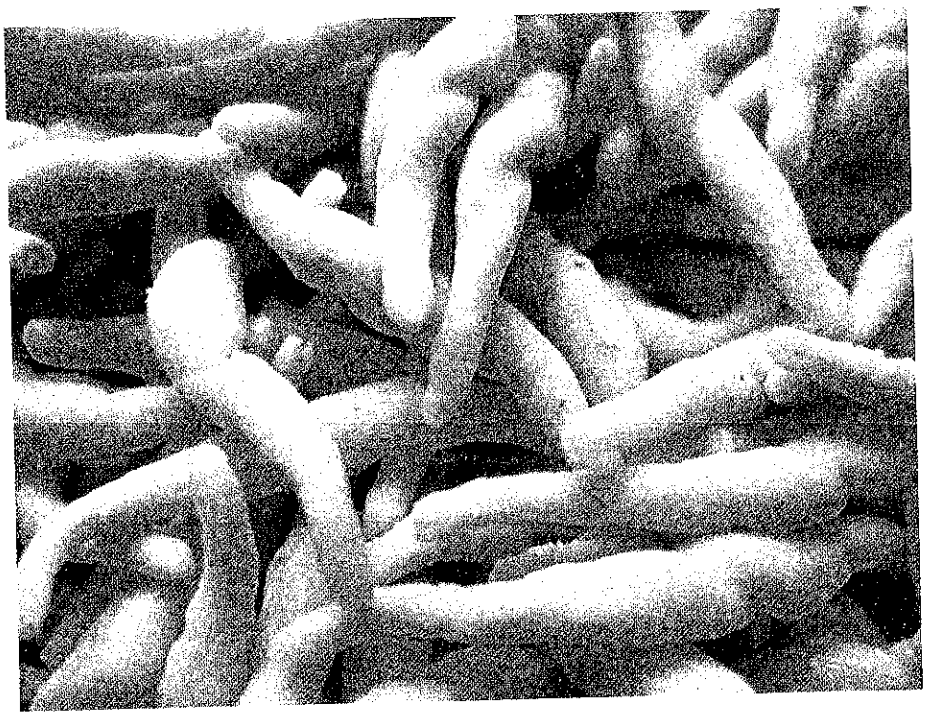
INTRODUCTION

The Food of Italy: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes

It is not down in any map; true places never are.
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Tiramisu. Spaghetti. Pizza. These items have become so pervasive that they come across as tired stereotypes. Even if many global consumers are not fully aware of their origin, Italian food is undoubtedly among the most palate-pleasing culinary traditions of the world. Its influence and appeal are increasing not only in the kitchen, but also in popular culture. A contemporary book about the recent developments in U.S. cuisine carries the title *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation*, focusing on the fashionable (and now ubiquitous) Italian green as a symbol of cosmopolitanism and culinary innovation.[1] In the past three decades Italian cuisine has gained status as well as notoriety. It is not only served at family-style eateries, ice cream parlours and pizza shops: high-end Italian restaurants are now listed among the most prestigious establishments in major cities worldwide, receiving heartfelt accolades from both critics and patrons. TV shows and magazines are full of Italian recipes, all claiming authenticity, and culinary professionals become celebrities banking on their Italian origins. As Italian cuisine acquires new relevance, scores of travellers flock to the epicentre of it all: Italy. They come to unearth yet undiscovered traditions, to visit villages and farms off the beaten track and to savour unique products. They lounge in countryside villas while taking a break in between cooking classes with world-renowned chefs, or scout out mom-and-pop establishments to enjoy 'authentic' local cuisine. So what is all the fuss about? How did Italian food manage to become what it is today? Why does it speak to so many people all over the world? Where does the apparently endless



Unusual pasta types such as *trofie* from Liguria are attracting the attention of food enthusiasts all over the world.

variety of local and regional cuisines come from? How did the dazzling – and, frankly, quite confusing for many – assortment of wines, cheeses, breads, vegetables and salamis come to be?

