

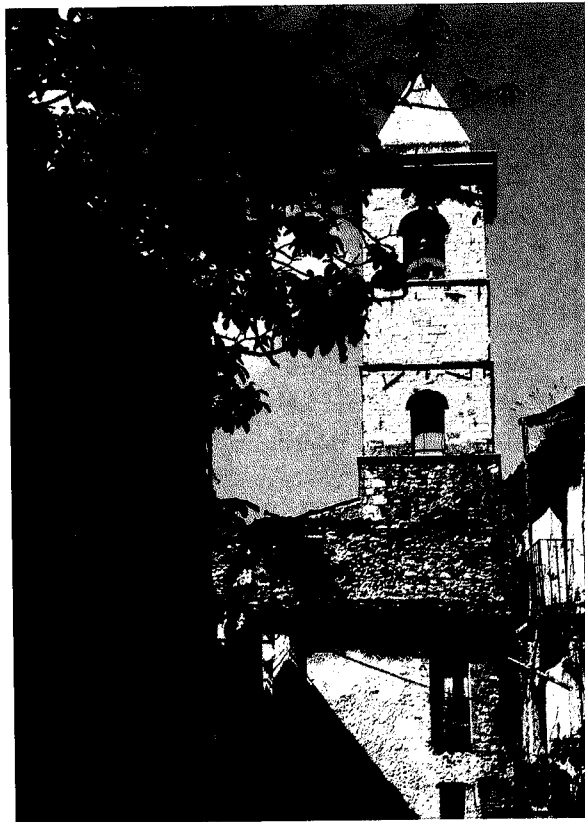
a nation of towns and regions: italian campanilismo

following the same general principles. However, since they were implemented before the unified EU regulations, they vary country by country.

UNDER THE BELL TOWER: WHAT FOOD IS ITALIAN?

These relatively recent trends seem to feed off and strengthen a powerful element of Italian culture: *campanilismo*. This profoundly Italian expression refers to the love, pride and attachment to a certain place by those whose homes are located in the area metaphorically covered by the shadow of the local bell tower. *Campanilismo* expresses itself through food as well. Towns, cities and even tiny countryside or mountain villages boast traditions that are unique or shared only with the immediate surrounding territory, often reflecting artisanal skills and rural civilizations that are visibly changing and, some say, slowly disappearing.

The variety and complexity of Italian food culture can be traced back to the origin of civilization in the peninsula. The influence of



The bell tower (*campanile*) in my grandparents' village of Tossicia, Abruzzo. It's the origin of the expression *campanilismo*, referring to local pride.

The classification of wine

The European Union system of geographical indications ultimately derives from the system of classification that France created in 1855 to rank winemakers in the Bordeaux area. Over time, the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (controlled appellation of origin) as a legal category was officially established in the 1930s. Following the French example, in 1963 the Italian government issued a law that introduced DOC (controlled denomination of origin, in Italian *Denominazione d'Origine Controllata*) and DOCG (denomination of controlled and guaranteed origin, in Italian *Denominazione d'Origine Controllata e Garantita*), with the goal of highlighting and protecting the best wine production just when mechanization was stimulating output with little attention to quality. Rules were established to determine who had the power to create new DOCs, and how. Production regulations (called *disciplinare*) delimit the zones in which the wines originate and specify type (or types, since a denomination may include a range of versions), colour, grape varieties, minimum alcohol levels, maximum yields in grapes per hectare and wine from grapes, basic sensory characteristics, fermentation (in wood or otherwise and possibly in sealed tanks), required minimum ageing periods and special designations identifying particular sub-zones, such as *classico* or *superiore*. A DOCG wine must meet standards that are stricter than those stipulated in DOC regulations. One of the main differences is the lower yields imposed by the DOCG rules. The limitations in output have probably done more to boost the quality of wines than any other provision in the regulations, which also require in-depth chemical analyses for all DOCG wines.

The first DOC, Vermaccia di San Gimignano in Tuscany, was declared only in 1966, and the first DOCG, Brunello di Montalcino in Tuscany, in 1980. A third category was established in 1992, in compliance with the European Union regulations: the IGT (typical geographic indication, *Indicazione Geografica Tipica*). The IGT regulations require use of authorized varieties, most of them establishing the use of one type only or in a ratio of at least 85 per cent to other approved grapes. The IGT wines are identified with specific

territories, most of which are larger than the zones specified in the regulations for DOCGs and DOCs. Some are region-wide, as in the case of Toscano in Tuscany and Sicilia in Sicily, while others are limited to a valley or a range of hills. For consumers, the IGT denomination primarily indicates a wide range of wines of acceptable quality available at highly competitive prices. It also allowed many local wines to acquire a higher status than regular table wine (*vino da tavola*), which can come from anywhere in Italy and can be bottled anywhere or even sold in bulk (*sfuso*). In fact, Italy is still one of the most important producers of bulk wine in the world.

