II

Naples, 1884

Pinocchio Hates Pizza

Gusto and *Disgusto*

To the Italian palate, the American way of eating is a cornucopia of horrors. The gastronomic culture clash begins over breakfast. In the morning, the Italians gently coax their metabolism into activity with coffee and a delicate pastry. The very notion of frying *anything* so early in the day is enough to make stomachs turn. So the classic American breakfast is an outrage; among its most nauseating features are sausage patties and those mattresslike omelets into which the entire contents of a refrigerator have been emptied. Grits defy belief. And anyone in Italy who tried serving a steak before the early afternoon would be disowned by their family.

Such crimes are compounded by another national pathology: the compulsive need to have everything on the same plate. Bacon with hash browns. And pancakes with maple syrup and cherry topping. And applesauce. And eggs. And a salad garnish. And a heap of fruit. Why not—it might occur to an Italian to ask—serve it all in a bucket and pour some of your edifying cereals in milk over the top, too?

A people like the Italians, brought up to savor the way *antipasto*, *primo*, *secondo*, *contorno*, and *dolce* make for an evolving pattern of distinct tastes and textures, experiences shock and pity when confronted

with brunch. The Americans can only have invented it to allow their lust for mutually contaminating tastes to descend into savagery.

Italians also find it distressing that Americans eat on the move. In Italy, ice cream is the only thing that can be enjoyed absolutely legitimately while walking, but even then the cone should be wrapped in a napkin, with another napkin ready to dab at the mouth, and the maximum permitted speed is a gentle amble. Italy has many street food traditions, ranging from Rome's simple and omnipresent pizza squares and *suppli* (a deep-fried rice ball with a melting heart of *mozzarella* cheese), to the more demanding Florentine *lampredotto* (a bread roll filled with succulent strips of boiled gut topped with oily parsley and chili dressings). But consuming even these ready-to-go delights is an experience to be savored, an experience worth framing with rules. Hence the napkin etiquette: skin and food should not come into contact. Hence also the fact that Italians eat things like *panini* and *tramezzini* (rolls and little crustless sandwiches) either standing at a counter, or perched on a stool by a shelf. To do anything as purposeful as walking at the same time would be disrespectful to the understated artistry of the cook, and it would cross the line that distinguishes eating from mere feeding.

The Americans—at least in Italian eyes—are innocent of such refinement. They munch burritos in cars. They stride to work sloshing brothy "coffee" into spongy mawfuls of industry-standard muffin. In fact the Yanks eat anything, anywhere, at any time: they slurp Chinese takeout while tapping at a keyboard between meetings, and masticate their loveless, overladen "pizzas" in front of the TV.

Then there is the salad question. A typical Italian salad is spare and simple, designed to complement a meal rather than compete with it: at most two different kinds of leaf, dressed with good oil, salt, and a hint of wine vinegar. The absurd, all- singing, all-dancing American "salad bar," with its bacon bits and croutons, would perhaps attract only detached curiosity or amusement from an Italian—were it not for the dressings. Thousand Island, honey mustard, blue cheese, ranch. Revolting, every one of them. Some of these swills actually contain buttermilk. On salad. *Ti rendi conto?*

All you can eat. Any style. To the Americans, phrases like these seem to hold out the promise of abundance, choice, and freedom. In an Italian, the mere sound of them causes the stomach to tighten in anticipatory repugnance. Four thousand varieties of the same muck is no choice at all. After all, the richest, freest nation on earth has proved itself incapable of making edible bread.

The Italian dread of American food expresses itself in many stereotypes, but it also reveals a truth about the most visceral of human emotions: we are defined by what disgusts us. As we shiver with revulsion, our bodies vibrate in tune with our sternest prejudices. A rule has been violated and we feel it physically as much as we perceive it mentally. Perhaps more compellingly than any other sensation, disgust shows who *we* are. Because *we* don't do things like *that*.

When it comes to food, Italians are as sedulous in their disgust as they are discerning about good eating. Taste and distaste, *gusto* and *disgusto*, are inseparable partners in the Italian civilization of the table. It has always surprised me that the upmarket cookery courses hosted in so many Tuscan villas these days do not begin with lessons in *disgusto all'italiana*.

