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L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
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GIAN LUIGI PONTI, GIÒ PONTI, DINO VILLANI,
EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: Graphic elaboration of *Madonna and Sleeping Child (Madonna of the Veil)* (1909) by Ambrogio Da Fossano, known as Bergognone; Palazzo Brera, Milan

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Dining in a good restaurant *has become an odyssey*

We must book with ample notice, endure long waiting lists and eat when we're told.

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

Remember that many years ago it wasn't necessary to book when eating out: hardly anyone did it. It may seem impossible nowadays, but that's how things were. Phoning to book a table was very rare, only done in particular circumstances, perhaps for a group or special celebrations. We simply decided to eat out, and off we went: "Good evening - we're four." "Welcome - please follow me." There were no mobile phones; we would have had to call from home, and finding phone numbers was tricky. Then, gradually, over time, guides began suggesting: "booking advisable" for the most important restaurants. By now, we've long grown accustomed to booking (even just a few hours in advance), partially as a form of respect for restaurants or to avoid showing up when they are closed or full.

Sometimes borderline grotesque situations arise

Nowadays, it's unthinkable to eat at anything but a fast food restaurant without a reservation: **booking through the internet or mobiles is not only simple but a guarantee** for customers and restaurateurs alike (aside for the deplorable no-shows). All clear, all correct. Yet recently, things may become borderline grotesque. We must often visit qualified restaurants in several cities. Armed with guides and information from the internet, and avoiding holidays and closure dates (sometimes there are two per week), we try to book days in advance. Three noted *trattorie* in Rome recently had no availability. Two more only had space at 7:30 or 10. Same in Milan. It's mostly impossible to talk to humans any more, either the restaurant is closed, or staff are busy. **We book through *The Fork***. That platform shows available days and times: **8:30 is hardly ever available, and they decide when we can eat**, so tables can be used twice or thrice per evening.

Once we've succeeded in snapping up an elusive table at a normal time for dinner, **another obstacle: they want our credit card information**. This is **no simple procedure**: we must divulge the number, name, expiry date and security



code on the credit card. It's not over: now comes the phone number validation process, whose aims include **agreeing on a pre-determined cost** as a surety against no-shows or late customers. This applies not only for bookings but **waiting lists too**, once a rarity and now very common. A noted 'starred' restaurant in Milan exacts 700 euros for two people on a waiting list which may be a month long. If a table becomes available and the customer consents to visit the restaurant, any difference in cost must be paid; if, alas, the waiting list is not followed by the long-awaited restaurant visit, the sum is 'unblocked' and returned to the customer.

The customer is the weaker party

In the meantime, like **Virgil** in limbo, we remain "*tra color che son sospesi*" - among the suspended ones. All in all, going to a decent restaurant when the mood strikes, or when we arrive in a new city without adequate bookings many days in advance, is impossible. **The lesson is very simple**: we are the weaker party. Even moderately acclaimed restaurants and *trattorie* are packed; after the grim Covid years, they are back working at full capacity, intoning the customary lament about how hard it is to find staff. Speaking of which, lately, even in traditional restaurants, personnel is mostly foreign, both in the kitchen and in the dining room. Another lesson: Italians no longer wish to work in restaurants. But where are those thousands of hotel school graduates going?



Christmas Eve

with Eduardo De Filippo

by Giuseppe Benelli
Lunigiana Academician

Cuisine has always played an important role in the comedies of this unforgettable author, the fortieth anniversary of whose death is this year.

Eduardo De Filippo (1900-1984) sang the praises of Neapolitan popular culture. An actor, comedic playwright and poet, he wrote and acted in tens of works, whose most acclaimed include: *Natale in casa Cupiello* (*The Nativity Scene*, 1931); *Napoli milionaria!* (*Side Street Story*, 1945); and *Filumena Marturano* (1946). Through his theatrical oeuvre,

