going misty-eyed about the fables that are spun around it, whether in Italy or abroad. Italy has become *the* model to imitate when it comes to making ingredients, cooking them, and eating them together. Some people believe that our health, environment, and quality of life may depend on whether we can learn some of the food lessons that Italy has to offer. It's all the more reason why we need a less syrupy story about how Italian food got where it is today than the one advertising and cookbooks have told.

The White Mill itself may be unknown outside Italy, but the family of images to which it belongs is all too recognizable across much of the Western world: the *trattoria* in the olive grove; the hams suspended from the rafters of a farmhouse kitchen; the sun-weathered old peasant with a twinkle in his eye; the noisy family gathered under the pergola while *mamma* serves the pasta. These same clichés recur in countless recipe collections, countless ads for olive oil, or those jars of unspeakable pasta sauce. Together they weave a powerful rural myth that finds its favorite setting in Tuscany. What that myth conjures up for us is a cuisine made from a thousand ancient country traditions; it is Italian food as *peasant* food. If the White Mill image of Tuscany has helped give Italian food a respectable claim to being the most popular cuisine in the world, then it has also helped make it the most widely misperceived. The Italian cuisine that the world so admires has surprisingly little to do with peasants.

In Italy, nostalgia for the rustic way of life is a recent development. The success of brands such as Mulino Bianco only came when the vast majority of Italians had left the hardship of the countryside safely behind. In Tuscany, the sharecropping system shielded the peasantry from the worst of the hunger and toil that was the timeless lot of the rural masses up and down the peninsula until as late as the 1960s. But even here, the contribution that dishes of exclusively peasant origin have made to local cuisine is not as great as the recent cult of peasant food would have us believe. The menu of the Old Grindstone Restaurant is

not representative of the country fare of yore. Nor is there anything *poor* about quite a few of the recipes one can find in books on *La cucina povera toscana*, including *bistecca alla fiorentina* (a thick Florentine T-bone or porterhouse steak) and liver *crostini* with Marsala wine. The rural masses could only dream of such delights. And even genuine peasant cooking has been the subject of a rebranding exercise. Like the medieval mill near Chiusdino, it has been extensively reconstructed and rethought by contemporary Italians.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, ordinary people in the countryside of Italy ate very badly—countless documents tell us as much. Such, for example, was the uniform conclusion of the many government inquiries into the state of the Italian countryside conducted in the decades after Italy became a unified country in 1861. The poverty of the peasant diet still echoes in a number of proverbs that have been handed down.

When the peasant eats a chicken, either the peasant is ill, or the chicken is. Among the poor of the countryside, chicken was a costly rarity reserved for the sick. Peasants were often only able to eat animals that had died of disease.

Garlic is the peasant's spice cupboard. Spices were essential to sophisticated cuisine from the Middle Ages until at least the seventeenth century. But they were largely unaffordable for the rural masses. Garlic, leek, and onion, by contrast, stank of poverty. This is not to imply that the well-to-do refused to eat these pungent vegetables—just that they looked down on anyone who had no alternative when it came to giving flavor to food.

Saint Bernard's sauce makes food seem good. Saint Bernard's sauce—hunger—was the most important ingredient in the peasant diet for most of the last millennium. Happily the recipe has now faded from memory.

A history of Italian food written as the story of what peasants actually ate would make for a stodgy read. Many pages would be devoted to vegetable soup. There would be a substantial section on porridge. Bread made from inferior grains, and even from things like acorns in times of hardship, would need in-depth coverage. That is not the history I reconstruct here.

Another proverb, a favorite of mine, suggests that we need to look elsewhere for real history of Italian food. "Al contadino non gli far

sapere, quanto sia buono il cacio colle pere" (Don't tell the peasant how good cheese is with pears). In other words, don't give anyone any information if they are in a better position to take advantage of it than you are. Or, keep your recipe cards close to your chest. This cynical piece of wisdom can also be interpreted as a simple parable about the imbalance in power and knowledge that underlies Italy's oldest gastronomic traditions. It may have been the country folk who produced the cheese and pears, but the people with the power to appropriate these ingredients, and with the knowledge to transform them into a delicacy by a simple but artful combination, were the inhabitants of the *cities*.

Italian food is city food.

Italy has the richest tradition of urban living on the planet, and the enviable way Italians eat is part of it. It is no coincidence that so many Italian products and dishes are named after cities: *bistecca alla fiorentina, prosciutto di Parma, saltimbocca alla romana, pizza napoletana, risotto alla milanese, pesto genovese, pesto trapanese, olive ascolane, mostarda di Cremona* . . . From early in the second millennium, the hundred cities of Italy hogged the produce of the countryside and used it to build a rich food culture. For centuries, Italy's cities have been where all the things that go to create great cooking are concentrated: ingredients and culinary expertise, of course, but also power, wealth, markets, and competition for social prestige.

So those urban pilgrims to the White Mill are not heading *toward* the traditional abode of Italian food: they are driving *away* from it. Italian food best expresses itself not in the farmhouse, but in the urban market. The real adventure of Italian food is not to be found by trekking off into the Tuscan hills. The point is to roam the city streets savoring the cooking and sniffing out the stories.