What is true now was also true in the past. Whenever Italian gastronomy has been strong, then Italians have had a fine sensitivity to what is repugnant, and a finely articulated code of manners. But the rules of repugnance have changed over time. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, garlic stank of poverty. Yet many contemporary dishes, from *pesto genovese* to *spaghetti alle vongole* (with clams), would be unthinkable without it. Medieval and Renaissance chefs boiled their pasta until it was very soft, but overcooked spaghetti repels today's Italians more violently than any other kitchen misdemeanor. So it should not come as too much of a surprise to discover that, early in its history, in the late 1800s, pizza was disgusting. Today, pizza is almost certainly the most widely eaten food on the planet, a blazon of Italian identity. Yet only just over a century ago, in the city where it was born, pizza would as likely have provoked a screwed-up nose as a salivating mouth. It is time to delve into the bowels of Naples.

Pizza Margherita

There are few hard facts in the history of pizza. The word probably shares its origins with the Greek *pitta* and the Turkish *pide*, which tells

us that it belongs to a wide, ancient Mediterranean family of flatbreads. Many dictionaries of Neapolitan dialect from the late eighteenth century onward tell us that *pizza*, at its simplest, was merely a generic word for all kinds of pies, and for what would be called *focaccia* or *schiacciata* elsewhere in Italy, that is, a flat piece of dough dappled with fat or oil and cooked quickly in a hot oven. This is such a commonplace recipe that it would be pointless to try to seek out its specific origins.

For a long time, from Scappi's 1500s until the end of the nineteenth century, *pizza napoletana* denoted a sweet tart containing almonds. But by the early 1800s, *pizza* had also come to refer to something like its modern form. One of the earliest pizza sightings was made by the author of *The Three Musketeers*, Alexandre Dumas (*père*), who visited Naples in the 1830s and observed the *lazzaroni* eating pizza—largely because it was much cheaper even than *maccheroni*.

> The pizza is a kind of *talmouse* [triangular cheese pastry] like the ones they make in Saint-Denis. It is round, and kneaded from the same dough as bread. . . . There are pizzas with oil, pizzas with different kinds of lard, pizzas with cheese, pizzas with tomatoes, and pizzas with little fish.

Given the pizza's sketchy history, it is perhaps no wonder that Neapolitans in search of certainties about their famous contribution to the way the world eats have latched eagerly on to one episode in June 1889. At that time, Margherita of Savoy, the queen of Italy, was making a monthlong visit to Naples. Although from Turin, she was eager to try pizza, so she sent for the renowned local *pizzaiolo*, Raffaele Esposito, who worked in a pizzeria tucked into a corner between the cramped alleys of the Spanish Quarters and the grand open space of Piazza del Plebiscito. Esposito was set to work in the kitchens of the hilltop palace of Capodimonte where the queen was residing. He made three pizzas: one with just oil; one with whitebait; and one with tomato, mozzarella cheese, and a couple of torn basil leaves. The queen preferred the last of the three, and it was duly baptized *pizza Margherita* in her honor. Esposito's shop, now called the Pizzeria Brandi, still proudly displays the letter of recognition he received:

Household of Her Majesty

Capodimonte
11 June 1889

Mouth Office Inspectorate

Most esteemed Mr Raffaele Esposito. I confirm to you that the three kinds of Pizza you prepared for Her Majesty were found to be delicious.

Your most devoted servant

Galli Camillo
Head of Table Services to the Royal Household

There seems little reason to doubt the authenticity of this document, although I can find no reference to Queen Margherita's pizza experiment in the press of the day. Yet still the story suggests far too cozy a picture of what pizza meant to nineteenth-century Naples. Understandably, many Neapolitans assume that their disk of baked dough flavored with tomato sauce and cheese is so unquestionably a good thing that it only needs to be discovered to be loved. But in reality pizza traveled a much harder and slower road to popularity. Italians had to *learn* to like pizza. Not only that: they had to learn not to loathe it.

One person who manifestly hated pizza was Carlo Collodi, the cook's son from Florence who finished writing *The Adventures of Pinocchio* six years before the queen's visit to Naples. After *Pinocchio*, Collodi's next venture, published in 1886, was an account of a young Tuscan boy's journey around Italy that often reads like chunks of a Baedeker tourist guide as retold in a twelve-year-old's letters home. All the same, it ran rapidly through fourteen editions, and sold particularly well in schools. When the boy in question reaches Naples, he finds a city of sunshine, happiness, and singing. The *lazzari* are now just a memory and, we are assured, the famous *maccheroni* with tomato sauce are eaten with a fork rather than with the hands. But the breezy mood is broken when it comes to describing pizza:

Queen of hygiene. Margherita of Savoy, shown in 1889—the year the pizza Margherita was named after her.

