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On the cover: graphic elaboration of *La vendemmia* (*The Grape Harvest*; 1880-1890) by Francesco Gioli; Gallery of Modern Art, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

Focus of the President

2 Summer news:
restaurants under fire
(Paolo Petroni)



Current Events • Lifestyle • Society

3 Twilight of the
Mediterranean Diet
(Giovanni Ballarini)



Tradition • History

5 The variegated world of tea
(Anna Livia Marcomeni)



Territories • Tourism • Folklore

6 A sweet treasure from the lagoon:
barana honey
(Marcello Marzani)



Summer news: *restaurants under fire*

This year, restaurateurs' 'extravagant' behaviour is big news.

August was once a time of news drought: newspapers mostly discussed the oppressive heat, the ebb and flow of weekend travellers, summer storms and other filler items. However, the main course was served on flying saucers: aliens only showed up in summer, only to disappear back to their distant planets at the first sign of rain. Then Covid changed everything. A flood of numbers: hospitalisations, infections, casualties, curfew times and much more. Last year, however, the top headline was the blue crab invasion, with consequent, seemingly insoluble economic catastrophes caused by vanishing mussels and clams. This year, the blue crabs are gone, we know not whither: perhaps they've self-eliminated. Just as well.

A hot topic this summer has been the attack on restaurants and bars

Instead, one of this summer's hot topics has been the attack on restaurants and bars. They've got up to all sorts of shenanigans. **One bar charged a customer 2 euros to cut a toast-ed sandwich in half.** Another diner asked for a saucer to give a child a forkful of *trofie al pesto*; the resulting receipt charged for a 'sharing dish'. In another case, customers were charged for several empty plates after sharing food. Other examples: 2 euros for microwaving a baby bottle; 50 cents for ice in coffee; 10 cents for cocoa sprinkled over a cappuccino. **Another restaurant charged 58 euros for cutting a cake for 13 people who had bought it elsewhere** (after securing the restaurant's permission). Rounding out this limited overview is the mandatory (sometimes justified) minimum order of 2 dishes. We would like to seize this opportunity to **point out even worse conduct.** We have noted several times that restaurateurs are a demographic prone to lamentation; in particular, we have gathered that **even historic restaurants are closing for lack of personnel. This is a real problem for two reasons:** working in restaurants is very hard; one becomes less social, **working while friends are having fun**, in terms of both hours and free days. The other aspect is economical. **Low wages,** often paid largely under the table; unpaid overtime; phantom

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia



contracts, often seasonal or 'on call'. Planet Restaurant is a world apart: overtime, holidays, night rates and bonuses often don't exist there. However enthusiastic in the beginning, young people face something of a cartel, which makes the rules, especially in large cities. Whoever won't stand for it won't find work.

Professional waiters were once the face of a restaurant

Restaurants were once graced by professional waiters, often of a certain age and well-dressed, even in white coats and bow ties; they knew the dishes and the clientele, and they were the face of the restaurant. **Nowadays,** waiters are mostly youngsters, often foreign, who **don't know the food they bring or interact with customers.** To be fair, they are frequently forbidden to do so. All national newspapers have reported what happened in a noted *trattoria*, where an uncouth customer told a waitress: "move your arse and clear the table". The owner quickly ejected him, but the incident illustrates a certain difficulty working with customers. We clearly don't know how staff are paid or treated; but **if service has been timely, efficient and courteous, please let's offer thanks, a smile and an adequate tip.** It's all we can do to show them that their work is important.



Twilight of the Mediterranean Diet

by Giovanni Ballarini

Honorary President of the Academy

Breakneck social change may demolish a food culture heading towards new identities.

Mediterranean Diet' is a term used for describing the dietary model of those who, before globalisation, inhabited countries along the Mediterranean coast, including Greece, Italy, southern France, Crete, Spain and parts of the Middle East. In the middle of the last century, before large-scale trade became widespread, people ate what was locally and seasonally available. Each of the peoples around the Mediterranean had their own Mediterranean Diet, but all shared **a vegetable base with some added animal products, namely fish, fowl and a limited amount of dairy products.** The modern version of the Mediterranean Diet **uses a small percentage of red meat and processed food,** while remaining vegetable-based and using healthy fats. There is robust evidence that such dietary models as the Mediterranean Diet, which are characterised by vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, whole cereals, unsaturated vegetable oils and fish, lean meat or fowl, are associated with **reduced mortality**

risks of all types in adults and the elderly. Such models also contain very little processed red meat, high-fat dairy products, refined carbohydrates and sweets, and may include alcohol, such as wine, in moderation.