ITALIANS sometimes refer to their "civilization of the table." The term embraces all the many different aspects of a culture that are expressed through food: from the agricultural economy to pickling recipes, from kinship ties to the correct technique for spitting an olive stone into your hand. Food itself is fascinating. But ultimately it is much less fascinating than the people who produce, cook, eat, and talk about it. That is why

this book is a history of Italy's civilization of the table, rather than just of what Italians put on their tables.

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin once wrote that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." What he meant was that even our most sacred cultural artifacts, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy,* or Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, or Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater,* are inevitably marked by the unholy power struggles of the time when they were created. That is not to say that Michelangelo was to blame for the greed, corruption, and brutality shown by the patrons who gave him the resources he needed to make great art. But it does imply that we miss much of the poignancy and relevance of art if we cut it out of its historical frame—if we shut our eyes to the power that makes it possible, and the horrors going on around it.

The same principle applies to cooking. In fact, because it is an art performed with the very raw materials people need to consume in order to live, cooking can be more intimately connected to barbarism than any other civilized activity. There is a dark dimension to the history of Italian food that cannot be ignored. For that reason, there would be something rather bulimic about a history that consisted of nothing but a long pageant of feasts and fine meals, of endless delicacies from days gone by.

The Italian civilization of the table, in short, is a product of Italian history. And Italian history is marked by division and violence as much as it is by beauty and creativity, by barbarism as well as civilization. All of these things are ingredients in what I have written here. Malnourishment, hunger, and famine are an essential part of the story of Italian food. This book also moves between the food of the powerful and the food of the powerless, between everyday eating and elite dining. Put a different way, it combines elements from the history of the Italian *diet* and elements from the history of Italian *cuisine.*

But as the title suggests, this book was a joy to research, and its pages give plenty of space to the delights of eating—mostly other people's, and just occasionally mine. Even though I have spent many years studying Italy and living there, working on this book brought many pleasures I had never tasted before. Like *pane squarato* in Marsala (a deliciously

chewy bread that is boiled before baking, like bagels, and then flavored with fennel seeds); or *animelle* in Rome (toothsome sweetbreads, served with artichokes); or *cappellacci di zucca* in Ferrara (pasta envelopes with a pumpkin filling that teeters at the edge of sweetness where a pinch of nutmeg can play to its most subtle and delicious effect). The more one explores Italian food, the more rich diversity there is to discover—and every dish seems to have a story worth telling. So I have inevitably had to resist many temptations. Coffee, wine, and other drinks have been excluded because their history has different laws of motion. I have also tried not to get drawn into foody one-upmanship, into the competition to seek out ever more obscure culinary curios. The focus tends to be on the best-known dishes. So you do not have to know your *caciocavallo* from your *Castelmagno* to enjoy the story.* Pasta is the best-known Italian food of them all, and it provides one of the most important unifying themes in *Delizia!* From the first evidence of dried durum wheat *vermicelli* on Italian soil in the 1150s, to the extraordinary vicissitudes of *tortellini* since the 1970s, the history of pasta and the history of Italian food as a whole move to the same rhythms.

Exhaustiveness is another temptation that I have had to resist. Italian food has become a world food, and comprehensive study of its history would encompass Britain, the United States, South America, and Australia as well as Italy. Many of the stories recounted here go to show that Italian food has been shaped at least as much by its promiscuous traveling as it has by its steadfast roots in the soil of the peninsula. But where Italian foods have traveled so far that they have entered the history of countries other than Italy, I have ceased to chart their path.

The reason for this determinedly Italian focus is that, at its best, Italian food has charisma. And its charisma derives from an almost poetic relationship to place and identity. The main reason why Italians eat so well is simply that eating enriches their sense of where they come from and who they are. Italy's cities are where these links between food and

* *Caciocavallo* literally means "horse cheese," but it is more accurately translated as "astride cheese." Rather bland, it comes from the south, and comes in double orbs that are formed by hanging them from a string across or "astride" a stick. *Castelmagno* is a hardish, cylindrical cheese from the northern region of Piedmont; one of its distinguishing features is a tinge of blue mold.

identity were forged. It is no coincidence that cities are also where the diversity of Italian food is made most manifest, or that cities have seen the most dramatic interplay of civilization and barbarism. Thus it is in the cities that the most compelling documentary sources are to be found, sources that show how great Italian dishes have registered the ebb and flow of Italian history. Cities therefore give *Delizia!* its distinctive structure. Following a path dictated by the sources, each chapter in turn tells a self-contained story located in a single city. Together, these slices of urban life build into a single narrative that spans the centuries from the Middle Ages to the present day. The result aims to be both a history of Italian food, and a history of Italy *through* its food.