> Pizza is a *focaccia* made from leavened bread dough which is toasted in the oven. On top of it they put a sauce with a little bit of everything. When its colors are combined—the black of the toasted bread, the sickly white of the garlic and anchovy, the greeny-yellow of the oil and fried greens, and the bits of red here and there from the tomato—they make pizza look like a patchwork of greasy filth that harmonizes perfectly with the appearance of the person selling it.

Collodi was a hidebound Tuscan, so his evident revulsion could arguably be dismissed as just regional chauvinism. But Matilde Serao, a bustling, extroverted young Neapolitan journalist, is a different matter. In 1884, she wrote a series of reports on the poorest areas of her home city that were published under the title *The Bowels of Naples*. Like Collodi, Serao's description of pizza shows her explaining a custom that was as yet unfamiliar to the great majority of Italians; it also shows her distaste:

> *Pizza* is made from a dense dough that burns but does not cook, and is loaded with almost raw tomato, garlic, pepper and oregano. If a pizza-maker has a shop, he makes a great number of these round *focacce* during the night. He cuts them into so many slices worth one *soldo* each, and gives them to a boy who goes off to sell them from a portable table at some street corner. The boy will stay there almost all day, while his *pizza* slices freeze in the cold, or turn yellow in the sun as the flies eat them.

A prominent writer at a time when women in any kind of public role in Italy were still very rare, Matilde Serao was also profoundly fond of Naples, and knew how hard life could be there; in her early twenties she had made ends meet by doing piecework in a telegraph office. So what was it about pizza that provoked aversion even in her? Fundamentally, it was not the quality of the ingredients or the dubious methods of the *pizzaiolo*; it was not even the flies. The problem with pizza was Naples; and the problem with Naples was cholera.

Cholera is a uniquely revolting disease. The *Vibrio cholerae* bacterium is carried in food and water contaminated by human excrement; when it is ingested it becomes attached to the wall of the intestine. The symptoms of cholera result from the immune system's attack on the bacteria and from their breakdown, which releases a powerful toxin that reverses the normal flow through the intestinal wall, allowing the fluid components of blood to drain into the guts, and out of the body in a characteristic "rice-water" diarrhea. The most severe cases of cholera can bring about an instant, fatal collapse. Even slower progression can reduce the human body to a corpse-like, wrinkled pallor within a few hours. Death is frequently brought on by severe shock, and is preceded by violent gas, vomiting, diarrhea, suffocating chills, agonizing thirst, paroxysms of abdominal pain, and uncontrollable writhing caused by muscular spasms. The torment is made more dreadful by the fact that the shrieking victims stay conscious and mentally alert throughout. Even those lucky enough to survive this initial, aggressive phase of the disease are usually too weak to make it through the quieter but more insidious stage that follows. Eerily, the corpses of cholera victims often continue to twitch for some time after death.

Nineteenth-century Naples had eight outbreaks of this fearsome malady in the half century after the *Vibrio cholerae* first reached Europe from its endemic home in India in the 1830s. At the time, Italian doctors were still unsure of what caused cholera, and why Naples was so vulnerable. The most widely accepted hypothesis was that its germs lurked in the fetid subsoil of the city, a theory that magnified visceral fears about the notorious filth and squalor of the Neapolitan slums.

With nearly half a million souls, Naples was still by far Italy's biggest city, and Europe's most crowded when Collodi and Serao wrote their descriptions of pizza. London could then count, on average, one inhabitant for every ninety-four square yards of the city's surface area; in Manhattan, there was one for every fifty-eight square yards. The average Neapolotan had markedly less room to move: nineteen square yards. And in the three most densely packed quarters of Naples, the figure reached one person every nine square yards. This was the dark and terrifying "low city" near the seafront, the stinking belly of Naples where no outsider would venture without a revolver. Entire families with their hens and chickens lived in single tiny rooms with barely enough space for everyone to lie down—"kennels," the chief of police called them in 1869. Six-, seven-, and eight-story stacks of these hovels were built around handkerchief-sized courtyards, along alleys so narrow that the tenements sometimes touched one another at the top.

A Swedish doctor called these buildings "the most ghastly human dwellings on the face of the earth." There was no plumbing. Soil pipes and sewers, when there were any, were often cracked or blocked. Cesspools and latrines overflowed and leaked, their contents seeping into wells and water tanks. Excrement and rubbish of all kinds collected in dunghills in the courtyards, or was simply trodden into the unpaved, uncleaned passageways where rivulets of fetid water ran.