he succeeded in capturing the magic and soul of Naples, celebrating traditions, love and irony with extraordinary eloquence and hilarity. In his comedies he gave importance to eating and **insisted that real food be on the scene**, from steaming ragù to *rigatoni al dente*, from capons ready for broth to soft onion omelettes. After all, he loved eating and could cook. "For Eduardo, cuisine always had a high value: **a way to appreciate and celebrate life**", wrote **Dario Fo** in the preface of the book *Si cucine cumme vogli'i'* (*Cooking as I like it*), containing Eduardo's recipes, published after his death by his wife, **Isabella Quarantotti De Filippo**. Fo even recounts the *mise-en-scene* of the comedy *Sabato, domenica e lunedì* (*Saturday, Sunday and Monday*), wherein the fragrance of donna Rosa's ragù not only wafted over the stage but reached the stalls and balconies too, olfactively inebriating the entire audience.

Around the table, family members explain recipes and preparation methods

Many scenes are dedicated to food, and various characters take pleasure in explaining recipes and preparation methods. So all the family members gather and face their disagreements and resentments, as in one of Eduardo De Filippo's best-loved comedies, ***Natale in casa Cupiello*** (*The Nativity Scene*), which many Neapolitans re-watch with pleasure during the Christmas holidays. The tragicomedy begins on the day before Christmas Eve, when in the morning Luca Cupiello - the protagonist and head of the household - awakes to set up his nativity scene amid his family's indifference. The meticulous assembly of the Neapolitan nativity scene is a moment which Lucariello avidly awaits, the only moment when he has a chance not to endure reality but create another one instead. His awareness of his daughter Ninuccia's adultery, incompatible with the world which Luca has fruitlessly striven to create, heralds the final tragedy, whose **grotesque and piteous scenes combine laughter and bitterness**. Not only is the nativity scene being fervently assembled, but **in the kitchen too** there's nothing but running and shouting amid frantic **preparation of indispensable delicacies**. In the second act, on the brink of the tragedy between Nicolino and Vittorio fighting over Ninuccia, we learn something about **what Neapolitans eat for Christmas Eve**. Luca pulls Pasqualino and Nennillo aside to organise a sur-



prise for his wife, but Nennillo, his son, protests that he would also like to take something to his mother. "Your mother knows that you've got no money. You take her letters. Do something else! Fill a plate with four dried figs, four walnuts, a few sweets, and some *pasta reale*, and come to us." ***Pasta reale* is an ancient Neapolitan sweet, a venerable mainstay**, especially during the Christmas period. This 'Royal Dough' is also called *Pasta del Divino Amore* ('Divine Love Dough') and owes its name to the nuns in the Divino Amore Convent who prepared it with sweet almond paste and sugar, forming it into the most creative shapes.

Capitone is among the most representative Christmas Eve specialities

Even in scenes without Concetta and Ninuccia preparing food, noises off-stage and the reports of Tommasino, whose entries and exits have the function of informing the audience, **involve us in the two women's predicament as they chase the *capitone*, escaped from the pot**, attempting to plunge it back into the boiling water. *Capitone* is among the most representative Christmas Eve specialities, with **a symbolism blending the sacred and the profane, popular culture and Christmas tradition**. Consumption of this fish is rooted, in particular, in its similarity to a snake, long and slimy and, for the Catholic Church, an embodiment of evil.

Capitone is usually defined as a female eel (from the Latin *caput*, 'head'), whose length can increase and exceed a metre and a half, while **anguilla** ('eel') denotes the smaller males: both belong to the same species, within the family *Anguillidae* (from the Latin *anguis*, 'snake'). A good *capitone* weighs at least 1 kg and its flesh is oily, flavoursome and nutritious; **in Naples it is fried** and served with excellent wine. During the days leading up to Christmas Eve, fishmongers in working-class areas of Naples



keep *capitoni* (the plural) splashing around in tanks with running water when, *de rigueur*, they are sold alive. They are generally purchased on the 23rd of December, kept at home in a basin and then despatched by decapitation. At one time **that ritual was assigned to women, in remembrance of Eve's disobedience, to exorcise evil by triumphing over it**, thus keeping ill fortune at bay. Fried *capitone* is prepared with minimal ingredients: gutted and diced fish, oil for frying, salt and a few bay leaves.

