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# THE HISTORY

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To throw an orange is to join in centuries of symbolic rebellion and live-action role-playing. À la the Battle of Oranges circa 12<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

According to a mishmash of history and legend, the northwestern Italian municipality of Ivrea was once ruled by a tyrannical baron—often identified as Ranieri di Biandrate or William VII of Montferrat—who forced himself on newlywed women under the medieval right *ius primae noctis*. Once upon a time, a miller's daughter named Violetta managed to fight him off, decapitating him and appearing in the window of the despot's castle by firelight, holding his head in one hand— instantly inciting the populace to burn the palace down and initiating an annual tradition of hurling oranges for three days straight.

Post-World War II, the Battle was institutionalized into its current form—the iconic “Battle of the Oranges. Held over three days before Ash Wednesday, the modern Battle includes 9 foot teams, 50 cart teams, up to 1,000 tons of oranges, 8,000 orange throwers, tens of thousands of

spectators, and one young woman chosen as the “Mugnaia,” who represents Violetta—and does not participate in the fruit assault.

The orange throwers hurl fruit while screaming profanities, embracing, joking and cheering one another on, “exhibiting with their total beings a deranged-seeming but euphoric sense of abandon and belonging, an outpouring of ferocity mixed with joy.” Oranges fly through the air in a kind of balletic flow-state, colliding with shoulders, forearms, temples, mouths. Soon the ground is covered in an electric yellow mash. The juice bleeds out. The slurry congeals.

Everyone is throwing and being thrown at, working together to have a good time. As Jon Mooallem writes in his [NYTimes article](#), “Why Are These Italians Massacring Each Other With Oranges?": *A fragile equilibrium is being maintained, between the seriousness and unseriousness of Carnival, between how crazy the thing looks and how meaningful it feels. I love the Battle of the Oranges for pulling that off. It was the ugliest beautiful thing I ever saw.*

Mooallem is getting at the kind of catharsis I’m aiming for—how crazy throwing an orange at the full moon fifty times can look and how meaningful it can feel.