Desperate poverty was the norm in the low city. In *The Bowels of Naples*, Serao explains how the indigent majority in the low city ate mostly in the street—even rudimentary cooking was difficult in the "kennels." The cheapest dishes, at one *soldo*, consisted of a slice of pizza, or four or five fritters made from bits of cabbage stalk and fragments of anchovy, or nine boiled chestnuts swimming in a reddish juice. Two *soldi* might buy a plate of snails in broth with a biscuit, or a small portion of *maccheroni*, or some octopus boiled in seawater and flavored, like most other poor dishes, with chilies. These foods, sold by peddlers from trays or small stalls, supported a fragile service economy that was one of the few sources of employment in the worst areas.

A population living in these conditions, on this diet, was inevitably small, thin, sickly, and very susceptible to a bacterium such as *Vibrio cholerae*, whose effects are usually nullified by the juices in a healthy stomach. The cholera outbreaks had taken a huge toll in the low city, and a dread of the disease set its roots deep into the popular psyche. Many tourists shared the same fears, and avoided Naples during the cholera era. Mark Twain did visit in 1867 to climb Vesuvius and wrote a grimly witty evocation of the city's permanent state of apprehension:

> "See Naples and die." Well I do not know that one would necessarily die after merely seeing it, but to attempt to live there might turn out a little differently. . . . The people are filthy in their habits, and this makes filthy streets and breeds disagreeable sights and smells. There never was a community so prejudiced against the cholera as these Neapolitans are. But they have good reason to be. The cholera generally vanquishes a Neapolitan when it seizes him, because, you understand, before the doctor can dig through the dirt and get at the disease, the man dies.

Countless more serious-minded commentators thought that conditions in Naples said something profoundly disturbing about the Italian nation. The enthusiasm that had followed unification in 1861 rapidly faded as the scale of the problems facing the new state became apparent. The Risorgimento, it was now clear, had been the affair of a tiny minority. Concerned patriots turned their attention to exposing the poverty and backwardness of the majority—those for whom the word *Italia*, if it meant anything at all, meant taxes on basic foodstuffs, conscription, and heavy-handed policing. There was a series of investigations, both private and official, into banditry in the countryside, agriculture, illiteracy, the mafia, and other areas of social concern. But of all the problems that exposed the frightening divide between the state and the people,

between "legal" Italy and "real" Italy, the low city of Naples was perhaps the most alarming. According to one Tuscan writer, who entered the low city, revolver in hand, in 1877,

> Here you can forget about the Fatherland, Italy, nationhood. They are Neapolitans and that's that. To them, all other Italians are either Piedmontese (to the north) or yokels (to the south). Besides, these people do not even show any noble affection for their own dens, and have no greater ambition than to enjoy their miserable poverty in peace. If they are left alone to roll around in their own filth, and given cheap snails and *maccheroni* to eat, then they will never ask what kind of government is running their country.

Despite this and other impassioned pleas, nothing was done, until the early autumn of 1884, when cholera returned once more to Naples, culling the vast proportion of its victims in the low city. Anyone who had the means to abandon Naples did: 150,000 fled in all—virtually the entire aristocracy and middle class. Sulfur bonfires were lit because they were thought to purify the atmosphere of noxious exhalations. But the infernal fumes rendered the air even worse than normal—some people with breathing difficulties choked to death. In early September, hundreds of tenement dwellers were expiring from cholera daily; the shrieking of the victims and the wailing of the bereaved was incessant; bodies were left uncollected for days. More than 7,000 people are thought to have died in little over a month. Panic and rage took hold, and rumors spread unchecked: it was said that cholera was a poison concocted to exterminate the deprived; doctors and officials were pelted and beaten because they were suspected of deliberately spreading the disease. European public opinion looked on in horror at what the *Times* of London called "a people steeped in ignorance and superstition, and overwhelmed by sorrow and fear." Initially, only penitential processions and the parading of saints' images seemed to keep the seething mass in check. The press at home and abroad lined up to thunder belated denunciations: Naples was a disgrace to humanity, to civilization, and to Italy.

It was then that King Umberto took the initiative. Natural disasters, such as the floods in the Veneto in 1882 and the earthquake on the island

of Ischia in 1883, were becoming an important showcase for a monarchy that was still unsure of its role, and for a king who was an insipid and rather dim character. When news of the raging epidemic reached Umberto, he resolved to go to Naples in person. As well as a politically astute move, this was also a very brave one. There was not just the cholera and popular tumult to face; when Umberto visited the city for the first time, soon after inheriting the throne in 1878, an anarchist cook had tried to stab him to death. But this latest royal stay in Naples was greeted with almost universal relief and approval: according to *The New York Times*, Italy went "almost crazy with enthusiasm for the King." His presence settled the nerves of the populace and gave new courage to the overwhelmed authorities. He visited the hospitals, accepted petitions, gave out money, and even went on a personal tour of the poorest boroughs—without, it can safely be assumed, sampling pizza.