1

THE MEDIEVAL TABLE

2

Palermo, 1154

Pasta and the Planisphere

"Italian Food Does Not Exist"

Think carefully before you ask for *focaccia* at a Palermo street stall. For, likely as not, the only familiar thing about it will be the sesame seed roll that the stall-holder splits in two to remove the soft center. The filling he places inside, braised and then fried in lard, will comprise slices of veal spleen and strips of lung, topped with the soft cartilage from a calf's throat. A squeeze of lemon is essential: it cuts pleasingly through the fatty juices oozing into the bread to set up the meaty but yielding mouthfeel of the filling.

This *focaccia*, or more properly *pani ca' meusa* (bread with spleen), is the totem of Palermo's venerable tradition of street eating. At the famous Antica Focacceria S. Francesco they offer a convenient *antipasto* sampler of such urban tidbits as: *arancine* (deep-fried balls of rice, peas, and meat *ragù*); *sfinciuni* (thick squares of light but greasy pizza variously flavored with onion, cheese, oregano, olives, etc.); and a miniature *focaccia maritata*—which is *pani ca' meusa* "married" with *ricotta* cheese.

Sicily probably has the most distinctive cuisine in Italy. In a world increasingly habituated to the so-called Mediterranean diet, there is still something unpredictable and lingeringly strange about what Sicilians eat. To eat in Sicily is to appreciate the dizzying variety in Italian food.

and to understand why the expression "La cucina italiana non esiste"—"Italian food does not exist"—has become a truism.

There is no feature of Sicilian food more strange than the outlandish colors on display in pastry shops: *cassata*, a sponge cake with *ricotta* cheese encased in stripes of iced marzipan in white and pale turquoise-green decorated with multihued candied fruit; and "Martorana Fruit"—marzipan dyed with garish greens, reds, and yellows and sculpted into the shape of watermelon slices, figs, and prickly pears. To the unaccustomed eye, Martorana Fruit can seem too beautiful to eat, and yet also unnatural and childlike—as if the cakes have gotten into the makeup box and daubed themselves with Mum's lipstick.

Even some of the everyday Sicilian dishes seem exotic. *Pasta colle sarde* is a good example: *bucatini* are dressed with a mash comprising fresh sardines, wild fennel, onion, salted anchovies, saffron, pine nuts, and tiny raisins. Indeed the island's cuisine retains its peculiar allure when it is simple to the point of being self-effacing, as with roast goat, or boiled octopus, or *macco*—dried broad (fava) beans gently boiled and crushed to form a hearty purée. (It is sometimes served with pasta, or made slightly more elaborate with chilies, or the odd ripe tomato, or the clean aniseed taste of wild fennel.)

As one of the peninsula's geographical extremes, Sicily offers a striking example of the enormous diversity of dishes that pass under the label "Italian." How can Sicilian food, with its couscous, swordfish, and citrus salad, possibly belong to the same culinary realm as the subalpine region of Piedmont, with its truffles, rich wine-infused meat dishes, and *agnolotti* (filled pasta parcels)? Many Italians, proud of their own local eating traditions, would say simply that they cannot. In Italy, even something as simple as bread can change from one small town to the next. The widespread notion that Italian food is regional is only a very lazy shorthand for patterns of variation that can be found at a much more local level *within* regions like Sicily or Piedmont, to say nothing of Emilia-Romagna. Generalizing about the way Italians eat is extremely hazardous.

Yet so is saying that Italian food does not exist. The country is *not* a collection of ancient and unconnected microcuisines. Many foods are shared by several regions of Italy, for example *polenta* in much of the north. Other habits apply to the whole country, such as conjugating the courses of a meal according to *antipasto, primo, secondo*, and *dolce*. Eating Sicilian food makes one appreciate what links Italy's many cuisines and gives them a common history.

Couscous, of which Sicilians are so proud, is also known in Tuscany, where it was thought of as a Jewish food because it was brought by the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who arrived in the port city of Livorno in the 1500s. *Pani ca' meusa*—spleen rolls—seem to be a unique local dish that the most intrepid gastro-tourists are keen to tick off their list. Yet these have also been available in Turin, the capital of the northern region of Piedmont, since the time of Italy's postwar economic miracle when thousands of Sicilian workers emigrated there.

Up and down Italy, broad cultural changes have modified eating habits in comparable ways. Many local specialities that were once reserved for particular religious occasions are, in these secular times, year-round treats. *Cassata* is an example: it was once eaten only at Easter. Martorana Fruit has undergone the same shift. The childish impression it makes is not a coincidence because it was originally used as a way of involving children in the Day of the Dead. Mothers would hide small presents around the house, such as fruits, sweets, and sugar dolls, which were supposed to be gifts to the children from departed relatives. Now both Martorana Fruit and *cassata* are nationally recognizable banners for Sicilian pastry chefs.

The Italian peninsula was divided among different rulers until the second half of the 1800s. That history of division carries much of the responsibility for the variety of Italian cuisines. But besides migration and secularization, other historical forces have brought the parts of Italy into gastronomic dialogue with one another—not just in recent years, but for much of the last millennium. It is this dialogue that gives a useful meaning to the term "Italian food." Cities like Palermo, as great centers of exchange, are where the dialogue happened.