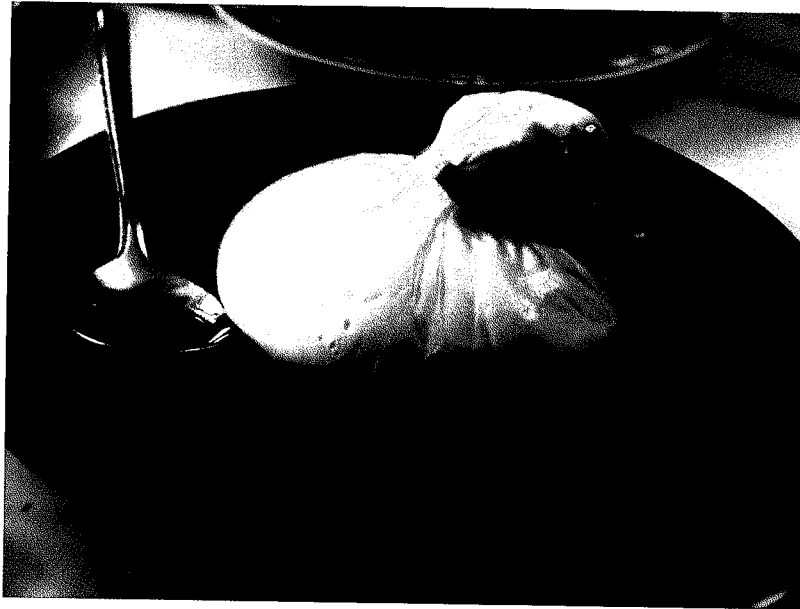
From the beginning, some innovative wine producers, who were particularly interested in experimenting with grape varieties and techniques, found these regulations too tight. Already in 1968, in the Maremma area of southern Tuscany, with the help of the oenologist Giacomo Tachis, Count Incisa della Rocchetta created Sassicaia, still considered by many to be one of the best Italian wines. In 1971, again in Tuscany, Antinori launched Tignanello. Though officially classified as *vini da tavola*, these wines, known in the English-speaking world as Supertuscans, gained global renown. In time, together with others such as Ornellaia or Guado al Tasso, they were able to compete with the great Bordeaux on the international market.

While these innovative trends were receiving widespread recognition, in 1986 Italy was struck by a scandal that had deep consequences for many years. Methanol, a poisonous substance, was added to a few Piedmont wines to raise the alcohol content, killing several people and causing intoxication and a few cases of blindness in Lombardy, Liguria and Piedmont. Although the Italian government issued many emergency regulations, the general perception of wine was profoundly tainted. Consumption fell to a historical low, while many Italians resorted, at least for a while, to beer. On the international market Italian wines were seen with growing suspicion. The economic damage was incalculable but at the same time forced wineries to improve their production and become more attentive to questions of safety, consumer perception and certification procedures, allowing Italian wine to acquire global fame.

the Mediterranean climate on Italian production and cuisine depends on the distance from the shoreline and on altitude. Precipitation varies greatly between the semi-arid plains and low hills of the south where rain can be limited or absent five to seven months a year, to the more humid hills and plains of central and northern Italy. Humidity and precipitation increases on the Apennines and in the areas located at the foot of the Alps.⁵ The different soil, water and climate characteristics have affected customs, social structures and other cultural traits of the settled populations. While farmers, herders and fishermen developed practices adapted to their environments, they also applied customs and technologies that they had borrowed from elsewhere to the familiar landscapes.

We must keep in mind that the present-day environmental situation and the problems connected with it are the result of 4,000 years of long- and short-term interactions between humans and their surroundings, which at different times caused, accelerated or counteracted the degradation of the soils caused by agricultural exploitation, deforestation or water management. Despite the generally mild climate in vast areas of the peninsula, agricultural yields were often insufficient, especially in periods of demographic expansion. As a result, populations moved towards lands that could guarantee crops in the necessary amounts, as in Roman times, or intensified agricultural outputs through the application of new technologies, artisanal skills, trade and, later on, industrialization. As a result, Italy generated and still maintains a dazzling variety of products, now an important component of local identities. I distinctly remember that while growing up I was not aware of many fantastic products that I now love, including the squash *tortelli* from Mantova, the smoked pork *speck* from Alto Adige, or the luscious *burrata* cheese from Apulia. At the same time, my Roman friends had no clue about the *arrosticini* (tiny grilled skewers of mutton) or the *ventricina* (ground pork and pork fat with spices, encased in a pig bladder) that I grew accustomed to during my childhood vacations in Abruzzo, just 160 km away.

Due to this diversity, many wonder how to define Italian cuisine as a whole, or if it is even possible to do so. In his book about foreign invasions, historian Girolamo Arnaldi quotes poet Mario Luzi, saying, 'Italy is an illusion, indeed, a mirage, the stuff of wishes' with a 'terribly fragile' national identity.⁶ Is there a set of ingredients, dishes, cultural attitudes and practices that can be identified as Italian? Does a coherent and clearly codified Italian culinary repertoire even exist, or is it the collection of interconnected but independent local traditions?



Burrata cheese from Apulia.