Whether it was Umberto or his prime minister who said "Naples must be disemboweled!" during that stroll through the low city is not certain. Nevertheless, the phrase became the slogan of the long-term government response to the crisis: the city's putrescent innards had to be ripped out, the tenements demolished, and new clean and airy quarters constructed. This was also the phrase that provoked Matilde Serao to write *The Bowels of Naples*, and her description of pizza. She, like many Neapolitans, had a well-informed fear of cholera—she said even the thought of it gave her an upset stomach—so she stayed in her adopted home in Rome during the outbreak and wrote her vivid account of the low city from memory. Its success helped propel her into a hugely successful career as a novelist, gossip columnist, newspaper editor—and professional Neapolitan.

The plan to "disembowel" Naples produced some very concrete results that are still visible today: notably Corso Umberto, the long boulevard that slices straight through the four city quarters worst hit by the 1884 cholera outbreak. To inaugurate the reconstruction work, King Umberto went back to Naples in June 1889. The queen went with him and during this visit the *pizza Margherita* acquired its name.

After the king's heroics in 1884, the cult of the monarchy was particularly strong in the city. The royal household had clear ideas about how "impressionable" the Neapolitans were, and how well they responded

to royal charisma—the memory of the *Lazzarone* King's early popularity played a part. Margherita, who was blond, forthright, and personable, was far more loved than the doughty Umberto. Matilde Serao, a conservative monarchist, was one of the loudest trumpeters of the queen's virtues. The leading ladies' fashion magazine carried Margherita's name, and fawning biographies turned every aspect of her lifestyle into a model for Italian women. She was an exemplar of beauty, elegance, charity, and *hygiene*—a buzzword of the era that embraced everything from washing and exercise to medicine and diet. Thus "hygiene" brought health and eating into a new relationship; but the smooth working of the digestion was still the great measure of well-being, as it had been in the Galenic era. According to one Neapolitan biographer, the queen hygienically balanced what she ate with her "digestive power," by preferring chicken and game birds, rice, boiled vegetables, eggs and milk products, and by taking an ice cream and a black coffee after her meals—everything was calculated not to "disturb the digestion." Her rigorously French formal lunches were also modest and hygienic, typically consisting of a *consommé*, a couple of *hors d'oeuvre*, two *entrées*, *a sorbet*, a roast, vegetables, and *entremets*.

The water supply in Naples was certainly much cleaner when the royal couple returned in 1889 than it had been in 1884. But whether the queen of hygiene had the courage actually to *taste* the pizza named after her is open to doubt—the letter in the Pizzeria Brandi offers no conclusive proof either way. All the same, her gesture of bestowing royal approval on this, the poorest dish of the poorest city in Italy, made political and human sense: it can be thought of as a late-nineteenth-century equivalent of the moment in 1987 when Princess Diana embraced an AIDS patient. Through pizza, Margherita took her own journey into the bowels of Naples.

In the name of hygiene, Naples was the subject of much undeserved snobbery from farther north in Italy. Commenting on the royal inauguration of the "disembowelling" in 1889, the Florentine newspaper *La Nazione* expressed the patronizing hope that the Neapolitans would learn to correct their old habits, which were "certainly not very hygienically correct." But even a Neapolitan could not disguise that pizza was so unhygienic that it was potentially lethal. The chances of exporting this

sample of squalor outside Naples were close to zero. Serao's *The Bowels of Naples* tells the story of a small-time Neapolitan entrepreneur who tried to set up a pizza outlet in Rome. In theory, there should have been a ready market: many Neapolitans had taken the opportunity to move away when the Italian seat of government was transferred to Rome in 1870. The entrepreneur offered the full range of products: tomato pizza, pizza with *mozzarella*, pizza with anchovies, pizza with garlic, oil, and oregano. But the business flopped. As Serao rather daintily put it: "Pizza, when taken away from its Neapolitan environment, seemed out of place; it was indigestible." The word *pizzeria* is not recorded in an Italian dictionary until 1918. Even in 1947 a Neapolitan journalist, describing his city for a national audience, used the word in quotation marks—he clearly thought outsiders might not be sure what it meant. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that most of the rest of Italy found pizza not only digestible, but delicious.