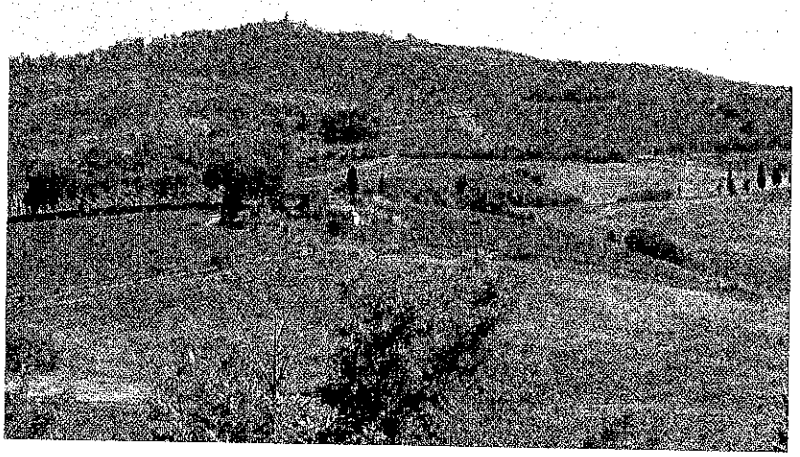
Building the Mystique

When people find out I am from Italy, a question they frequently ask is: 'So, what's your favourite Italian restaurant?', which is usually followed by 'Do you cook every day?' The assumption that I have a deep and innate connection with good food points to the widespread notion that Italy is, indeed, a special place when it comes to eating and the pleasures of the table. The world seems to be so in love with Italian food that many tend to think of it as exquisitely traditional, almost timeless, untouched by the events that have shaped what many consider a broken food system. Foodies are enraptured by its endless diversity and its capacity to intrigue and to always offer something new and 'hot'. Tourists and travellers, often pleasantly surprised by their meals and the warm manners that surround them, end up projecting healthy amounts of romanticism on

to dishes and ingredients, enriching Italian food with their own desires and longings. Writers also do their bit to perpetuate the myth. Besides cookbooks, non-fiction works like Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun* have played an important role in solidifying perceptions, expectations and biases about Italian food. Although Mayes herself points out that 'it is easy for foreigners to idealize, romanticize, stereotype, and oversimplify local people', she often gets very close to doing precisely that.[2]

> The rhythm of Tuscan dining may throw us off but after a long lunch outside, one concept is clear – siesta. The logic of a three-hour fall through the crack of the day makes perfect sense . . . My idea of heaven is a two-hour lunch with Ed, I believe he must have been Italian in another life. He has begun to gesture and wave his hands, which I've never seen him do. He likes to cook at home but simply throws himself into it here.[3]

Exposed to the influence of the environment and enthralled by the inevitable languor that apparently possesses everything and everybody in Italy, the foreign protagonists of Mayes's story slowly change their behaviour. Time seems to lose its weight and its rigidity, melting into



The Tuscan landscape plays an important role in the mystique of the Italian countryside and its food.

The scandalous fame of extra-virgin olive oil

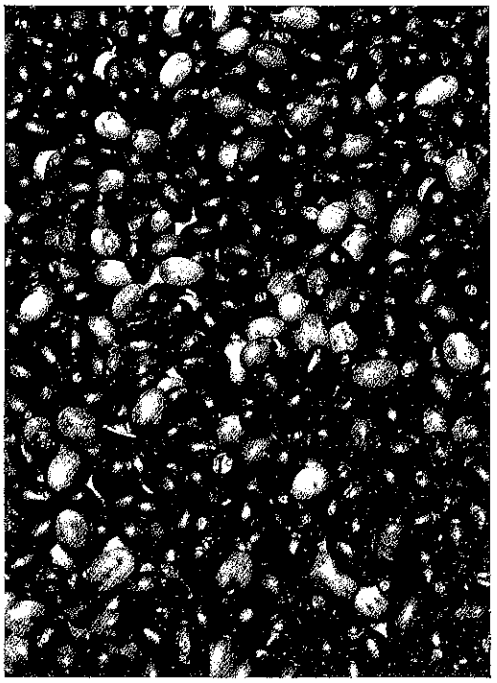
Extra-virgin olive oil is certainly among the most sought-after of Italian products and a symbol of the Mediterranean diet. Each variety of olive, or cultivar, differs in size, taste and growing periods, creating a multiplicity of local varieties. Following the increasing appreciation for the cultural and economic value of the product, in recent years the profession of olive-oil taster has been publicly recognized, and also the more refined consumers are now aware of the impact of elements such as growing areas, cultivar and harvesting times. Small productions, difficult to purchase and frankly quite expensive, enjoy unprecedented success. Nevertheless, for everyday use, most consumers still buy mass-produced olive oils, sensitive to prices more than just quality.

Often referred to as 'liquid gold', both for its unique hue and its commercial value, extra-virgin olive oil has been the focus of rural and trade policies aimed at guaranteeing its origin and its quality. In fact, the sector is plagued by a long history of adulteration and counterfeiting. Olive oil is classified in different grades according to extraction methods, taste and oleic acid content, with extra-virgin olive oil having an acidity lower than 0.8 per cent, with an absolutely perfect taste. However, many producers argue that these measurements are not enough to limit the sales of cheap 'deodorized' oils, which are chemically purified to get rid of smells connected with defective production.

But the problem goes well beyond grades. Other vegetable oils – including hazelnut – have been bottled and sold as

the pleasure of extended lunches and long naps, which are considered as essential to the natives' lives as their gestures and flair for pleasure – especially of the culinary kind.