These questions became the object of public debates and media attention when in 2011 Italy celebrated the 150th anniversary of its unification as a sovereign state, a goal that many still consider unaccomplished or plainly unrealistic. Many deep-rooted issues continue to shape the political discourse about national identity, with important organizations and parties aiming at greater local autonomies, if not downright secession. While most of the anniversary celebrations focused on elements such as the flag, the constitution and the anthem, cuisine also received some consideration. In particular, events were organized to commemorate the role and relevance of cookbook author Pellegrino Artusi, who in 1891 published *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene* (Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well). As we discussed in chapter Four, this collection of recipes is still considered the first to imply the possibility of Italian cultural unification, without articulating any political agenda. Acknowledging varying local elements, Artusi treated the complex mosaic of Italian food as one entity that needed a cohesive approach and a unified language. In fact, right after the introductory chapters and before the recipes, he provides a glossary of terms that, 'belonging to the Tuscan dialect, not everybody would understand'.⁷ At the time, common words like *lardo* (rendered pork fat), *matterello* (rolling pin), *mestolo* (ladle) and *tagliere* (chopping board) still needed an explanation. A few decades after



Bust of Pellegrino Artusi in the cemetery of San Miniato al Monte, near Florence.

the publication of the book, the Fascist propaganda machine took it upon itself to shape and reinforce the identity of Italian cuisine as a component of national identity and as a reason for national pride, enriched by its variety and its regional characteristics.

Of course, the shared perception among Italians about what dishes and ingredients should be included in a national inventory has changed over time. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the unification, the popular wine and food magazine *Gambero rosso* invited its readers to identify what were, in their opinion, the most important Italian foods. The online survey indicated Parmigiano Reggiano as the product with the highest percentage of mentions (53.5 per cent), followed by extra-virgin olive oil (43.8 per cent), pizza Napoletana (43.2 per cent) and buffalo mozzarella (40 per cent). Surprisingly, rice (37.4 per cent) appeared to be considered to be more 'Italian' than bread (36.7 per cent) and spaghetti (34.1 per cent), the latter with the same percentage as panettone, a Christmas dessert speciality from Milan that acquired national distribution only when it was industrially produced after the First World War.

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Panettone, a Christmas dessert speciality from Milan.

The *Gambero rosso* top-fifteen items also included Florentine-style steak, Genovese-style pesto, lasagna, *pasta amatriciana* (a typical Roman dish with *guanciale* – cured pork cheek, *pecorino* cheese and tomato), mortadella and Barolo wine.⁸ The list does not have scientific value as it was produced by the readers of a food magazine, and more specifically only by those who had online access. In fact, it seems to be skewed towards the north. At any



Pasta amatriciana, a typical Roman dish with *guanciale* (cured pork cheek), *pecorino* cheese and tomato.

rate, the list reflects the strong local character of Italian cuisine, even when specialities connected with particular places are embraced as national dishes. Some products, such as pesto and buffalo mozzarella, only recently acquired national renown, proving that Italian cuisine does not have a fixed or stable canon. Instead, what makes certain foods Italian is their strong connection with local identities, artisanal skills and traditions, even when these elements are heavily influenced by perception and marketing. Looking back at Artusi's book, *mozzarella di bufala* and *pasta amatriciana* were not even mentioned, the only Genoa-style sauce finding a place among his recipes included capers and eggs and was used with boiled fish, while Neapolitan pizza was a dessert with almonds, eggs and ricotta.

ITALIANS AND THEIR FOOD TRADITIONS

Practices and ideas about the definition of Italian food have changed since the late 1800s and are bound to keep on changing, despite any administrative effort to define and regulate products through the enthusiastic embrace of the European Union legislation on geographical indications. Similarly, what qualifies as traditional and what additions are acceptable is bound to evolve over time. More interesting to question, then, might not be which product or dish is traditional, but rather what do Italians mean by tradition and why do certain elements end up being perceived as traditional? Above all, the most crucial issue is why, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, do Italians care so much about tradition after having almost completely discarded it half a century ago when the country embarked on a path of fast and sweeping economic development? Why are values such as 'typical', 'artisanal' and 'authentic' so relevant in the contemporary cultural discourse on food? Why have the connections between specific places and local traditions acquired such relevance? And how do the various levels of this interest – from the very local, to the regional, to the national – interact with one another?

I would argue that Italians, like many other nationalities, tend to give attention to their past, including its material aspects, as a reaction to anxieties and priorities in their present. This renewed interest in culinary traditions, local products and artisanal delicacies is reaching new heights not only in Italy but also Western Europe, Japan and more recently the United States and Australia. Other countries are following right behind, such as Brazil, Mexico and Costa Rica, where a still-growing upper class

is showing shifting sensitivity about the cultural relevance of food traditions.⁹ Until a few years ago, many citizens in developing countries would have considered local ingredients and dishes embarrassing, uncouth and uncomfortably close to the rural realities and the ethnic groups often left at the margin of national projects of modernization. This was definitely the case in Italy, which in the late 1950s underwent a fast and widespread transition from rural to urban environments, from poverty to relative prosperity, from backwardness to modernity, from unsophisticated to cosmopolitan sensibilities (which, as we will see, do not coincide with actual multiculturalism). Only from the late 1980s, when the uncomfortable past seemed distant enough, were Italians able to look back with a certain sense of nostalgia, discovering an unprecedented appreciation of many aspects of their traditions such as foods that they had been eager to leave behind and that were at risk of extinction.