Coffee is the poetry of life

A Christmas Eve meal must of course be followed by coffee, to which Eduardo dedicated immortal pages. Coffee is the poetry of life, which, "besides allowing us to pass the time, imparts a certain serenity of spirit as well". It is the perfect synthesis of Neapolitan culture, embodying its unique brand of joy and contentment. Eduardo crafted a veritable anthem for coffee, which is an experience to be savoured intensely, starting from its preparation. The **entire monologue from the comedy *Questi fantasm*** (*These Ghosts*) centres, indeed, on coffee preparation, which must not

be undervalued or performed hastily, because it is truly an art. In the acclaimed scene, Pasquale peers from the balcony and, while addressing a presumed interlocutor outdoors, makes coffee with a devotion bordering on the religious. It is precisely in this moment that the scene reveals all its poetry and humour: the famous *cuppetiello*, **a small paper cone resting on the spout of the coffee pot**, becomes the element that **concentrates the coffee's fragrance**, elevating it to a symbol of ancient wisdom. The pedagogical yet affectionate tone used in describing simple but essential gestures succeeds in creating an almost magical atmosphere in which time seems to be suspended.

Thus in *Natale in casa Cupiello* Luca berates his wife Concetta for being unable to make a decent coffee. "Concè, you've outdone yourself! What a vile potion you've made! Don't get angry, Concè. You're the lady of the house and you can do many things. For example, nobody can make onion omelette like you can. It's like a delicate pastry. But coffee is not your strong point. You can't, and you won't, make it properly, because you're trying to save money. One mustn't save money on coffee. It's of low quality too - this one stinks of cockroaches...".

Giuseppe Benelli



A sweet (for) Christmas

by Gabriella Pravato

Roma Eur Academician

*However we celebrate it,
it's always a sweet
holiday as tradition
dictates.*

Let us travel the length of our Beautiful Country, from north to south, to discover each region's Christmas desserts. Simple delights, often of peasant origin; recipes inherited through the generations, written in little notebooks that smell of vanilla, leafed through thousands upon thousands of times.

In our smallest region nestled among the mountains, **Valle d'Aosta**, Christmas would not be complete without **montblanc**, a homage to Europe's loftiest peak. Invented by an anonymous French pastry chef, it is a dome composed of chestnuts, milk, sugar, vanilla and rum. Decorated with whipped cream and marrons glacés, it indeed resembles a snowy mountain. It is complemented by **caffè mandolà**, a truly special coffee because butter and toasted, minced almonds are added into the dusky brew.

"A ven Gelindo" is the Piedmontese way of saying that Christmas is nigh. *Gelindo* is a 17th-century theatrical comedy in Piedmontese dialect which mixes the sacred and the profane, recounting the tale of Gelindo, a shepherd from Monferrato, who arrives in Bethlehem on Christmas night. When he arrives in Piedmontese homes, he brings **cresenzin**, a **sweet bread** often shaped like a baby to symbolise the birth of Jesus. Its flour was once 90% rye, the only cereal cultivated in the mountains. Few ingredients: sugar, raisins, walnuts and occasionally dried figs. A humble sweet, mirroring the poverty that once gripped Piedmontese farmers.

In foggy Lombardy, people slice panettone, now famous worldwide. As often happens in the pastry realm, *panettone*

seems to have been birthed accidentally, at the court of **Ludovico Sforza** in the 15th century. Having left a cake in the oven too long, Toni the cook's assistant extemporised by adding raisins, candied fruit and butter to the mixture, creating Pan di Toni (Toni's Bread) whose name gradually morphed into *panettone*.

*In Trentino-Alto Adige, tables
are gladdened by zelten*

In Trentino-Alto Adige, those respectful of tradition adorn their festive tables with a **fruitcake** named *Zelten*. Its ingredients and shape vary from one valley to the next, but it always contains fruit and flour in equal weight. In the olden days, rye flour was used and candied fruit was not, as it was first introduced in the 18th century according to a manuscript in Rovereto City Library. **It has many ingredients:** dried figs, raisins, dates and other dried fruit, all irrigated with orange juice and *grappa* and then aromatised with cinnamon, cloves, allspice and star anise.