To eat in Sicily is also to feel that one is tasting the very beginnings of Italian food's history. The island has been conquered by virtually every dominant Mediterranean power of the last two or three thousand years. Among these various invaders, the Muslims' gastronomic legacy is most often celebrated today—they occupied the island in the ninth, tenth,

and eleventh centuries. If many Sicilian dishes are exotic, at least to a northern European palate, it is partly because of their North African and Middle Eastern influences. Some signs of the Muslim legacy on Sicilian tables are obvious, such as couscous, or the jasmine that flavors ice creams and sorbets, or indeed, one even more obvious but rather less exotic dish: spaghetti.

The history of Italian food begins with the arrival of spaghetti, which was brought to Sicily by Muslim invaders. More precisely, the history of Italian food begins when spaghetti enters the food dialogue between the Italian cities, ceasing in the process to be an exotic import. How that came to happen is best explained through the story of one particular Sicilian Muslim, and the map he made—the planisphere. It is a map that provides the first crucial piece of evidence in the history of Italian food, but it is also one of the most beautiful artistic treasures of medieval civilization, and a document of barbarism.

A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places

The planisphere must have been a marvel to the men who first set eyes on it in year 548 of the Hijrah—or 1154 in the calendar of Christian kings: a perfect disk of solid silver, close to two meters in diameter, and weighing as much as two men. Engraved on its polished surface were the contours of the habitable world; it was then the most complete map ever created.

King Roger II, the Norman ruler of Sicily, had ordered it to be made at the zenith of his power. With his enemies either defeated or turned into allies, he gave full rein to his thirst for knowledge—not just of his own kingdom, but of the whole globe. He sent for the foremost geographer of the age, al-Sharif al-Idrisi, and offered him a fortune to produce a cartographic survey that would surpass all others. For fifteen years al-Idrisi studied, and journeyed, and consulted travelers. With a great iron compass, he painstakingly traced longitudes, latitudes, and distances onto a drawing board. When he had finished, the most skillful silversmiths in the realm were commissioned to transfer the resulting outlines onto a specially cast silver disk.

At its western edge the two Fortunate Isles were marked. It was said

that on each isle, atop a mound of stones one hundred cubits high, stood a bronze statue pointing to the unknown space beyond.

To the east lay the farthest region of China, where a tree grew in the middle of a river. So convinced were the Chinese that the river flowed toward paradise that praying crowds would gather to watch enraptured men fling themselves from the tree's uppermost branches into the broad waters below.

Sudan, in the south, was made up mostly of sands blown hither and thither by the wind, and its people had skin burned to ebony by the sun.

Set within the Dark Ocean in the far north was the desert island of Scotland. Once, the geographers believed, there had been three towns in Scotland. But they had been abandoned in ruins after their inhabitants had fought one another to near extinction.

Between these outlying points, all the seven seas and the seven climates of the Northern Hemisphere were engraved, with the names of countries, cities, ports, rivers, and roads marked in a handsome Arabic script. Anyone who was not content merely to gaze in astonishment at the world thus displayed, could consult al-Idrisi's great geography book that was kept beside it—its title translates as *A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places.* It contained information on the customs, products, commerce, language, and character of all the locations on the planisphere.

Most of those who first looked on al-Idrisi's silver map would find their eyes drawn toward the western side of the fourth climate. There they could find Sicily—or "Siqilliah" (sih-kee-lee-uh) to the many Arabic-speakers who called the island home. It was known the world over for the fertility of its soil and the excellence of its wares. Chief among Sicily's 130 towns and castles was Palermo, "the beautiful and immense city, the greatest and most splendid residence," as al-Idrisi's book proclaimed it. Only Baghdad bore comparison to Palermo, which stood by the sea to the west of the island, guarded by a ring of mountains. Its two main quarters were bisected by canals, and surrounded by orchards and villas watered by abundant springs. By the port there was the quarter known as 'al Halisah (the distinguished), because it was here that the emir had lived. The other part of the city, Qasr (castle), was a long peninsula crammed with

"towering palaces and noble homes, with mosques, baths, warehouses, and shops belonging to great merchants"; its many gardens were irrigated by channels of sweet water brought down from the mountains. At the highest point of Qasr, farthest from the sea, stood the ancient fortress, which had recently been endowed with a shining new citadel. In one of its halls, each decorated with exquisite sculptures, paintings, and calligraphy, the planisphere itself was housed.

The planisphere's creator, al-Idrisi, was born in what is now Morocco in about 1100 and probably educated in Muslim Spain. He had seen both the Balkans and the Bosporus before he settled in Sicily to execute the king's orders. The evidence of his book suggests that he may even have sailed as far as England. (This would perhaps explain the color of what he garnered about the Scots.)

Al-Idrisi was of eminent blood: he could even trace his lineage back to the Prophet's immediate family. Besides being a geographer, he was also a pharmacologist and doctor—an international intellectual star. Yet the surviving sources give only a hazy picture of him, perhaps because subsequent generations of Muslim scholars deliberately suppressed his memory. Their motive, if this theory is correct, was that al-Idrisi worked for an infidel: he was commissioned to create the planisphere by King Roger II.