Over the past twenty years in many post-industrial societies there has been a growing appreciation for local food customs, as well as the manual skills and the know-how of food producers. *Terroir*, originally a French concept connecting the sensory quality of a food or wine to soil, climate and the geographical environment of production, is no longer exclusively applied to French traditions. Producers all over the world, including those in less developed countries, are becoming increasingly aware that the shift towards unique foodstuffs could help them move towards more rewarding value-added segments of the business, breaking free from the commodities market, recently plagued by international speculation and uncontrollable spikes in prices. Coffee beans connected with a specific area, grown in limited amounts, with recognizable sensory profiles and produced according to precise rules, can command much higher price tags on the global market – as long as international consumers are made aware of their existence and their distinctiveness. Renowned cocoa from specific locations is highly valued by experts, pastry chefs and well-informed consumers. In Italy, varieties of tomato from Pachino or San Marzano, known for their flavour, shape and culinary versatility, are now sold and bought at much higher prices than other less famous kinds. The trade of speciality products is growing in volume and relevance. This trend – quite visible in supermarkets, restaurants and around domestic tables – is promoted and exploited by the media, marketers and politicians, and it is inevitably reflected in tourism flows. Many of these products thrive precisely because they find buyers beyond the areas in which they are produced, not only nationally but often also internationally. However, while

these dynamics can have a positive impact on rural communities, it is undeniable that participation in worldwide currents of people, money, goods and information frequently causes disruption and tension.

Contemporary Italians, the majority of whom live in cities and with little direct connection to food manufacturing, tend to perceive local traditional foods as deeply rooted in the rural world and a long history of artisanal activities. In fact, much of the appreciation of these products is fuelled by the fear that they might disappear under the assault of industrialization, globalization and corporate appropriation. As we discussed in chapter Six, a noticeable interest in organic produce, farmers' markets, CSAs and fair trade, together with the success of the Slow Food movement, demonstrates how consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it is made and how it lands on their tables. However, for many urban Italians with spending power, the countryside is little more than a picturesque background for their weekend outings and their vacations, a landscape dotted with *agriturismi*, where they can spend time enjoying a controlled and unthreatening connection with a world they identify with relaxation, calm and physical well-being. The harshness of land toiling, as well as the economic and structural problems plaguing agriculture, rarely become part of an approach to food that emphasizes leisure and entertainment. Now and in the past, rural activities are framed around urban consumption. Starting from the Middle Ages, some of the most pricey and sought-after specialties were not named after the places in the countryside where they were grown or manufactured, but rather were identified with the cities and towns that historically constituted their main markets and where merchants and consumers from outside their area of production got to know them. For instance, we are familiar with lentils from Castelluccio, chestnuts from Vallerano, *Ragusano* cheese (from the town of Ragusa) and traditional balsamic vinegars from Modena and Reggio Emilia, but none of these products is actually produced within the limits of the towns that give them their names. These denominations are the result of rural-urban connections that, in the thirteenth century and today, put Italian cities in a predominant – and often exploitative – position towards the surrounding countryside.

The rediscovery of local and artisanal foods emphasizes easily identifiable – and defensible – units, like cities or specific rural areas. This is the mechanism behind the geographical indications adopted by the European Union legislation and other forms of protection.

Nevertheless, in contemporary Italy the attachment and the defence of local identities can assume various forms and operate at different levels: the same individuals can be proud (and defensive) of the unique recipes of their town, but also of the products of the larger area in which their town is located, of the region to which both the town and the surrounding area belong, and of more general geographical categories, such as 'the north' and 'the south', which still play quite a relevant role in Italian cultural and political debates.

REGIONAL FOODS

While the attachment to the food of specific areas, cities and even villages, dates back centuries, it is only recently that food traditions, ingredients and dishes have been discussed in terms of regions.¹⁰ This might sound strange to foreign consumers who in the past two decades have grown used to understanding and classifying Italian food by region. Certain areas, such as Tuscany and Sicily, have been clearly identified in Italian culture for centuries and attributed specific and recognizable traits. Regions were already listed among the five elements forming the Italian Republic together with the Municipalities, the Provinces, the Metropolitan Cities and the State in the 1948 Italian constitution. Passed after the 1946 referendum that determined the end of the Reign of Italy and the beginning of the republican era, a substantial section of the constitution, articles 114 to 133, is dedicated to local autonomies and their relationships with the central government. The founding fathers of republican Italy emphasized this topic's importance by placing it among the fundamental principles of the new state. Article 5 reads:

The Republic is one and indivisible. It recognizes and promotes local autonomies, and implements the fullest measure of administrative decentralization in those services that depend on the State. The Republic adapts the principles and methods of its legislation to the requirements of autonomy and decentralization.