In the Veneto, where presents are brought by Saint Lucy during the night between the 12th and 13th of December, **Christmas**

is the season for pandoro, a starry dome rich in butter, covered by an ethereal veil of icing sugar. Created by **Domenico Megatti** in 1894 at his shop in Verona, it was inspired by *nadalin*, especially esteemed by Veronese who consider themselves *de soca*: traditionalists. **Nadalin** is a squat, compact star enriched with apples, raisins, pine nuts and hazelnuts.

In the region where North meets South and East meets West, namely **Friuli-Venezia Giulia**, **there's no Christmas without gubana**, a spiral whose name apparently derives from the Slovene word *guba* meaning 'fold'. It was **first served in 1409 to honour Pope Gregory XII**. Its eight turns of flaky pastry enclose walnuts, both *sultani-na* and *zibibbo* raisins, pine nuts, almonds, candied citron zest, prunes, dried figs, Malaga or Marsala wine, and spices.

*Liguria's opulent 'coffer
of delights'*

In Italy's flowery arch, **Liguria, Christmas is greeted with pan dolce** ('sweet bread'), surmounted by a sprig of laurel to attract good luck. *Upanduce* has uncertain, possibly Persian origins, and if prepared ac-





According to its original recipe, which contains no eggs, it is grey and low-rising. Nowadays it is defined as a 'coffer of delights' because it contains raisins, pine nuts, candied fruit, fennel seeds, orange flower water and Marsala, besides flour, butter and sugar.

In the region that "grabs you by the throat", **Emilia Romagna**, Christmas is marked by a dessert that seems to have Jewish origins: **spongata**. A pastry shell conceals a mixture of honey, walnuts, almonds, *amaretti* biscuits, raisins, clove powder, nutmeg, cinnamon and toasted breadcrumbs.

In Tuscany, Christmas means panforte. An old legend narrates how a shepherd boy saw the comet and approached Baby Jesus resting in his manger. He had some black bread and offered it to St Joseph, who took only half. Returning home, the boy laid the remaining bread on the table and the house lit up amid celestial chants as the black bread was transformed by divine intercession into a sweet laden with almonds and spices. This is probably not the origin of *panforte*, but Christmas is a time for miracles after all...

They say that those who sing pray twice, and perhaps for this reason, the homeland of **St Francis**, Umbria, never abandoned the tradition of Christmas carols originating in the Umbrian *lauda* of the 13th century. **In Umbria, since time immemorial, Christmas has been associated with pan pepato** ('peppered bread'): a country sweet made of flour, cooked grape must, cocoa, honey, candied fruit and a pinch of black pepper.

In the Marche, the region of living nativity scenes, Christmas has the shape of a lucky talisman: a horseshoe. Even today, an ancient preparation method is followed for **making cavallucci** ('little horses'). They contain many ingredients: almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, sugar, *sapa* (another term for cooked must), breadcrumbs, coffee, orange zest and finally a few drops of many

liqueurs - Alchermes, Cognac, Amaretto, Marsala and Mistrà.

In Latium, Christmas is yellow

In Latium (Lazio), Christmas is yellow, **as in imperial Rome** when the 25th of December marked the ***Dies natalis solis invicti***, the 'natal day of the invincible sun', a celebration instituted by the emperor **Aurelian** to honour the birth of the new sun (Christmas is called 'Natale' in Italian). The Eternal City's representative Christmas cake is **pangiallo** ('yellow bread'). Its oldest known recipe is in a manuscript in the Viterbo State Archive dating from the first half of the 18th century. Its author is unknown; its ingredients are: bread dough, *zibibbo* grapes, almonds, pepper, salt and twelve saffron threads.

"È tante 'bbone stu parrozze..." wrote **Gabriele D'Annunzio** to his friend in Pescara, the pastry chef **Luigi d'Amico**, after tasting the sweet that Luigi had made for him. Today, *pane rozzo* ('rustic bread'), or better, **parrozzo**, has become **Abruzzo's Christmas dessert**. It has few ingredients: flour, butter, almonds both sweet and bitter, chocolate and Aurum, a liqueur from Abruzzo with a brandy and orange base.