The genre of the food memoir has become quite prevalent in popular culture, relating the adventures and human development of the foreigner who arrives in Italy and establishes a new, sensual connection with his or her true self through eating and other assorted messy, noisy pleasures. Italy is not the only place of course, as any location with exotic



Taggiasca olives from Liguria are renowned for producing high-quality extra-virgin olive oil.

extra-virgin olive oil, both for the national and the international markets. Taking advantage of laws that do not require the indication of the product origin on the label, olive oils from other areas of the Mediterranean, especially Turkey and Tunisia, are bottled in Italy and resold as Italian extra-virgin olive oil. It is an uphill battle, but one that the Italian government and high-quality producers are ready to fight to protect the image and quality of the Italian extra-virgin olive oil. Nobody wants to be swindled with fake gold.

flair – from the Fiji islands to Southeast Asia – is likely to provide the necessary background for self-discovery and life-changing insights. When it comes to food, however, the focus is often on southern France (preferably Provence), but above all on Italy, with Tuscany featuring large among the possible destinations. The genre has deep roots, dating back to classics like E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), in which a young, repressed English woman tries to escape British society by embracing Italian culture. The theme of the foreigner, often a woman,

who is frustrated with his or her life and finds the answer to all existential needs in Italy – often by establishing a new relationship with food, pleasure and desire – has become pervasive in memoirs, in magazine articles and in a growing number of movies such as adaptations of books like *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Eat, Pray, Love*, as well as original scripts like *A Month by the Lake*, *Letters to Juliet*, *A Good Year* and *When in Rome*, in which the authors decided to invent a new fountain, as Rome did not have enough . . .

We often find ourselves in the realm of the pastoral fantasy: far away and acceptably foreign, Italy is at times imagined as a backward but charming place where there is no room for the hustle and bustle of modern efficiency; where productivity is not a priority and life is different, sweeter. Visitors expect to get back in touch with nature and with themselves while rediscovering food as enjoyment and partaking, rather than as a source of anxiety and the cause of extra pounds. In this kind of narrative, Italians seem to play the cultural role attributed to the 'noble savage' in eighteenth-century European culture, defined by qualities such as 'health, frugality, liberty, and vigour of body and mind: the love of virtue, the fear of the gods, a natural goodness toward our neighbours, attachment to our friends, fidelity to all the world, moderation in prosperity, fortitude in adversity, courage always bold to speak the truth, and abhorrence of flattery', in the words of the French writer Fénelon.[4] However, as the cultural critic Edward Said emphasized in his famous discussion of Western colonial perceptions of Eastern cultures, the projection of such qualities on a different, exotic population is often wrought with ambivalence: it is easy to detect on one hand the envy for a natural state beyond the modern individual's reach, on the other a pervasive sense of superiority, as transpires for instance from this passage in Mayes's book.

> How Italian will we ever be? Not very, I'm afraid. Too pale. Too unable to gesture as a natural accompaniment to talking . . . We never will master the art of everyone talking at once . . . After a soccer game, we'll never gun through the streets blowing the horn or drive a scooter around and around in circles in the piazza. Politics always will passeth understanding.[5]

Tomatoes, parsley and garlic are among the most popular ingredients that are widely identified as symbols of the Mediterranean diet.

The Mediterranean Connection

Italian food is not only considered restorative for the soul, but good for you. So much so that widespread appreciation for the benefits of the Mediterranean diet has turned into a mantra.[6] For centuries, populations around the Mediterranean, including Italy, found themselves fighting against food scarcity, wars, invasions and an environment that was often not very favourable to agriculture. With limited access to meat, dairy and fats, they developed eating habits that hinged on grains, pulses and vegetables that varied depending on their location, their cultural background and their sociopolitical situation.[7] Only after the 'economic miracle' that swept the country starting in the late 1950s were most of the Italian population – including the less fortunate – finally able to afford a more diverse and abundant diet, even though that often implied severing ties to traditional ways of life and their culinary habits. As we will see, new packaging and conservation techniques, industrial mass production and more sophisticated systems of transportation and distribution brought profound changes in the way Italians ate and thought of food. As these epochal changes were affecting diet in Italy and elsewhere in southern Europe, the rest of the world seemed to realize that the practices adopted by Mediterranean people to fight hunger actually constituted a healthy eating model. Immediately following the Second World War, the

American epidemiologist Leland Allbaugh, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, conducted in-depth fieldwork on the diet of people on the island of Crete to assess the conflict's impact on local food security. However, the correlation between what people around the Mediterranean ate and their health – despite their poverty – became clear only later, thanks to the work of Ancel Keys. Having spent time in Naples in the early 1950s, he noticed that locals, despite their poverty, showed very low rates of heart disease and relatively long life expectancies, a finding confirmed by further research conducted in seven different countries. Another study, commissioned in the 1960s by the European Atomic Energy Commission (Euratom), emphasized the correlation between dietary patterns and lower incidence of heart disease. It was not until the 1980s that the American and northern European public became aware of these findings, when Ancel Keys and his colleagues published the results of their seven-country survey work. Later, in 1993, after the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued the Food Guide Pyramid as a visual representation of dietary recommendations for Americans, a Mediterranean Diet Pyramid was presented at a conference organized in Boston at the Harvard School of Public Health by the World Health Organization together with the Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust, an organization connected with the olive oil and wine industries, among others.[8] The media fell in love with the Mediterranean diet, which not only promoted healthy and palatable food, but also supposedly facilitated weight loss, especially if paired with a more active lifestyle.