Roger's father, the twelfth son of a minor nobleman in Normandy, had put an end to two hundred years of Muslim power in Sicily. A child when he inherited his father's realm, Roger proved to be no less remarkable. Like his father, he implemented a policy that mixed generosity to allies with implacable brutality to foes. His influence stretched from the borders of the pope's lands in central Italy, to the Maghreb, and even as far as the Holy Land. He had engraved on his sword: "The Puglian and the Calabrian, the Sicilian and the African all serve me."

Roger shaped his image to impress each of the peoples who became his subjects. He called his most senior officials "emirs," and borrowed the parasol from the Arabs as a symbol of power. His stunning red silk coronation cloak, embroidered in gold thread and set with enamel and hundreds of pearls, can still be seen in Vienna today. From the center of the cloak a palm, the Arab tree of life, spreads its fronds. On either side a heraldic lion attacks a camel, symbolizing the Norman subjugation of

the North Africans. Around its border an inscription proclaims Roger's virtues in elegant Kufic characters.

Roger's crown, by contrast, was styled on a Byzantine model, and most of his charters were issued in Greek. The best-known image of the king himself is a mosaic in the Greek style in the Palermo church known as La Martorana: he is shown wearing the ceremonial garb of a Byzantine emperor and has a Christlike beard and long hair.

The planisphere was part of the same policy of asserting Roger's kingship in every possible language, every possible artistic form. Al-Idrisi's work was also meant to proclaim the wealth of Sicily, which the island owed in great measure to the long years of Muslim rule before the Norman conquest. New foodstuffs were one important legacy of Muslim domination. By bringing irrigation techniques that had originated in the Middle East, the North Africans who first arrived in the late 800s diversified agriculture beyond recognition. The Sicily that al-Idrisi recorded was an island of carefully watered orchards and gardens where generations of Muslim technical expertise and commercial know-how had bequeathed a rich agriculture of lemons, almonds, pistachio nuts, cane sugar, dates, figs, carobs, and more.

It is impossible to imagine contemporary Sicilian cuisine without the produce of which al-Idrisi and Roger II were so justifiably proud. For that reason alone, al-Idrisi has an important place in the history of Italian eating. But it is to a few remarkable lines from *A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places* that Roger's court geographer owes the fame he has recently acquired in Italy—remarkable, that is, because they constitute the first and best clue as to the origins of pasta, the most recognizably Italian dish of them all.

Itriyya

Geographically and historically, Italy is a country divided by a common food. Pasta is one of the great unifying motifs in Italy's constantly shifting gastronomic mosaic. But that is not because all Italians have always eaten the stuff—far from it. Pasta takes on varying forms in different parts of the country, and some Italians have only developed a taste for it in recent times.

Many pitfalls, including linguistic challenges, await anyone who endeavors to trace the origins of Italy's pasta habit. The basic meaning of the word *pasta* today is nothing more specific than "paste." It also means "pastry" or "dough." Yet the world knows the word as Italians also use it to mean a broad category of dishes made with a dough that has been boiled after being transformed by any number of methods: rolling, cutting, extruding, filling, etc. Most of these methods were in use by the late Middle Ages. Medieval Italians talked a great deal about *maccheroni, lasagne, vermicelli, ravioli*, and the like—this is when the pasta habit really took hold in the Italian cities. But if you asked a cook in the time of Dante or Giotto to prepare you a plate of *pasta* he would probably just have been puzzled. A separate category of foods called pasta just did not exist. If the term was used, then it embraced all kinds of dough-based dishes, including pastries and cakes. So by the fourteenth century, Italians were certainly eating "pasta" as we use the term, but unfortunately they were not aware that they were doing so.

So the history of Italian pasta begins in the Middle Ages. But the people of that time could not see or name the transformation in their eating habits that was slowly unfolding. Several distinct traditions were coming together to form the genre that would much later be called *pasta*. It helps to think of these traditions as different families who have intermarried to form a broad and diverse pasta clan:

Gnocchi, or dumplings
Lasagne, or sheets
Tagliatelle, or cut strips
Tortellini, or little parcels

First there were *gnocchi*—virtually every food culture has produced some kind of dumpling cooked in water, broth, or stew. Then came *lasagna*. The word is thought to have its origins in the ancient Latin term *laganum*, a sheet of dough that was fried to make a pastry. During the Middle Ages, the *gnocchi* family and the *lasagne* family merged: *lasagne* could now be boiled like *gnocchi*, or cut into strips and boiled like *tagliatelle*. Another great invention of the Italian Middle Ages was the *tortellino*, literally meaning a "little pie"—which was how *tortellini* started life, as tiny pies that were cooked by boiling rather than baking.

There is also a fifth family in the genealogy of the pasta clan. Its historical origins make it something of a renegade, yet it is now the most famous and most characteristically Italian of them all. Many of the offspring of the *gnocchi, lasagne, tagliatelle*, and *tortellini* families are today grouped under the heading "fresh pasta," meaning that it is cooked soon after being made, when it still contains moisture; many types of fresh pasta also contain egg. "Dried pasta," the fifth family, refers to those packets of *spaghetti, penne*, and *fusilli* that now fill supermarket shelves across the Western world. Italians sometimes avoid confusion by using *pasta secca* to refer to this kind of dehydrated product. It is generally made from durum wheat, or "hard grain" as it is known in Italy. "Hard grain" is a variety with a high gluten content that makes it easier to dry and store, and gives it a chewier texture when prepared as pasta even without egg.