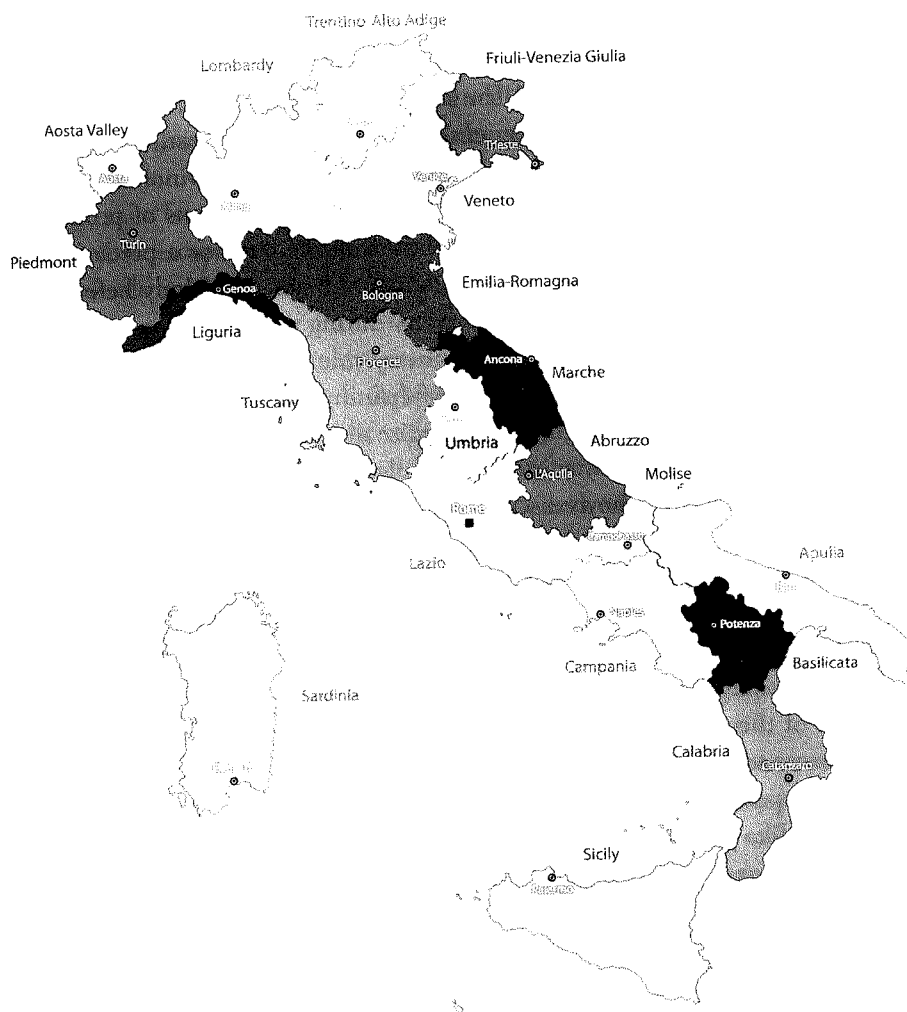
After two decades of centralized administration by the Fascist government, politicians operating in post-war Italy found it was not easy to implement autonomies. Under Fascism, *Podestà*, appointed by Rome, had replaced elected mayors. When the 1948 constitution was approved, the text already mentioned the future twenty regions by name, but only

four of them were established at the time: Sicily, Sardinia, Trentino-Alto Adige and Val d'Aosta, followed in 1963 by a fifth, Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Each of these regions was granted a special level of autonomy, as they had a unique past and were currently struggling with complex issues, often connected with the presence of ethnic minorities and with border negotiations. The remaining fifteen regions, foreseen in the constitution as regulated by 'ordinary statutes', were established as actual administrative entities only after 1970. Since then, their legislative and regulatory powers have increased. They cover matters such as tourism, agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food safety, all managed in coordination with the Ministero delle Politiche Agricole, Alimentari, e Forestali – the ministry for agricultural, food and forestry policies of the central government. (The ministry, temporarily abolished in 1993, was reinstated in 1999 in response to the need for an institutional representative of Italy in negotiations at the European Union level, including those about the establishment of geographical indications for food products.)

Despite their short history, Italian regions have acquired great relevance and visibility in the everyday life of Italians due to growing legislative reach. Over time, their influence has also been felt at cultural and social levels, including gastronomy and food traditions. The expression 'regional cuisine' has become quite common both in Italy and abroad, even if it is, at times, hard to define. What are these regional customs? Do they differ from local practices, do they include them all or is it possible to identify a specific set of culinary specificities, ingredients or techniques that would clearly mark a dish or a preparation as part of a regional tradition?

Regional cookbooks are now popular, and cookbooks on Italian cuisine often arrange recipes by region. This establishes a clear organizing principle that is easy to manage and helps make sense of a dazzling cultural and material variety. For Italians, this classification is extremely practical for identifying dishes and products that are not well known or that, at any rate, do not belong to one's own traditions. One of the first recipe collections that adopted this structure was *La nuova cucina delle specialità regionali*, published in 1909 by Vittorio Agnetti. However, his classification did not cover all twenty regions that exist today, while some regions were represented only by their major cities.¹¹ So while Agnetti dedicated sections to Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, we find Venice instead of Veneto and Rome as representing all of Latium. Naples stood for the whole south, although the author carved out subsections dedicated to Sicily and Sardinia. The overall goal of the

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The 20 contemporary regions of Italy.