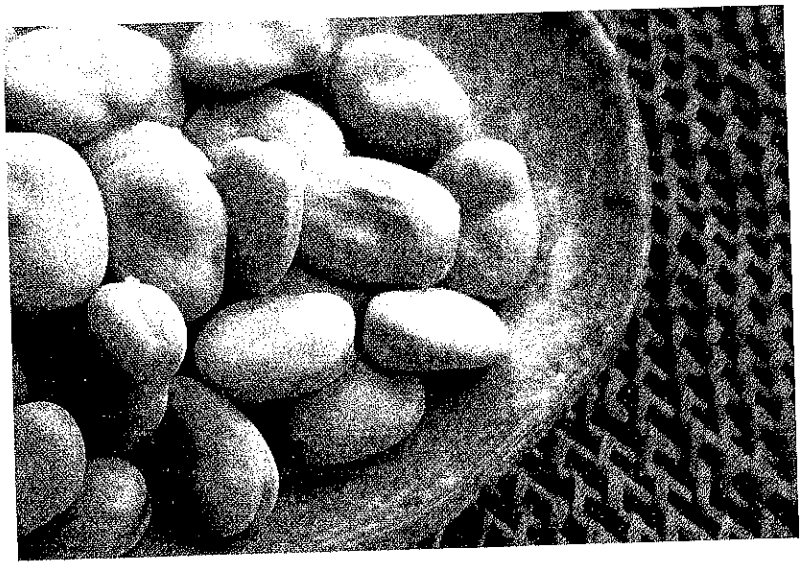
Beyond the health aspects, it is necessary to look at the Mediterranean diet as a cultural artefact that heavily influences the attitude of many foreigners, including Americans, towards the food of southern Europe, namely Italy. What is the Mediterranean diet after all? The media representation is mixed; it is unclear whether the diet is considered as a cultural and historical construction, as a selection of specific foods or, more scientifically, as a nutrient profile.[9] The three elements all appear in magazines and popular literature, but when the focus is on nutrients and food selections, little space is given to the deep connections between a specific nutritional pattern and the society that created it as a part of its culture.

Defining the Mediterranean diet has become even more complicated after the 2010 UNESCO decision that placed the Mediterranean diet on the 'List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity', following a proposal from Morocco, Italy, Spain and Greece. Despite the acknowledged

need to consider 'the millenary qualities and values of an important heritage, transmitted from generation to generation', the document hints that the Mediterranean diet is, in fact, an evolving food tradition. For instance, it points out how 'new ways of transmitting expertise and knowledge as well as of meaning are added to the informal and traditional modes of transmission (participation and imitation within the family, oral communication in the markets, etc.)'.[10] So the declaration recognizes the dynamic element of the uninterrupted process of recreation of a lived experience and the inherent intercultural dialogue that establishes a Mediterranean cultural space.

The document offers no specification as to who is part of the diverse communities of the area: only locals, born and raised, or also immigrants? The question is not an idle one, since large sections of the population in the European countries on the Mediterranean shores are exhibiting growing unease towards what is often perceived as the assault of hordes from southern parts of the world. The presence of Morocco – the country of origin of a great number of immigrants in southern Europe – among the signatories of the UNESCO document suggests that the spirit of the declaration is inclusive and aimed at intercultural dialogue and social integration. However, in most countries that backed the initiative, immigration issues are often framed by conservative parties, focusing on the perceived threat to the local traditional way of life in terms of customs, culture, religion and more material aspects that range from clothing to food. Food-related cultural heritage is considered too weak to survive by itself, besieged by globalizing forces. In this specific case, the equivalence between the constraints of globalization and dietary models based on fast foods, fat- and sugar-rich diets and mass-produced goods is quite immediate.

At any rate, it is not easy to pin down what the Mediterranean diet is in terms of cultural traditions, dishes or even sheer nutrients, since it varies in time and space. A growing attention to food, however, suggests a change of focus from diet to cuisine, which is particularly alluring to those readers who are always looking for authenticity and prone to adopt foreign fare as a sign of distinction. In fact, in many areas around the world – and not only in developing countries – access to affordable, healthy food is a serious issue: not everybody has the financial and cultural means to include the ingredients and dishes of the Mediterranean in their diets. Furthermore, limited availability can be a problem, as anybody who has tried to cook Italian dishes abroad knows well. Tasty



Broad (fava) beans, cultivated in Italy since Roman times, are among the ingredients of *vignarola* pasta.

tomatoes, fresh herbs and specific produce like Romanesco zucchini and cauliflower are not easy to find, and can also be quite expensive. As a Roman, I have struggled to find simple ingredients like tender artichokes and broad (fava) beans for *vignarola*, a typical spring pasta dish that calls for fresh peas, artichokes and broad beans, very common and cheap at that time of the year in the countryside around Rome. Furthermore, the mystique that surrounds certain products becomes at times disproportionate, allowing for more or less intentional miscommunications and for the spread of counterfeits. The case of extra-virgin olive oil provides a perfect example. Indicated in many quarters of the culinary world/community as a panacea for several ailments, the product is often described as completely natural, hiding all technology involved in its manufacturing. The frequent and widespread frauds involving extra-virgin olive oil have shown how consumers can be duped into buying foods that do not deliver what they promise.[11] The scientific theories about the Mediterranean diet only became popular in Italy in the 1970s, first among nutritionists, and later in the media. The very expression became current in the common language only in the late 1980s, when a variety of diets were gaining traction due to growing concerns about body image and weight loss.