Tiny Molise awaits the Redeemer's birth by lighting *n docce*, torches made of fir wood and bunches of broom, and serving *cauciuni*, ravioli stuffed with chickpeas, cocoa and candied citron zest, aromatised with cloves and cinnamon.

In the homeland of the siren Parthenope, **Campania, Christmas is bursting with sweets**. The most beloved are the s-shaped doughnuts called **roccocò**. They share an ingredient: **pisto**, a powder obtained by grinding nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and white pepper with a mortar and pestle.

In Puglia (Apulia), land of sanctuaries, caves and *trulli*, people pray to St Nicholas

and at Christmas they enjoy **cartellate: small pastry roses**, fried or baked. Their ingredients are few: flour, oil, wine, yeast, cooked must and *cotto di fichi* (fig must).

In Lucania the night is lit with a thousand bonfires during Christmas: the remains of an ancient Celtic ritual. The fire which banishes darkness symbolises rebirth and the hope of an abundant harvest.

Then, at home, people enjoy calzonceli. They have ancient but unknown origins. Those who strictly follow their original recipe only use chickpea and/or chestnut flour, sweeten them with cooked must, and finally fry them in boiling lard.

In Calabria the holiday is fragrant and very sweet

In Calabria Christmas is fragrant and very sweet. At home, flour, eggs, oil, must, cinnamon and orange zest are combined into **turdilli**, which, once fried, are **coated in orange or chestnut honey**. Some families that still adhere to hoary traditions follow the custom of burning *u zippuni*: an oaken log surrounded by 12 smaller pieces of wood representing the Apostles. Long ago, it was customary to invite as many poor people as had died in one's home to dine with one's family as the log burned in the fireplace.

In Sicily, Trinacria to the Greeks, Christmas must include **buccellato**: a shortcrust shell containing roughly chopped walnuts, pistachios and almonds with chocolate, raisins, candied pumpkin (*zuccata*) and the fragrance of cinnamon and cloves. Also, abundant dried figs, softened and ground: long ago those figs were called *incannati* ('reed-skewered'), because they were skewered on reeds to dry in the sun.

Saba, grape must cooked for an entire day, gives its name to the soft, moist **Sardinian sweet pan'esaba, containing raisins, fennel, pine nuts, walnuts and almonds.**

Christmas means joy, prayer and family. It may be a rich or a poor Christmas, celebrated at home or in the street, but it is always a source of sensory wonders; and above all, as our voyage demonstrates, it is always sweet, as tradition requires.

Gabriella Pravato



The date: *a sweet little talisman*

by **Giancarlo Burri**
Padua Academician

*A toothsome symbol
of life, prosperity
and health.*

According to lore concerning lucky foods that one must consume in the first days of the year **to attract good fortune**, dates are among the five protagonists alongside lentils, grapes, pomegranates and red chilli peppers.

Dates are the fruits of *Phoenix dactylifera* L., a palm tree which, despite the popular image of it sprouting anywhere in the desert, can in fact only thrive and bear fruit with sufficient water. An an-

cient Bedouin proverb explains that **the date palm is happiest with its “feet in water and its head in the fire of the sky”**. Its fruits, which grow in heavy clusters hanging under its leaves and whose shape resembles a finger (**daktylos in Greek**, hence the Italian *datteri*), can be up to 7 cm long, and their thin skin encloses **a sweet and pleasant pulp** surrounding a single hard, woody, pointy seed.

*Depending on variety,
dates may be eaten fresh or dried*

There are **hundreds of date varieties** which, depending on type, may be consumed fresh or dried. Because they are highly perishable, fresh dates, such as **Berhi** and **Hiann**, are rarely found in

European shops and are almost always kept in cold storage at -20 °C.