volume was to show that Italy's cuisine was as diverse as its inhabitants, from 'the people from Friuli, a little like Germans' to 'Sicilians, a little like Arabs', and that for that reason food 'is far superior, for variety and deliciousness, to the well-renowned French cuisine'.¹² At a time when the newly unified kingdom was striving to assume a relevant role in international politics, Agnetti was more motivated by national pride than by the desire to explore all of Italy. This attitude towards regional cuisines became prevalent during the Fascist regime, which approved the publication of the *Guida gastronomica d'Italia* (Gastronomic Guide to Italy) in 1931 by the Touring Club of Italy.¹³ As mentioned in chapter Five,

the volume's goal was not to present recipes but rather to provide information for travellers and tourists, as well as to promote Italian products, 'a good nationalistic activity'.¹⁴ The list of regions provided in the guidebook is quite similar to the ones enshrined in the 1948 constitution of the Italian Republic, with a list of specialities, dishes and wines for the provinces composing each region, frequently with mentions of products from specific cities. To this day, the volume remains a precious tool to assess the state of food production and cuisine in Italy before the major changes that swept the country during the late 1950s.

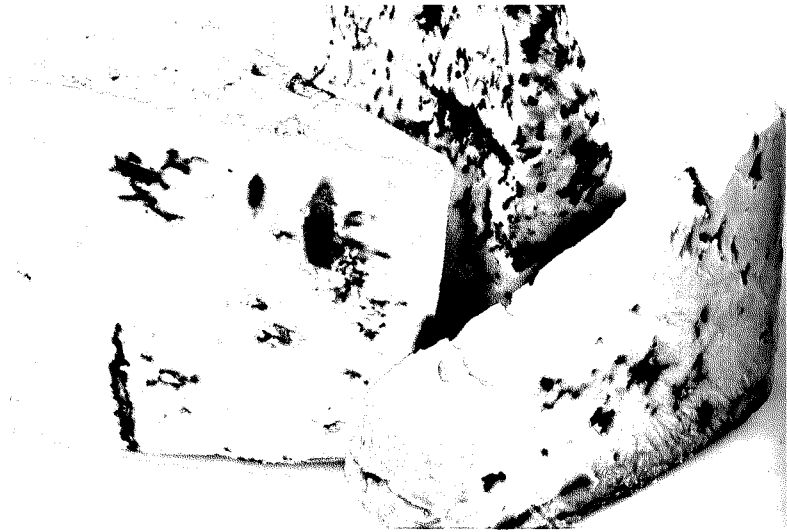
Neither of these early twentieth-century volumes nor contemporary recipe collections confronts the issue of defining what regional cuisines are, using these large categories to organize dishes and ingredients that can also be identified by more specific places of origin. For instance, books, articles or TV shows discussing Tuscany often mention *cacciucco*, the fish and shellfish stew cooked in wine, tomatoes and herbs, as a typical dish from Livorno (one of the main Tuscan cities). Can *cacciucco's* classification as a Tuscan dish highlight common traits shared with completely different traditions that also happen to be located in Tuscany, such as Lunigiana or Chianti? How are the vastly different material cultures of these areas connected to each other, other than belonging to the same administrative unit? In some cases a budding regional identity, superimposed onto diverse realities, has managed to acquire its own life. A dish like *pasta amatriciana* in Latium is now widely perceived as regional, especially by people from other places. Debates rage about its origin: was it created in Rome or in the town of Amatrice, also in Latium, where many of the *osteria* cooks came from. Other specialities, like *caponata*, a sweet-and-sour vegetable relish, and *arancine*, fried stuffed rice balls, both from Sicily, are now widely identified with the whole region rather than with specific towns or provinces. The question of their origin within the island is mostly sidestepped by focusing on their connections to the Muslims who occupied the area in the Middle Ages. This is not the case for all Sicilian dishes of Muslim derivation: couscous, for instance, is still strongly identified with western Sicily, and in particular the province of Trapani.

NORTH AND SOUTH

Apart from regions, there are even wider geographical identifications that still operate in Italian culture, reflecting themselves in areas from

gastronomy to politics. The most relevant of these classifications is the generic, but nevertheless widespread, distinction between the north and the south. This separation was originally based on the abysmal social and economic disparities between the two areas at the time of Italy's unification. These differences turned into grave issues for the kingdom and then for the republic. Beginning in the late 1950s, southern Italians tried to escape poverty and underdevelopment by moving en masse towards northern cities. In particular, the so-called 'industrial triangle' between Milan, Turin and Genoa held promises of stable jobs and modernity. Quite suddenly, workers appeared in the north who did not share the same culture, bringing exotic food-related habits, culinary techniques and unheard-of ingredients and dishes. The newcomers – frequently from rural backgrounds – were often represented as unrefined, uneducated, noisy and not greatly concerned with hygiene, but their generosity and gregariousness were also noted. Their food was perceived as abundant, intensely seasoned and closely connected with their tight-knit family lives, yet at the same time unusual and somewhat threatening. These vast generalizations drew much of their power precisely from their vagueness; they could be applied at any scale and to comment on any set of problems.