The New Appreciation for the Old

Italians seem happy to play along with the apparently harmless myths and stereotypes about their food, partly out of sincere pride and attachment to their culinary customs, partly as a way to bask in the whole globe's admiration for this particular aspect of their heritage and partly as good business. These themes appear, for instance, in a Parmigiano Reggiano advertisement that ran in the *New Yorker* in the summer of 2011:

> *Parmigiano Reggiano: Always Naturally Handmade*
>
> Parmigiano Reggiano is a collaboration between Italian master craftsmen and Mother Nature. The air, the soil, the temperature, the humidity have as much of a hand in what makes every morsel of Parmigiano Reggiano a delight to the senses as to the centuries-old production methods used to create it. Aged for 24 months or more (the longest of any cheese) it has a slightly crystalline texture that melts on the tongue into buttery and fruity notes. It is handmade by people with a passion for their craft and enjoyed by people with a passion for the very best man and nature can bring to the table.[12]

Casu marzu cheese from Sardinia.

Besides the European Union mark for the Protected Denomination of Origin products that will be discussed in chapter Eight, the advertisment carried the logos of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali) and Buonitalia, the trade institution for food promotion whose motto is 'The Real Taste of Italy'. The entire message is built around the oxymoron of a food 'naturally made', which points to its wholesomeness and its connection with the natural environment where the cheese is produced, and at the same time to the skills involved in its manufacturing. The whole idea highlights the closeness of nature and culture, and portrays quality as the result of a positive interaction between them. The other elements that emerge from the advertisement are the passion and investment Italian producers put into the food they make, and a laid-back approach to time. The period it takes to age the cheese to perfection is just a prolongation of the centuries-old traditions, and their impact is visible in the final results. Time is slower in Italy, providing consumers all over the world with the perfect antidote to the fast lifestyle that many in post-industrial societies both resent and embrace.

Part of Italian food's recent success is due to the increasing importance of buzzwords such as 'authenticity', 'tradition', 'typical', 'local' and 'artisanal' in the culinary world, popular culture and the media. Against the background of fears and anxieties about the provenance and safety of what we eat, these expressions reveal the desire for products whose origin is not only clear and recognizable, but also connected to specific people, their skills and their lives. Although industrial and mass-produced food is affordable, convenient and accessible, growing segments of high-end consumers are ready to pay premium prices for items they perceive to be of higher quality and thus more enjoyable. Many of these delicacies are available in limited quantities, due to the rarity of their ingredients, the length of the production process and the small numbers of artisans involved. Marketers have become aware of this trend, informing food lovers about the personal stories of those who manufacture their purchases, the traditions on which they base their activity and their dedication to excellence. In many ways, Italian products are very well placed to satisfy these kinds of demands. Many specialities now labelled as 'typical' and 'authentic' have survived (albeit barely) the industrialization of the food system that started much earlier and had a much longer history in other parts of the world. Specialities like *colatura di alici*, the sauce obtained by filtering the liquid produced by the fermentation of anchovies

and salt, and *casu marzu*, the Sardinian sheep cheese softened by the digestive action of maggots, which breaks down the cheese's fats, are alive and well, their sales thriving due to the renewed interest in traditional foods. Since much of the Italian population was rural, traditions connected with local productions were maintained until the late 1950s, when Italians moved en masse from the countryside to the cities, and from the south to the centre and north. Entire villages were abandoned, and agricultural activities were often identified with poverty and perceived as backward. The post-war generations wanted to be modern, and they embraced the new industrial products with great passion, partly stimulated by the growing influence of the media, in particular television.

Only recently, as a consequence of the new appreciation for traditional and artisanal products, have the jobs of running a small farm or producing high-end wine become respectable, and at times even glamorous (of course, that is not the case for rural labour engaged in large-scale agriculture for industrial uses, often composed of undocumented immigrants). This does not imply that the fabrication, the flavour or even the looks of these newly cherished items are the same as fifty years ago. Many have evolved over time to respond to different needs and unprecedented opportunities. As we will see in chapter Eight, the definition of food's characteristics has been complicated by the establishment of regulations for the geographical indications referring to wine and food. Parameters and standards of production, while ensuring the quality and the survival of traditions, also have the potential to freeze any further development. Are these foods being saved from extinction and protected from globalization and corporate greed, or rather, are they turned into museum pieces? Who decides what the 'original' or 'authentic' standard of the product is, and what political and economic interests go beyond the negotiations behind it? From the cultural point of view, what does it mean to elevate a traditional food item to a higher status? How does it affect its actual usage, and even accessibility to the communities that produce it in the first place?

As scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observed, heritage can be considered 'a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse in the past . . . [it] is a value added industry . . . [it] produces the local for export'.[13] This implies that food traditions are not simply objects or practices already existing out there, just needing to be discovered, uncovered or saved. Instead, they are frequently established in the form we know by our very act of observing and defining them. They may fall

under what Eric Hobsbawm defined as an 'invented tradition', as a 'response to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition'.[14] The recent rediscovery and revamping of food traditions can be interpreted as a manifestation of contemporary cosmopolitanism, solidly rooted in the global flows of goods, ideas, practices, capital and people. The revitalization (or even resurrection) of a culinary tradition does not only operate on the past, but also tends to solidify the present, guaranteeing a better future for the communities involved in global tourism and consumption. From an economic point of view, international exposure leads to increased demand for, and pricing of, traditional products that would otherwise become extinct. The international organization Slow Food launched local initiatives called *presidia* to 'sustain quality production at risk of extinction, protect unique regions and ecosystems, recover traditional processing methods, safeguard native breeds and local plant varieties', as their website declares.[15] Operating through social actions, media campaigns and political interventions, Slow Food has demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. The intense and strongly flavoured black celery from Trevi in Umbria, the *radic di mont* (wild radicchio) from Friuli Venezia Giulia and the *regina* tomato from Torre Canne in Apulia have acquired national visibility thanks to their induction into the *presidia* system. The production of *lardo* (cured pork fat) from the Tuscan

Vineyards in Piedmont, Italy. Producing high-end wine is considered a respectable, and at times even glamorous, activity.

Lardo di Colonnata.

village of Colonnata, traditionally aged in marble vats from the nearby quarries, risked being discontinued in 1996 under the new food safety regulation introduced by the EU. However, the intervention of Slow Food and the public involvement that followed led to changes in the regulation, which now allow for traditional products to maintain practices that would otherwise be forbidden.[16] The financial viability of products, skills and daily practices at the centre of culinary revival and promotions also depends on the willingness of consumers and tourists elsewhere to spend money. Recipes featuring *lardo* are now widely appreciated, and the summer festival in Colonnata, dedicated to delicious pork fat, attracts visitors from all over the world, spurring a wide variety of activities connected with the traditional product.

Back to History

For the professionals who produce and import Italian food, or for authors and journalists who write about it and need to pitch a good story or a book proposal, it may be hard to maintain a critical distance from the hype and the stereotypes. This is particularly the case if consumers and readers are more than ready to embrace them. Born and raised in Rome, and having worked for many years for the popular Italian food and wine magazine *Gambero Rosso*, I have had many opportunities to witness

these dynamics, and over time I have realized that as soon as you scratch the surface, there is quite a lot that deserves to be explored. However, I have grown increasingly wary of the concept of unchanging traditions. When it comes to Italian food, it is necessary to re-inject history into culinary romance to put things in perspective. Where did the food grown, produced and consumed in Italy come from? Has it always been there, or did somebody (but who? and when?) introduce it into the Italian rural and urban landscapes? And have Italian culinary traditions always been so diverse, rich and local? How have they changed over time, and how are they still changing? Which factors have caused or accompanied these developments?

These are some of the questions I address in this book. In doing so, I explore different sources, multiple approaches and various fields of research, including agricultural sciences, environmental studies, biology, nutrition, economics, business, law, marketing, politics, postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, design, architecture, technology and media and communication, among others. Food finds itself at the core of many social, economic and political issues at the global level, while keeping us close to the most concrete and material aspects of culture. After all, what we eat literally becomes part of us and affects the way we think about ourselves. What and how we produce, purchase, cook, consume and dispose of what we eat has always had an enormous influence on who we are as individuals and as members of communities on all scales.

Food culture has a life and a logic of its own, which cannot be exclusively reduced to external factors. As Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari contend in *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*, it is important to understand the dynamics behind the development of dishes, techniques and cooking styles, or the changes in the use of ingredients, as self-sustaining processes with their own internal logic.

> The history of food cannot be reduced to extraneous dimensions. It is related more closely to the sciences and technologies of everyday material culture, to the rituals and necessities of ordinary life, and to forms of taste than to anything else.[17]