Italians also started eating *pasta secca* in the Middle Ages. But once again, they did not make a great deal of terminological fuss about it. *Maccheroni*—spelled in a variety of ways—was the most popular medieval pasta term; it comes from *maccare*, meaning to pound or crush. But confusingly for historians, it was used to refer both to fresh pasta *gnocchi* and to tubes of dried durum wheat pasta. Thus the task of tracing the early development of Italy's distinctive *pasta secca* was made particularly tricky.

So it is easy to understand why the first Italian food historians to come across al-Idrisi's *A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places* fell upon the following passage so eagerly. A few lines after completing his celebration of the glories of Roger II's Palermo, al-Idrisi gives us a description of Trabia, some eighteen miles along the coast to the east:

> West of Termini there is a delightful settlement called Trabia. Its ever-flowing streams propel a number of mills. Here there are huge buildings in the countryside where they make vast quantities of *itriyya* which is exported everywhere: to Calabria, to Muslim and Christian countries. Very many shiploads are sent.

Itriyya is an Arabic word on which we can rely. A medical text in Arabic written by a Jewish doctor living in Tunisia in the early 900s explains

that, two hundred years before al-Idrisi created his silver planisphere, *itriyya* already meant long thin strands of dried dough that were cooked by boiling. *Itriyya* produced in Sicily and exported over such distances can only have been made from durum wheat: since the Romans defeated Hannibal, "hard grain" has been the island's most prized crop. After al-Idrisi's time, Italians adopted and adapted the word *itriyya* to label this exotic import: *trie* meant, and still means, thin strips of pasta such as *tagliatelle*. Alternatively, *itriyya* might be referred to with the more down-to-earth Italian word *vermicelli*, meaning "little worms." (*Spaghetti*, meaning "little strings," refers to the same kind of thing but did not become common until the early 1800s.)

Thus it is that al-Idrisi gives us the first ever reference to *pasta secca* on Italian soil. But there is one more enigma. The Muslims brought *itriyya* to Sicily. But does that mean that Arabs invented it? A good few recipe books continue to serve up this story, suggesting that a nomadic people like the Arabs would have found a dried food like pasta as portable as it was nourishing.

The theory undeniably has a romantic charm, but unfortunately is based on muddled thinking. For one thing, pasta's portability only makes it suitable for a nomadic lifestyle if your camels are strong enough to carry the large millstones needed to prepare durum wheat flour. For another, it should hardly need pointing out that not all Muslims, and not all Arabic-speakers, are Arabs. The people who occupied Sicily for two hundred years before the Normans were mostly from the Maghreb. They were Berbers, rather than Arabs. And they were traders, not nomads.

Itriyya, it turns out, is not even originally an Arabic word, but an Arabic transliteration from Greek. To Greek-speakers it referred to something dough-based cooked in liquid—a "something" that is too vague to be given a secure place in the genealogy of spaghetti. So before it reaches Italy, the origins of spaghetti cannot be traced back to one single point in space and time. Whichever route we follow, the prehistory of *pasta secca* takes us back out onto the heavily trafficked waters of the Mediterranean.

The Fate of the Planisphere

Roger II's Palermo was an international crossroads, one of the greatest trading cities in the world. Here the goods of the Muslim Mediterranean were fed into the burgeoning commercial routes of the sea powers on the western coast of Italy. Merchants from Amalfi, Naples, Pisa, and Genoa would come to source the spices, medicines, sugar, textiles, indigo, gold, and precious stones that arrived in Sicily from Spain, the Levant, Egypt, and by caravan across the deserts of North Africa. Al-Idrisi interviewed these polyglot traders as he labored to create the planisphere.

In the royal court that he frequented, Latin, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and the dialects of northern France could all be heard. Norman knights mingled with Italian bishops, North African merchants, Jewish craftsmen, Arabic poets, and Greek administrators. It seems highly likely that Roger had Muslim chefs—his successors certainly did.

No wonder Norman Palermo has often been imagined as a grand and happy experiment in cohabitation between different cultures and faiths. But the truth about Roger's reign is more bloody, and less sanguine. In 1153 Palermo witnessed a gruesome event that completely undermines the myth of Roger II's kingdom as an oasis of tolerance.

It features Philip of Mahdiyah, one of Roger's eunuchs—a "completely castrated servant," as one source describes him, meaning that his penis had been cut off as well as his testicles. This drastic surgery was necessary because he was invested with great power over royal affairs. No attachment to lovers or family could come between him and his sovereign.