Today, decades after the epochal migration, with the former newcomers largely assimilated into the host cultures, the distinctions between the north and the south still survive, having become effective, pervasive and apparently natural categories. Especially in popular culture and media, individuals are frequently pigeonholed into specific roles that fulfil common stereotypes. The Luca Miniero box-office blockbuster *Benvenuti al sud* (Welcome to the South, 2010), the Italian remake of the French hit movie *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008), tells the story of a post-office manager from Milan who is transferred to a little village on the coast south of Naples. Despite the breathtaking beauty of the landscape, the newcomer cannot adapt to the local way of life, and a series of misunderstandings provides abundant fodder for easy comedy. Of course, food plays a huge role in emphasizing the differences between the south and the north. Northerners are represented as more modern, with social structures organized around work and the nuclear family. While attached to their traditional products like Gorgonzola cheese, they are also open to all kinds of cosmopolitan food including sushi, presented in the film as the litmus test for culinary adventurousness. Down south, young couples with children live with their parents, matriarchs



Gorgonzola, among the most famous Italian cheeses.

have control over others' lives, food is abundant, traditional (including *sanguinaccio*, a spread made with chocolate and pig's blood), almost always prepared by hand and consumed at a slow pace in settings that favour sharing and community. Over time, the northern functionary understands the true value behind such distinctive customs and finds his place in the village. While it can be argued that the narrative resolution invites viewers to look beyond the stereotypes, most of the comic effect is actually built by exploiting – and, by default, naturalizing – them. The movie's success spawned a sequel, *Benvenuti al nord* (Welcome to the North, 2012), where the same film-maker, Luca Miniero, flips the script by sending a southern post-office worker to the north, playing on the exact same stereotypes that have underlined many Italian comedies since the 1950s. This does not imply that all Italian films embrace this approach. For instance, Francesco Rosi's amazing *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped in Eboli, 1979), about an intellectual from the north exiled to a tiny southern village during Fascist rule, provides a more nuanced and realistic description of cultural differences and social dynamics at a specific point in time. Recently, younger film-makers from the south are looking at their own culture with a critical but affectionate eye, often employing satire and a hyper-realistic style that manages to achieve bizarre, dreamlike results. These films are almost implying that only by embracing the contradictions, the dramatic problems and the seeming madness of the contemporary south can viewers hope to

understand it beyond any stereotype. An interesting example of this approach is Rocco Papaleo's *Basilicata Coast to Coast* (2010), which describes the voyage of four young men through Basilicata, still one of the less developed regions in Italy. By travelling on foot, the protagonists are confronted with the productive landscape of their land and with its traditional dishes, such as bread with frittata, dried peppers and *gnummareddi*, pieces of offal meat tied with lamb's intestines. Eduardo de Angelis's *Mozzarella Stories* from 2011 focuses instead on the buffalo mozzarella industry in the areas south of Naples, highlighting the political and economic problems that plague those communities, from organized crime to corruption and the impact of Chinese competitors. These films reject nostalgia, highlighting instead the changing and shifting nature of local traditions and artisanal skills, threatened and at the same made more valuable by their exposure to globalization.

For historical, economic and cultural reasons, regional cuisines are fundamentally hybrids, as culinary expert Vincenzo Buonassisi affirmed at the 1983 convention of the Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani (GRI), the Italian Restaurateur Association in the United States. He stated to all participants,

In Italy there is no longer such a thing as truly autonomous regional cuisines. This is a romantic American notion, not a modern reality. In the modern Italy that actually exists, regional cooking is traveling from region to region.¹⁵

In conclusion, are culinary identities in Italy to be understood as exclusively local and fragmented or are there elements that can be identified as national and Italian? Food historian Massimo Montanari tackles the question in his book *L'identità italiana in cucina* (Italian Identity in the Kitchen). He argues that since the rebirth of city life in the late Middle Ages, a shared set of food-related tastes, styles, practices and preferences, often adopted and adapted from nearby rural environments and lower classes, circulated among the upper classes in urban environments across Italy, far away from their places of origin.

The upper strata of society, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, had been living for centuries in an 'Italian' dimension that superseded the political and administrative borders of the numerous states located in the peninsula and on the islands. That is to

say, at least for some Italy already existed. It was an Italy made of lifestyles, daily practices, mental attitudes.¹⁶

Montanari maintains that it is not historically sound to look for a strictly unitary model that includes and erases differences: local diversity constitutes instead one of the fundamental traits of Italian cuisine.¹⁷

FOOD AND COMMUNITY

As much as they are increasingly appreciated, traditional foods and food customs are not excluded from the dynamics of globalization that involve many aspects of contemporary material culture. And not all its effects are negative. By increasing demand and prices, international exposure can revamp or even save disappearing ingredients or dishes, even if it exposes producers to the uncertainties and caprices of worldwide markets. The dichotomy that opposes global versus local, homogeneity versus diversity, and universality versus particularity, comes across as an oversimplification. When it comes to food, it is arguable that, in many cases, local identities are the historical result of larger trade and contact networks, and are acknowledged and defined as local against the backdrop of other, different places. Italian food historians Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari state:

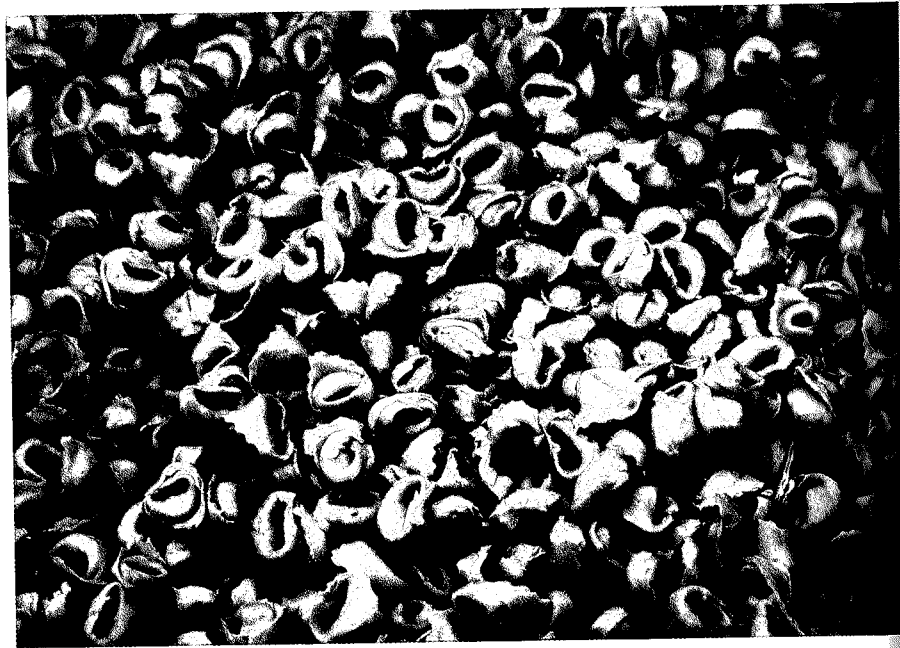
In the context of culinary traditions, one might assume as self-evident that identity has to do with belonging to a particular place and that it involves the products and recipes of a specific location. Thinking about it like this may cause one to forget that identity might also – perhaps primarily – be defined as difference, that is, difference in relation to others. In the case of gastronomy, one thing is quite clear: ‘local’ identity is created as a function of exchange, at the moment when (and to the degree that) a product or recipe is brought into contact with different systems and cultures.¹⁸

Following this approach, the two historians argue that it is necessary to move the roots of identity from production to exchange, emphasizing contamination and hybridization among localities, classes and cultures. If we adopt this perspective, we cannot continue to consider local identities as eternal and static elements but rather cultural and social constructions that result from relations, tensions and ongoing negotiations between

different people, the places in which they live and the power structures that sustain them. Since both the local and the global are always developing, it is useful to abandon the naive point of view that considers the local as 'natural', original, connected to biodiversity and heterogeneity, as the last defence against the homogenizing forces of globalization.¹⁹

The Italian debates about local identities and traditions point to the potential conundrums faced by any attempts at defining and protecting food-related products and practices, which are often embraced as tools to oppose economic standardization, hyper-exploitation of the environment and commodification of local cultures. It does not matter whether customary eating habits, typical products and artisans are not so ancient or if they have been established quite recently with little or no connection to the past. They are often perceived as the contemporary expression of a long and living history, but at the same time they are described as at risk of extinction and in need of appreciation and protection.

The defence and promotion of local and traditional foods and eating habits contributes to a renewed and enhanced sense of communal identity that can be easily manipulated for political gain. This emotional investment is easy to exploit as a rallying cry for localized activism and political interests ranging from regional to national and international levels, often on both sides of the widening rift that divides conservatives and progressives in Italy. The very current concept of *terroir*, which considers the flavours and qualities of a food as a direct result of its connection to a territory and its inhabitants, has the potential to favour intercultural dialogue that stresses diversity and integration, but can also become a weapon for xenophobic attitudes and conservative agendas aimed at protecting the territory against immigrant penetration. Local communities are frequently fiercely attached to their food traditions, which are charged with emotional significance and passionately embraced by all the actors involved. These food-related debates are born out of specific situations, calling on individuals, communities and interest groups to create new and ever-evolving local identities. Through its intimate connection with bodies and their material survival, food constitutes a perfect anchor for these cultural processes, which can then be readily enlisted in wide-reaching social and political projects.²⁰ Referred to in terms of satisfactory and pleasant consumption, of potential danger or even of disgust, ingestion offers a set of structured and powerful metaphors that can easily inform political discourse about acceptance or refusal of multiculturalism and acceptance of outsiders. Food allows individuals



Tortellini are commonly identified with the regional cuisine of Emilia Romagna.

to experience the material and physical reality of integration and exclusion, much more directly and compellingly than any intellectual discussion.

We have focused on the historical dynamics that throughout the centuries have shaped food in Italy, from the beginning of agricultural production to the most recent trends. It has become apparent how different populations, diverse habits and a dazzling variety of products and dishes have interacted to shape local identities, connecting what people eat with specific places but also with economic structures and power relationships. Traditions and authenticity constitute an important part of the lived experience for many people.²¹ For this reason, they cannot be considered as fabricated, artificial or simply dispensable. In fact, they constitute powerful categories that can be mobilized in social and political projects.

There's more to meals than the pleasures of the table, the flavours of the ingredients and the skills of the cooks. They can help us to understand individuals and communities, cultures and societies. That is the goal of this book. I hope that next time you travel to Italy, you'll look differently at the landscapes, the people and all the amazing food you will encounter.