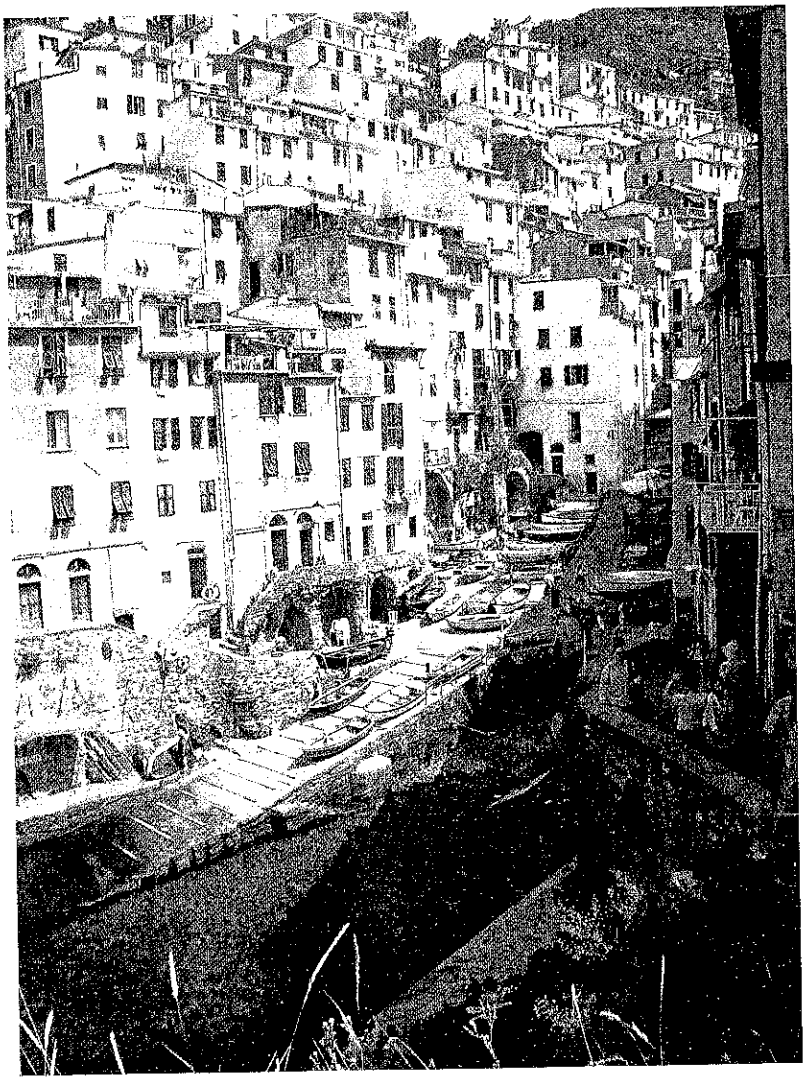
Following their approach, this book will also look at the history of gastronomy, that is to say the way food has been thought about, talked about and represented through history. We will see how the first examples

of food criticism emerged in the Greek cities of Sicily, how medieval and Renaissance authors conceptualized the different kinds of food and their impact on the body, and how a merchant from Romagna, Pellegrino Artusi, established a new language to talk about cooking after the unification of Italy. However, this is not enough to assess the complex history of food in Italy. It is also crucial to look at the cultural aspects of economic issues of production, distribution and consumption. Antiquity scholar Peter Garnsey has acutely pointed out:

> Two questions pose themselves under the heading of food and the economy: first, how far conditions were favourable for the production of food, that is to say, the physical environment, the state of agricultural technology, and the way ownership of and access to land and its resources were distributed among the population; and second, how far market mechanisms and institutions promoted the circulation of food between areas of surplus and areas of deficit.[18]

It is impossible to grasp fully how the economics of Italian food have changed over time without some background information on the peculiar political history of the country, including the long succession of populations that settled down in Italy over the centuries, their organizations and their influence on material culture. Throughout the book we will see how the transformations that took place through the centuries have contributed to the diverse culinary mosaic of Italy, where ingredients, products and customs still play a noticeable role in defining local identities.

Information from the past is not enough to make sense of the present and what readers might see when visiting Italy. When we find ourselves in a foreign place, as much as we think we have the tools to understand it, there are always layers and layers of objects, signs and simple gestures that require interpretation. We do not want to risk going through a different reality, trying to understand it through meanings and expectations that we carry with us from the places we come from, unable to use those that the new reality offers to us. We would end up missing a lot. What's the origin and sense of the dishes we see on a restaurant's menu? Why is the menu formatted as it is, with dishes divided into courses that do not fall under the sequence 'appetizer (or starter)', 'entrée (or main course)' and dessert? Have restaurants always



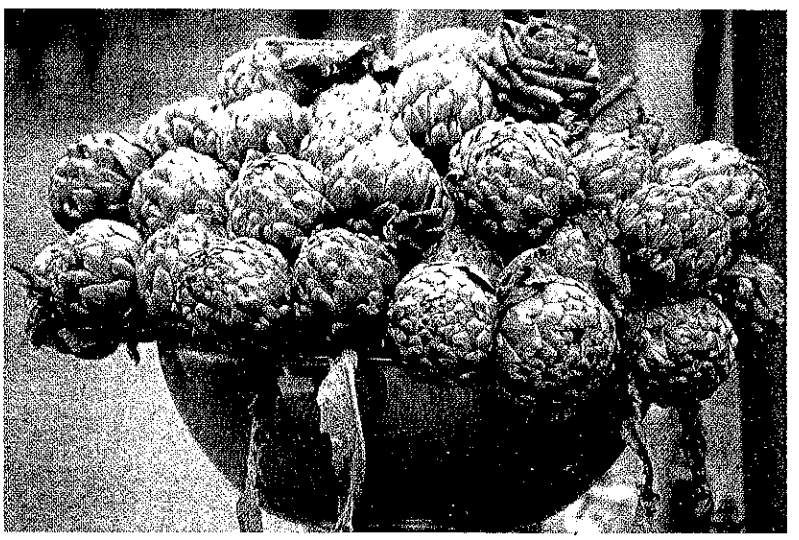
Riomaggiore, Cinque Terre. The five villages in the Cinque Terre area in Liguria form one of the most popular tourist destinations.

existed? Have they always been the same or have they changed over time? Who ate there? And where did people buy food? Have the markets where we shop been there for a long time, and always in the same form? Has it always been possible to buy the things we now have access to?