Many such emasculated administrators worked for Roger II. They were highly educated, multilingual, and ambitious—drawn from across the Mediterranean by the promise of power and gold. Most were also Muslim. But they had to sacrifice even faith for a career in the royal household: Roger forced his eunuchs to convert to Christianity, and did not allow Muslims openly to practice their religion at court. Roger used these talented, rootless, utterly dependent men to free his administration from the influence of overweening barons and their clans. (The barons, as a result, loathed the eunuchs.)

Even among such an elite group, Philip was special. He was both an administrator and a naval chief; he and the king were close—so close, in fact, that it was said Philip had been brought up as a Christian by Roger himself. But during the holy month of Ramadan in December 1153, Philip's Christianity was exposed as a pretense: he had returned to the faith of his birth.

We do not know exactly what evidence the king uncovered. One version of the story says that Philip sent oil to Medina for the lanterns at the tomb of the Prophet. Another says merely that he pleaded too strenuously for leniency toward Muslim captives. Either way, there is no doubt about the vindictive ferocity of Roger's response. Philip was dragged round the palace by wild horses; then, still alive, his broken body was burned.

The execution of Philip of Mahdiyah happened at the very time when engravers were at work on the silver planisphere, and al-Idrisi was bringing his decade and a half of study to an end by writing *A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places*. Since both were members of the royal household, Al-Idrisi must have known Philip, and may well have witnessed the eunuch's fate. Like all the wonderful artifacts of Roger II's court, the great Arabic geography was created in an atmosphere of fear rather than tolerance.

Roger II died within weeks of the planisphere's completion, in February 1154. Seven years later rebellious barons ransacked his palace and slaughtered many of the surviving eunuchs. The knights and their followers then moved out into the city, robbing and murdering its Muslim inhabitants. There was no trace of the planisphere after this massacre. It may well have been heaved, careening, from the palace walls and carried off as booty to be melted down.

The silver planisphere is a sorry symbol of how much of the cultural legacy of Muslim Sicily has been destroyed. Norman rule heralded not just the end of Islamic power on the island, but also the steady eradication of the Muslim population. When Roger's father first arrived, about half of all Sicilians, some 250,000 people, were Muslim. When the last survivors were deported to a colony on the Italian mainland in the 1220s, there were only 20,000 left: pogroms, conversion, and emigration had accounted for the rest. The sophisticated agriculture that the Muslim population created soon went into decline as Sicily returned to its ancient role of providing hard grain wheat for Italy.

Many other aspects of Sicilian Muslim culture shared the planisphere's fate. Only a couple of hundred words of Arabic origin survive in Sicilian today. The architectural legacy is also fragmentary: Sicily has no Alhambra. The buildings in Palermo that show Arabic influences date from the period when Norman monarchs such as Roger II used Muslim craftsmen to further the purposes of their own propaganda.

Sicilian food, like Roger II's Palermo, is often celebrated in a tolerant spirit, as evidence that cultures can mingle in peace. Some Sicilians see a more flattering reflection of themselves in the menu than in the history books. After all, jasmine ice cream and couscous offer a more optimistic image of continuity between Sicily's Islamic past and its Christian present than does the planisphere. But the sad truth is that the turmoil of Sicilian history has reduced the evidence of its food's past to little more than shards. No medical texts, no cookbooks in Arabic survive from Muslim Sicily. One of the few food testimonies comes from a rather haughty Baghdadi visitor to Palermo in the mid-900s, who tells us, mystifyingly, that the locals ate so much onion it clouded their reason. Some of the Sicilian dishes that are often thought to be of Arabic origin have now been shown to have more recent roots. *Cassata* does not derive from the name for a bowl in Arabic, as is often claimed. Much more prosaically, it originates in the Latin for cheese. *Cassata* did not mean a dessert until the late 1600s, and the dessert did not take on anything like its current striped, green-and-white form until the 1700s; the famous decoration of candied fruit came even later. Magical it may be, but the taste of a *cassata* cannot conjure us back to the days of the Sicilian emirs, or tell us what Roger II's Muslim chefs prepared for him. Little documentary trace of the continuity between medieval Muslim cuisine and Sicilian food can be found. The only evidence we have is from our taste buds. But alas, what our taste buds register is often our own wishful thinking rather than the real stuff of history. Whatever flavors and smells characterized Islamic Sicily's civilization of the table, most of them, like the planisphere, have been irretrievably lost.

Rich and Industrious People

Illustrated manuscripts of al-Idrisi's book survive, and give a rough idea of the outlines that were once cut into the planisphere's silver surface. Initially they are hard to recognize. Sicily is huge, occupying about half the area taken up by the Italian peninsula. Sardinia has shrunk and floated off toward Spain. Italy's own famous "boot" outline has a horribly stubbed toe; and instead of jutting diagonally down from the continent it runs horizontally, as if drawn back so as to punt Sicily out toward the mysterious waters of the Atlantic.

Although distorted, al-Idrisi's map offers a cue for some essential introductory reflections on the geographical disunity that has marked Italy's history—and therefore its cuisine.

The Apennines, the peninsula's rocky backbone, are the most obvious feature on any modern atlas. Curving inland from the Gulf of Genoa, the mountains cut diagonally across between Bologna and Florence, almost reaching the Adriatic coast at Rimini before they straighten and plunge down the middle of the peninsula. Toward the south, the line of mountains turns again, through Calabria—the toe of the boot—and out along the northern coast of Sicily.

