



The agricultural and food heritage

Evolution of eating habits and taste between tradition and innovation

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The key facts in brief

Today our meals begin with savory and end with sweet, we combine pasta with tomato sauce, we choose what and when to eat. But it was not always like this. Food, as an item of social and cultural identity, is characterized by choices and preferences that have changed over the centuries. Taste follows from flavor and is an individual sensation. But, we must also realize that it's influenced by cultural, economic and social circumstances. At the root of the traditions there are gastronomic influences resulting from the meeting of different cultures, a continuous exchange between peoples. In recent decades, the globalized food model has been established, offering everything and more, at any time, even at the risk of losing our specialties and identity. Our agricultural and food heritage, combined with a greater awareness of the value of food, becomes the starting point for reassessing the local cuisine, understood as a combination of tradition, creativity and innovation. Consumers have realized that foods form a cumulation of history, rediscovering its roots, having a new interest in products and gastronomic specialties that are today better and more reliable thanks to innovations in the industry.



To better understand: a few basic concepts

Garum: a type of fermented fish sauce typical of the Roman period, obtained from the intestines and other parts of fish waste, marinated in salt, mixed with spices, herbs, oil, vinegar, honey, wine, figs and dates.

Maestro Martino: a native of the Canton of Ticino in the mid 15th century (today Switzerland, in those days the State of Milan), he is considered the first modern chef in history, who started to change the taste with more subtle flavors, using herbs and simple products such as vegetables. He worked at the major Italian courts of the renaissance, the Sforza court in Milan and the papal court in Rome.

DOP (or PDO) Protected Designation of Origin: certification that protects foods whose quality and characteristics depend exclusively on the territory in which they are produced. All stages of the production cycle take place in a specific geographic area.

IGP (or PGI) - Protected Geographical Indication: certification awarded to agricultural products and foods for which at least one phase of the production process must take place in a particular geographic area. Both certifications protect consumers from unfit products placed on the market.

Food chain: a set of inter-related activities that contribute to the creation and commercialization of a finished product: agriculture, manufacturing, distribution channels and consumption

Short chain allows a more direct relationship between agricultural producers and end users of the products (to **zero kilometer**, a very short chain).

Local supply chains or having a strong local connection, mostly for the dairy, the wine, and the olive oil industries.

People's calendar: July



Food as a means of social identity

Foods have always traveled and continue to travel, revolutionizing the lives of men. Most products have been introduced and transformed by great social and cultural events, phenomena comparable in a way to today's globalization: the Neolithic Revolution in the Fertile Crescent, the Arab civilization in the Middle Ages, the discovery of America and the French Revolution. The kitchen is a place for sharing and transformation; food increases contact between cultures, but does not come out unscathed. There are foods that have always accompanied man, like wheat, oil and wine, while others have been forgotten, like the Roman garum; some were put to one side such as honey, replaced by sugar, but are today considered once again, because they are more healthy; others are transfor-

med such as corn, which has been used in flour to make porridge and bread, according to European traditions. The discovery of America introduced new products and new flavors, many of which initially met with much resistance: from corn and beans, and the potato, accepted only during the terrible famines of the 18th century, to the tomato, used for pasta sauce from the end of the 18th century, along with many other vegeta-

bles and fruits that form the basis of our daily diet today. The taste for new things, unlike today, was still limited. The past centuries are characterized by the social ethics of food, where food is a sign of distinction. Scarcity and/or abundance are at the origins of the formation of taste, depending on social reference group, whether coming from the rich or poor classes.

Until the 17th century taste was based on the idea of the creation and mixing of flavors: sweet and sour dishes created by the simultaneous use of vinegar and honey and from the 11th century citrus fruits and sugar cane brought by the Arabs; an abundant use of spices was a real status symbol of the wealthier classes; a combination of sweet and savory. Rare and expensive, sugar was considered for many years as a spice, present in every dish, even on pasta with cheese and butter. The kitchen of the poor was instead characterized by salt, mainly used in food preservation and based on dietary habits determined by a simple availability of produce: cereals, vegetables and fish have long been the mainstays of the peasant diet. Only on holidays, linked to the agricultural cycle and key moments in the seasons, was there the chance to eat differently. Certain foods of symbolic significance were reserved for nobility, such as game birds, while foods from the land were for the general population, based on the belief that both the natural world and human society are organized in a similar vertical structure, divided into ordered and closed hierarchies. The liturgical calendar shaped choices at the table, with a clear distinction between lean and fat days, alternating lard and oil, meat and fish, cheese and vegetables. Over time there has been a change in the function of certain foods, with their role changing. The kitchen has been developed on the separation of flavors, enhancing the simpler products, and from the late 18th century, weakening social differences. The transition from scarcity to abundance has created the need for niche products, recognizing in the peasant foods of the past an important and lost gastronomic value. Similarly, a need has been created to protect the characteristics and specializations of certain areas. An increased food culture, a return to seasonality, for the pleasure of enjoying quality with respect to production. All this is due to the certifications and the enhancement of regional identities.



People's calendar:
June and November

Illustrations taken from
a people's calendar from the
beginning of the 17th century,
engraved by Adriaen Collaert,
drawings by Joos De Momper.

Examples from Switzerland and Italy - A new typicality between tradition and progress

Constantly present in the earliest civilizations, spelt was used by the Romans for polenta (puls), soups and porridge. Like other minor cereals, it was typically peasant food or used as fodder. With attention being given today to food as a means to good health, spelt has become a niche product with its wonderful qualities and beneficial properties. It's the least calorific cereal overall. **Spelt from the Garfagnana**, the most important area for its cultivation in Italy, obtained **IGP certification** in 1996. Instead, a luxury item such

as saffron has become commonplace. Until the 17th century, spices separated the rich from the poor and were a sign of power, completely breaking free from the recipe. When supply became easier, their social change began. Today this spice, still considered "red gold", is used for both savory and sweet dishes. **Saffron from Mund** in the **canton of Valais**, with a niche production of about 3 kg per year, obtained **DOP** recognition in 2004.

The Emmental Valley in Switzerland, in the canton of Bern, is the classic example of a local supply chain. The tradition of making a tasty cheese during the months when the pastures were accessible for grazing, dates back to the 13th century. But it was in the mid-1500s that the cheese took its name from the valley in which it was produced, demonstrating the strong link that existed between its characteristics and its territory of origin.

Over the centuries, the production of **Emmentaler** intensified due to the characteristics of the pastures, located at lower altitudes than those in the alpine area and therefore workable for longer periods of the year, and with the presence of the river Emme that facilitated transportation. In 1813 came the first dairy farm to the valley, after which numerous others followed. The unbreakable link with the land, respect for traditional techniques and the unique characteristics derived from this, earned it the **DOP** in 2006.

Another territory with a similar story is the **area of Parma ham in Italy**. Already in Roman times the area was famous for the breeding of pigs and the production of ham. It was only during the Middle Ages, however, that the craft was officially recognized with the establishment of an autonomous association of Lardaioli (sellers of cured meats). The activity, the most important stages remaining unchanged, has been handed down to the present day, obtaining the **DOP** in 1996. Production can take place only within the plains and hills of the province of Parma, mainly concentrated around the town of Langhirano.

Questions and new challenges

How do our eating habits evolve, and as a consequence our tastes? Will we all eat grasshoppers and other insects one day? Will we give up the tastes and dishes that do not belong to our tradition? On a virtual table, intended as *Noah's Ark*, what would we like to save, retrieve from the past and what would we change?

Bibliography

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Suggested Reading

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www.slowfood.com