Visitors are often struck by Italy's rural landscape, the sense of peace and beauty it conveys with its variation from the alpine meadows where cows graze at ease to the flat fields of the Po plain, the small plots wrapped around hills and mountain slopes in the Apennines and the

stunning fruit orchards of the Mediterranean coast. Every time I visit my grandparents' village on the slope of the Gran Sasso mountain I am moved by the jagged profile of the peak, the patchwork patterns of fields and orchards on the hilly terrain, and even the smell of the grass and trees. It is easy to get lost in a pastoral dream of harmony and traditions, where men and environments have adapted to each other over centuries. We can easily rent a countryside villa, or get a nice room in one of the farms that have turned to *agriturismo* (rural tourism) to make ends meet and take advantage of the city people's renewed interest, without asking ourselves how those structures ended up where they are, looking the way they do. Pastures, trees and canals have plenty to tell those who are patient enough to listen about the lives and the traditions of those who shaped them. These are tales of wealth and poverty, delight and survival, of communities and individuals that have left deep – although often veiled and silent – marks on the food Italians grow, make, sell, eat and even throw away. I hope the stories and the information in this book will increase readers' interest in the varied products and cuisines of Italy, their desire to know them better and their enjoyment when they consume them.

Our voyage through history looks at the events that have shaped food – its production, consumption and perceptions – in Italy, from its prehistoric origin to more recent developments. Each chapter focuses on a specific period and the cultural, political, productive and technical



Artichokes (*carciofi*) play an important role in the culinary tradition of Rome.

Fusilli alla Vignarola

For 4 people
3 artichokes
squeeze of lemon
2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
1 whole, peeled clove garlic
300 g (10 oz) shelled broad (fava) beans
300 g (10 oz) shelled peas
450 g (1 lb) fusilli
2 tbsp chopped fresh parsley
grated Romano cheese
black pepper, salt

Clean the artichokes by removing the internal fluff, cut them into thin slices and place them in water with some lemon squeezed into it. Sauté them in a pan for about fifteen minutes with the extra-virgin olive oil and the garlic. Add the beans and the shelled peas, 2 tbsp of water, salt and pepper. Cover with a lid and cook until the ingredients become soft but not mushy. Remove the garlic clove. Meanwhile, cook the pasta in salted water till al dente, drain and add it to the pan with the vegetables. When serving, sprinkle with grated Romano cheese and the chopped fresh parsley.

Bruschetta with Lardo di Colonnata and Prawns

This is a creative take on the traditional Roman bruschetta, usually simply seasoned with garlic, salt and olive oil.

For 4 people
4 prawns
4 slices country bread
4 thin slices *lardo di Colonnata*
extra-virgin olive oil, salt

Quickly blanch the prawns in boiling salted water and peel them. Grill the bread and season it with salt and a drizzle of olive oil. Place a *lardo* slice on each bread slice and place a prawn on top.

factors that have determined the introduction of new crops and dishes, shaped diverse landscapes and established distinctive ways to cook, eat and think about what is cooked and eaten. Finally, the last three chapters will assess the current situation and the impact of globalization on what Italians and the new immigrant population consume.

We will end our journey with the exploration of a crucial aspect of food culture in Italy: *campanilismo*, an expression that refers to the love, pride and attachment that the inhabitants of a certain place – those who find themselves under the shadow of the town bell tower – feel for it. What role do these elements play in the development of local culinary identities? How do they affect the ways Italians think of themselves in relation to what they eat? For centuries, towns and cities have boasted about what's unique to their tables, often originating in the surrounding areas. Other customs have their roots in rural cultures that are inexorably changing and, some say, disappearing. Over the years, after the establishment of regions as administrative structures in the 1970s, Italians started thinking of their eating patterns, ingredients and dishes in terms of regional traditions. I must admit I am emotionally connected with the dishes of my Roman upbringing: *pajata*, tiny knots made of the intestines of suckling veal calves and cooked in a tomato sauce; bruschetta, slices of bread grilled and seasoned with various toppings; the crunchy, deep-fried *carciofi alla giudia* of the Roman Jewish tradition; and pasta *alla Vignarola*, reminding Romans of their connections with the surrounding countryside. Dishes that remind me of my family roots in Abruzzo resonate in a special way, particularly the rough texture of spaghetti *alla chitarra*, made with a wooden contraption that looks like a strange harp, and *crespelle*, a savoury version of crêpes served in broth.

As much as I try, when it comes to food in Italy I always feel I am just scratching the surface, and I believe my suspicion is quite legitimate. However, this is precisely what makes Italian cuisines unique and fascinating: we can rest assured that, as much as we expand our knowledge, we never risk getting bored and that surprises are always around the corner.

Buon appetito!