Abandonment of the Mediterranean Diet

As early as 1985-1986 and 2005-2006 there were signs that Italians were abandoning their traditional Mediterranean Diet, with changes being more evident in young and elderly people. Recent overviews of scientific studies are demonstrating that in Mediterranean countries, including Italy, adults, and **chiefly younger people, are progressively distancing themselves from the traditional Mediterranean Diet, especially in the past ten years.** This is particularly marked in adolescents, the adults of tomorrow, whose food habits





have been considerably changed by globalisation and westernisation. **Studies of Italian youngsters** indicate that only 5% of children in primary schools and 16% in high schools have nutritional habits consistent with a Mediterranean Diet. With differences in details and extent, a similar departure is evident in **all Mediterranean countries, contributing to weight gain and even obesity** among an increasing proportion of the population, especially the young. Particularly, in Italy, where obesity was previously very rare, the percentage of overweight and obese individuals is now 29.7% for children, 22.6% for adolescents and 42.9% in adults.

The causes of a complex phenomenon

Why is the Mediterranean Diet being abandoned? Certainly it is a complex phenomenon: its causes are manifold but **socioeconomic factors and lifestyle changes play important roles**. The Mediterranean Diet surely exists within the realm of rapidly changing family habits, now mostly involving partially or heavily processed foods or pre-made foods provided by an increasingly pervasive industry with varied, often distantly sourced offerings, in step with reduced seasonality. **Family-centred meals and habits are now replaced by life and meals outside the home**, from café breakfasts to fast food restaurants, informal eateries, *pizzeria* and the *apericena*

(a portmanteau of *apéritif* and *cena*, dinner), especially popular among the young, less so with adults and the elderly. The Mediterranean Diet **was associated with different rhythms of life** than current ones, and while the diets of other populations were once viewed more or less negatively, they now represent stimulating opportunities for experiences perceived as youthful. Furthermore, if the Mediterranean Diet was once based on ingredients with limited or (apparently) low cost, sourced in family vegetable plots, orchards or farmyards, now **many representative** elements of Italy's Mediterranean Diet, most obviously extra-virgin olive oil but fruits to a comparable extent, **suffer competition** from easily available, more affordable products due to globalisation. Last but not least, **the advent of industrial production** and organised large-scale

distribution (known as GDO, *Grande Distribuzione Organizzata*) of partially or completely processed foods and **ready-made foods** operates on a vast scale which transcends the limits of local production on which traditional Mediterranean Diets rested.

From the Mediterranean Diet towards a new identity?

The Mediterranean Diet had a distinctive identity in each country it inhabited, manifested as Lebanese, Greek, Tunisian, Spanish, Mediterranean French and Italian cuisine. We are witnessing, if not its disappearance, its progressive reduction and the profound changes pointing towards its twilight. Change is not a new phenomenon, as we saw during the slow, limited episodes of commercial receptiveness which introduced aubergines, tomatoes and potatoes into the Mediterranean Diet. The current changes wrought by swift globalisation are indubitably massive, and could even demolish **a food culture which is moving towards new identities**. Though this is a distressing thought for many, it is alas irrefutable. Thus the ongoing changes in our Italian Mediterranean Diet must be **continuously, scrupulously monitored** and assessed.

Giovanni Ballarini





The variegated world of tea

by **Anna Livia Marcomeni**
Spoletto Academician

*A beverage which
invites leisurely
conversation.*

A Japanese proverb recites: “Love and friendship are not requested like water, but offered like tea”. Many Italians are even unsure how to spell ‘tea’ in their language: it is often rendered as, inter alia, *tè*, *the* or *thè*.

The Accademia della Crusca, which issues authoritative pronouncements about the Italian Language, confirms that the correct spelling is *tè*: “*tè* indicates the beverage, and is preferable to

the and *tea*, while *te* is the complement pronoun” (‘you’).

*Tea is credited with a
5000-year history*

Tea is considered **one of the world’s oldest, best-known drinks**, second only to the water in which it is prepared, and



Green tea



White tea



is credited with a 5000-year history, **though its origins are shrouded in mystery.**

According to a **Chinese legend**, tea was discovered by the emperor **Shen Nung** (or Shennong, also credited with discovering and disseminating agriculture) in 2737 BC.