Most commercially available dates are dried, dehydrated using different methods and time scales. Considering the glut of lower-quality dates in terms of both cost and organoleptic properties due to harsh dehydration procedures, **to enjoy dry dates adequately** it is advisable to choose **two particular varieties: Medjoul**, ranging from light to dark brown and prized for its size (between 15 and 23 g), softness, sweetness and juiciness, and **Deglet Nour**, ranging from an almost golden light brown to dark brown, smaller than Medjoul (8-11 g), aromatic and sweet with a subtle marzipan aftertaste.

*The ‘fruit of paradise’ has
extraordinary nutritional virtues*

An ancient Persian hymn transmitted by the greek **Strabo** (63 BC - 23 AD) **praises the 360 uses of the date palm** (corresponding to the 360 days of the old Persian calendar), while **according to Islamic tradition**, the date is the ‘fruit of paradise’ due to its extraordinary nutritional properties.

Dates are mentioned **in the Qur’an** where the birth of Jesus is recounted: Allah helps Maryam (Mary) to alleviate her suffering during childbirth by causing a date palm to release a cluster of ripe fresh fruit. **The apocryphal gospel** of pseudo-Matthew contains a similar episode in which, during the flight into Egypt, Mary, exhausted by the journey, is offered restorative dates by a palm





that bends over her in a miracle wrought by Jesus.

In ancient Rome, dates were much appreciated (especially, according to **Pliny**, the fleshy variety that came from Judaea), and in January, the first month dedicated to the god Janus, aristocrats customarily exchanged jars of honey containing dates and dried figs, accompanied by the propitiatory message "so the year that begins might be sweet".

Marcus Gavius Apicius, in book VII of his *De re coquinaria*, presents a recipe for dates fried in honey among the recipes for *Dulcia domestica* ('Domestic Sweets'): "Stuff pitted palm fruits, or dates, with a walnut or pine nuts or ground pepper. Touch the outside with salt, fry in cooked honey and serve." A university study specially undertaken in Qatar has confirmed **the efficacy of salt for optimising the caramelisation of dates in hot honey**.



Apicius also provides the formula for *Conditum paradoxum*, a sort of mulled wine: **wine sweetened with abundant honey** is heated several times and aromatised with pepper, spikenard leaves, saffron and dates, generally offered to guests after a meal.

In the Renaissance, dates were used in cakes and pies

In the Middle Ages and then the Renaissance, dates were served, stuffed and caramelised, after meals, but were most commonly included in cakes and pies, **often combined with savoury ingredients**.

It was commonplace for the great chefs in the service of potentates to keep detailed and updated records of ingredients used in food preparation, as attested by **Cristoforo di Messisbugo** (*Libro novo nel qual s'insegna a' far di ogni sorte di vivanda - New book in which dishes of all sorts are taught*, 1577) in his "Memorandum for a general setting upon the arrival of any great prince or for whatever else may have importance", wherein **dattali** figure prominently alongside "...persiche, pomi, pere" (peaches, apples and pears). And of course, dates appear in his "Paste per di di Quaresima e gran vigilie" (Pastries for Lenten days and major vigils), contributing to fritters and

cakes in collaboration with walnuts and *zibibbo* grapes.

Great fame among the cardinals followed the creation of the **rotolo di datteri** (date roll) created by **Bartolomeo Scappi** (*Opera*, 1570) for meals with the Pope: a twisted tube, wound on itself no more than thrice, consisting of a thin sheet of dough made from *fior di farina* (fine-milled flour), eggs, yeast, butter and rosewater, filled with Corinth grapes, dates and *zibibbo* grapes previously boiled in wine.

The custom of making rolls or rings filled with nuts (walnuts, hazelnuts and almonds) and dried fruit (dates, prunes, figs and raisins) persists in many regions of south-central Italy to mark patron saints' feast days.

Giancarlo Burri

DATES IN THE MOONLIGHT

*(formulated by the futurist
Doctor Sirocofran)*

Ingredients: 35-40 very ripe and sugary dates; 500 g of Roman ricotta.

Preparation: remove the seeds from the dates and mash them thoroughly (better still, pass them through a sieve). Blend the resulting pulp into the ricotta to form a homogeneous paste. Serve cold, after several hours of refrigeration.