The Apennines slice the long Italian boot in two from the groin to the toe. In the central and southern half of the country, there are sharp contrasts in relief on either side of the long mountain range. This is a land of short rivers that tend to be torrents in winter and trickles in summer. No town in this central-southern area of Italy is far from the mountains or the sea, and all the landscape features in between. In Calabria, an easy morning's drive from the beach into the mountains can take you from palms, into vines and olives, then up into bright green chestnut woods, to arrive in misty pine forest: the strata of different trees are clearly visible on the mountainsides.

In the northern portion, between the Apennines and the Alps, is the long wedge of flat territory given its character by the sluggish, constantly shifting course of the Po, which at 405 miles is one of Europe's major rivers. The ancient Romans thought of the Po valley as a different country: they called it Cisalpine Gaul—in modern terms, "the bit of France on this side of the Alps." The Po makes the landscape through

which it flows unstable; five or six centuries of human labor have been required to adapt the valley for agriculture, industry, and transport. What is true of the Po valley is true of the whole country. Italy is not a naturally rich or fertile country, but a naturally diverse land that has to be worked to produce the fruits of civilization.

Most of Italy's fundamental geographical features were invisible to al-Idrisi. What interested him, almost exclusively, were cities. For that reason, he identified changes that were beginning to give Italy the shape we know. In Sicily and on the southern mainland, the kingdom that Roger ruled from Palermo would last until Giuseppe Garibaldi overthrew it in 1860 and united it to the Italian state. In the north and center, the cities founded and built by the ancient Romans were reviving. Al-Idrisi singles them out for their "remarkable monuments," "dynamic artisans," "thriving markets," and their "rich and industrious people." Brief they may be, but these phrases capture the essence of what was happening to the cities set in the valleys of the Po and Arno while Muslim influence was waning in the south. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, a series of invading powers had struggled to revive Rome's legacy of imperial authority in the peninsula: from the Ostrogoths under Theodoric the Great in the early 500s, through the Byzantines, Lombards, and Charlemagne's Franks. But by the end of the first millennium, central authority in the north and center of Italy had declined to such an extent that the towns and cities were able to assert their independence. As they did so, they became wealthy through industry and trade.

The revival of medieval Italian cities was led by trade, so al-Idrisi's account of the "very many shiploads" of pasta exported from Sicily rings true. Even allowing for a little exaggeration by Roger II's mapmaker, the scale of the *itriyya* business in Trabia circa 1150 is remarkable. Al-Idrisi mentions no other center of pasta-making remotely like it, not even in the North African regions he knew so well, and from which we can safely assume *itriyya* arrived in Sicily. Historians have not discovered any evidence of large-scale pasta manufacture elsewhere or earlier. So the strong likelihood is that it was only *after* it reached Sicily, and after it reached the markets of the eastern Mediterranean, that making *pasta secca* became an exercise in centralized production and distribution for a wider market. Some argue that *itriyya* became so popular in Norman

Sicily because it made such a good food for sailors, that it was a fuel for the "commercial revolution" then overtaking Italian ports. Whether this theory holds or not, Sicily's claim to *pasta secca* preeminence in Italy is irrefutable. Within a century and a half of the planisphere's creation, in the cities along the west-facing curve of coastline from Genoa, through Naples, to Palermo, and up to Cagliari in Sardinia, Italian cooks had adopted *itriyya*, turning it into *trie*, *vermicelli*, and *maccheroni*. These are the places where *pasta secca* begins to be mentioned in the patchy records upon which historians of the origins of Italian food have to rely: a note in a merchant's ledger or last testament, a tiny drawing in the margin of an illustrated manuscript, a passing reference in the life of a saint. Together such documentary scraps proclaim that the history of Italian food was under way.

3

Milan, 1288

Power, Providence, and Parsnips

War Wagons and Parmesan Cheese

What does a *genovese* actually taste when he or she eats *pesto*? Why do Neapolitans find the texture and flavor of their city's pizza so evocative? It only takes a quick search on the Internet to find a recipe for *pajata*. But it surely takes more than the intestines of an unweaned calf, with its mother's partially digested milk still in them, cooked in a tomato sauce, to make *pajata* as a Roman experiences it.

When Italians eat their own food there is always an extra ingredient in it that is imperceptible to outsiders. Corny as it may sound, that ingredient is local pride. Many Italians are, famously, more strongly attached to the town of their birth than they are to their country. They are *bolognesi*, *catanesi*, or *torinesi* first; they are *italiani* second. Food may be the most evocative expression of that historically rooted sense of local belonging.

Pesto, *pizza*, and *pajata* are prime examples of what the Italians refer to as *typical* dishes. What they typify, respectively, is Genoa, Naples, and Rome. *Tipicità*, "typicality," is the Italian word that describes the magical aura a food acquires when local identity is invested in it. *Tipico* has become close to indistinguishable from *buono*—good, wholesome, delicious.