Another legend, instead, identifies the discoverer of tea as the founder of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, **Bodhidharma**, who visited China during the reign of the emperor **Xuanwu** of Northern Wei. Various sources attest to his presence in China in the 6th century AD.

Official history dates the diffusion of tea in China to the first centuries AD.

Previously, the leaves of *tu* (an earlier pronunciation, originally of a character for 'bitter herb') were gathered and pulped into poultices to apply on aching body parts.

In 1610, Dutch merchants began importing tea into Europe

The tea plant is an evergreen shrub, originating in China, Tibet and northern India, with small white buds resembling tiny roses.

Tea was first imported by Portuguese and Arab merchants in the 16th century, and subsequently, in the 17th, by Jesuit missionaries. In 1610, merchants of the **Dutch East India Company** began im-

porting tea into Europe. It **competed with coffee and alcohol**, but around 1660, **establishments arose where tea was administered medicinally** against migraines, lethargy, sleepiness, paralysis, vertigo, epilepsy, colic and gallstones. Only men, of course, were admitted.

Tea sales multiplied, even in coffee houses, which became the earliest natural venues for English clubs where one could buy a newspaper, drink tea and converse.

From 1662, Catherine of Braganza introduced tea to the English court, and throughout the 18th century, its consumption reached noteworthy levels, enriching importers to the point where, to curb their growing economic power, the government imposed a hefty tax on trading tea, both within Britain and in its American colonies. Tension between the crown and the Anglo-American merchants escalated into the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the American War of Independence.

Differences depend on place, climate, harvesting and processing

In 1753, the Swedish botanist **Carl Von Linné (Linneus)** first described the tea plant, calling it *Thea sinensis*, meaning 'Chinese tea'.

Tea variations are caused by differences

in cultivation area, soil, climate, processing methods and/or harvesting methods.

Most tea growers use only three plant species identified according to their provenance, namely: **Chinese, Assamese and Cambodian.** The tea that we find for sale today grows within a belt surrounding the planet, above the equator; the best plantations are those whose altitude is below 1,800 metres.

Altitude and mountain mist protect the plants from strong sunlight and provide the temperature and humidity **which favour slow growth of leaves and buds**, preserving their tenderness.

Tea plants grow from seeds the size of a hazelnut, gathered in October and kept through the winter in a mixture of sand and earth; in spring they are planted a metre deep. After their first growth phase, the plants are pruned weekly to avoid excessive growth.

Harvesting begins during the third year of low-altitude plantations and the fifth year of high-altitude plantations. **Tea plants are productive for 30 or 40 years**, but some of them, generally wild, can continue producing for over 100 years. Most tea plants alternate between 'flush' (growth) and dormancy periods.

Tea leaves are gathered when buds open. In hot climates buds frequently sprout and harvesting may occur all year, but generally it begins in April and ends in October.

The portion selected for prized tea

Black tea



Oolong tea



varieties is the final two leaves and the apical bud. For more casual teas, up to the fourth and fifth leaves are also gathered. They are detached with fingernails by moving the fingers downwards.

Tea varieties and the different preparation techniques

Green tea: also known as 'unfermented tea' because its leaves are not 'fermented' (actually, oxidised) and thus remain green, producing a light, fragrant infusion.

White tea: among the most prized and sought-after Chinese teas. Some types of *Yin Zhen* ('silver needle') tea are very expensive and only harvested a few days a year.

Oolong: these teas undergo a partial oxidation process and are thus dark, to varying degrees, producing sturdier infusions and a more intense flavour than green teas.

Black tea: principally produced in India and African countries, it is destined for western markets that require stronger teas richer in theine (the same molecule as caffeine).

Aromatised tea: green, black or oolong tea with added fragrances.

Compressed tea: in China there is a centuries-old tradition of compressing tea into shapes to preserve it and make it more transportable. There are varieties

of shapes, including nests, bricks, balls and cups.

Pu-erh tea: these teas undergo very specific processing which extends their shelf life. Some types are aged for years in cellars, and enthusiasts may boast of pu-erh tea aged more than a century. Over the centuries, three tea preparation techniques have developed, identified by the imperial dynasties during which they prevailed.

Boiled tea technique: prevalent in various forms until the Tang dynasty (618-

907), when tea became China's national beverage.

Whisked tea technique: prevalent from the 10th century, under the Sung dynasty, when tea was used as currency and payment for horses purchased from northern Mongols.

Infused tea technique: in the 14th century, under the Ming dynasty, porcelain teapots became indispensable accessories, and white cups became the norm to highlight the colour of tea.

Anna Livia Marcomeni





A sweet treasure from the lagoon: *barena* honey

by **Marcello Marzani**

Treviso-Alta Marca Academician

Bees, attracted by the nectar of sea lavender, transform it into a prized product rich in minerals and enzymes.

In his *Abbecedario Adriatico* (ABC of the Adriatic), **Fabio Fiori**, a writer and expert on the Adriatic Sea, dwells upon the transience of lagoons: uncertain, mutable spaces where nothing is definite. A precious resource and, at the same time, a treacherous place, the Adriatic lagoon is a landscape rendered unique by the sequence of islands, canals, river mouths, beaches and **barena**: **sandbanks barely emerging from the water**. Periodically submerged by the briny waters, *barena* (singular: *barena*) are characteristic of the Marano, Grado, Venice and Valli di Comacchio lagoons, and curiously, also of Tavolara island near Sardinia. Deriving from the Venetian *baro* (uncultivated land) and the Gaulish *barros* (bushes or clumps of marsh grass), according to the writer **Riccardo Bacchelli** *barena* are made of the same “*terra fracida e torbosa*” (“soggy, peaty earth”) as reed thickets: inhospitable, sterile places full of clay and sand, unsuited for cultivation.

Barena are crucial to the health of the lagoon ecosystem

In reality, *barena* are crucial to the health of the lagoon ecosystem: natural barriers against the aggression of waves, providential **refuge for numerous waterfowl species** and veritable **botanic oases**. It

is precisely this last peculiarity that gives rise to a product unknown to many, but assuredly unmissable: **barena honey**. The heavy, salty, oxygen-starved soil of Venetian *barena* is ideal for **halophytes**: salt-loving plants. These include rushes, samphire, reeds, sea wormwood, glasswort and sea lavender (*Limonium*), this last being a plant around half a metre high which transforms the *barena* into marvellous purple tracts from June to September. **Bees, attracted by the nectar of sea lavender**, locally named “*fiorella/fioreta de barena*” (“little flower of the *barena*”), hoard it and then transform it into a yellowish, opaque, rather dense and easily crystallised honey rich in minerals and enzymes.

So prized as to be included among the **PAT (Traditional Agrifood Products) of Veneto** alongside the honeys of the Euganean Hills, Mount Grappa, the Po river delta, Montello, the Verona area and the Asiago plateau, *barena* honey has been produced since at least the 19th century. It is now a speciality in the areas of **Campagna Lupia, Mira, Chioggia, Venezia, Cavallino-Treporti and Jesolo**.

Appreciated for its balsamic properties

Appreciated for its balsamic properties and reputedly beneficial to the airways, *barena* honey **owes its uniqueness to the lagoon environment which gives it salty, herbaceous and faintly bitter notes** reminiscent of other legendary honeys including Tuscan beach honey or Sardinian arbutus honey.

Enjoyed on bread for breakfast, used as a sweetener, **paired with fresh cheeses**, chocolate or crustaceans, the star of



such elaborate recipes as **glazed duck**, *barena* honey is a rarity from which unforgettable **nougats and ice creams** can be made.

A curious fact: in Dolo, a town adjoining the Venetian lagoon, there lived for several years one **František Hruška** (1819-1888), of Bohemian origins, an officer of the Austro-Hungarian army. A passionate beekeeper who owned hundreds of beehives, after several experiments Hruška built an instrument still in use today: **the honey extractor**, which allows mechanical extraction of honey from honeycombs without destroying them.

“Those who seek honey must have the courage to face the bees”

The fascinating world of bees, essential to the well-being of every living thing, sadly does not escape the menaces wrought by climate change and humans’ disrespect for the environment. Beekeepers, to avoid succumbing to this, must react with **the same obstinacy of those who, year after year, perch their beehives on those scraps of land half-sunken in seawater**, exposed to the fickle tides and winds, but **rich in unique botanic essences**. After all, those who choose to dedicate themselves to apiculture have a surplus of willpower and audacity, as illustrated by an African proverb: “*Those who seek honey must have the courage to face the bees*”.