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EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,  
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



**On the cover:** *Graphic elaboration of a detail of Still Life with Pewter Plate, Shrimps, a Lemon, Glass Cruets, Bread and a Bottle of Wine (ca. 1750) by Giacomo Ceruti; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (lent until October 2020 by the Estense Gallery in Ferrara).*

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# Freedom of the press, statistics and the restaurant crisis

by Paolo Petroni

President of the Accademia

*Befuddled by contradictory news, we must be discerning and prudent.*

**W**e all feel that we inhabit a democratic nation where the press has absolute freedom: witness the proliferation of news outlets and television stations, with varying political inclinations, whether outspoken or subtle, but nevertheless all different. Alas, however, we live in a different reality. According to the prestigious international association **Reporters sans Frontières**, Italy **ranks 41<sup>st</sup>** for press freedom worldwide. Ghana, South Africa, Burkina Faso and Botswana are just some examples of countries with greater press freedom than Italy's. Not that the government is issuing morning *veline*, the heavily censored news and instructions received by newspaper editors from the fascist-era **Ministry of Popular Culture** (Minculpop); nor is television news equivalent to the propagandistic **Istituto LUCE** newsreels of that era. Yet the concentration of news outlets under very few large publishing groups, the public financing of dailies and periodicals, advertising revenue and editors' financial interests all influence content. Individual journalists can themselves be swayed by friendships, convention and threats from criminals.

*The use of statistics is often a sneaky and effective way to distort reality*

Certain viewpoints are clearly proclaimed in an echo chamber, and some interviews of 'potentates du jour' positively reek of reverence. Consider also the dossiers classified by governments and the indiscriminate overabundance of statistics, which many experts regard as the sneakiest, most effective way to lie and distort or conceal the truth. As **Mark Twain** said, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics". Our own **Trilussa**, purveyor of no-frills Roman popular wisdom, expressed it thus: "If I eat two chickens and you eat none, we've eaten a chicken each". The above represents everyday normality; however, for months the scene has been darkened by news of the coronavirus epidemic: a daily barrage of news, whether aiming to dramatise or dismiss the issue. Headlines are chock-

full of 'buts': "Deaths are down, **but** infections rise"; "Fewer infections **but** more hospitalisations"; "Nobody hospitalised, fewer infections, **but** things get worse in India".

*Expecting zero infections worldwide is utterly utopian. That will take years*

Let it be clear that it is utopian to expect zero infections worldwide; corona silence will require years, not because the virus will be extinct but because other problems will supersede it and the barrage will cease when that news no longer sells. All this is to say that we recommend maximum caution and circumspection when reading headlines that scream contagion statistics in all caps. There's a comeback of the 'vulnerable demographic', now renamed '**vulnerable workers**', whose age now begins as low as 55. These are workers who risk being infected by irresponsible young plague-spreaders. We have already pointed out that the Covid problem exists and requires great caution, while also noting that numbers and percentages can be vastly misleading without their qualitative aspects. We have also described, in an earlier Focus, the "deafening silence" regarding the frightful restaurant situation. Well, that silence has now been shattered by a government representative suggesting that beleaguered restaurateurs change profession. Having noticed this faux pas, the authorities suggested credit card cash-back discounts to be paid into diners' personal accounts, a proposal which obviously withered on the vine. Other luminaries recommended a freeze on restaurant licences. Restaurateurs are admittedly prone to moaning, but their situation is truly dire.

*Good restaurants will manage unaided, in accordance with market forces*

Let us leave aside bonuses and subsidies, which often end up in the wrong hands and have limited stamina. Good restaurants, if assisted by bureaucratic streamlining, less onerous taxes and the end of 'working at home' (which empties cities and nullifies socialisation), will manage on their own, in accordance with market forces rather than hypocritical laws portraying the dread coronavirus as a sort of modern **Count Dracula** who wakes at sundown, biting and infecting from 6 PM to 6 AM, and shrinking back into his sarcophagus at the first light of dawn.



# The future of meat and the meat of the future

by **Maurizia Debiaggi**

*Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Academician*

## *Combating the biodiversity crisis.*

**M**odifying our food habits by eating less of the meat we crave is rather like severing the roots linking us to our past, our history. It seems a far-fetched scheme incompatible with human nature. Yet this is the challenge proposed in a 2019 study by the World Economic Forum. A human

population of around eight billion must have played a role in this.

## *Reducing meat consumption also has environmental benefits*

The WEF's investigation shows that balancing meat, particularly beef, with alternative protein sources brings **significant environmental and health benefits**, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and food-related illnesses. The recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic supplies additional motivations, including, first and foremost, fear (or better, awareness) of emerging zoonoses.

'Species-jumping' diseases ultimately raise ecological concerns regarding intensive livestock breeding, which I have always viewed critically.

**What, then, is the future of meat? An ever-narrower path, apparently!** A way to reduce factory farming is partial replacement of animal with vegetable proteins: hence the burgeoning tendency in innovative food industries to **develop meat-like plant-based products** with a comparable smell, taste and texture. The two pioneers and leaders of the 'plant-based meat' market are Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, Californian companies founded in 2009 and 2011 respectively, which have embraced the environmentalist cause, presenting



flexitarian customers with appetising yet environmentally friendly products.

**Plant-based meat production** uses **75% to 95% less water and 93% to 95% less land** than beef production, while **emitting between 87% and 95% fewer greenhouse gases**. Their **principal ingredients**, pea protein, coconut oil, beet juice for the Beyond Burger and soya protein, coconut and sunflower oil and soya hemoglobin for the Impossible Burger, **make these products look, taste and even sizzle while cooking** like animal meat. In the wake of undeniable success in the USA, **other companies in Europe have responded in kind**: Nestlé's Incredible Burger and Unilever's purchase of The Vegetarian Butcher are only two examples.

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### *'Meatless meat' is gaining popularity in Italy*

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With increasing awareness of sustainable eating, 'meatless meat' is gaining popularity in Italy: the Beyond Burger is available in such successful chains and venues as Well Done, Burger Wave, Ham Holy Burger and Avo Brothers; the Incredible Burger is widely distributed in shops and the Vegetarian Butcher's patties are sold by Burger King as the vegan version of its signature creation, the whopper.

So far, however, **these plant meats don't appear much healthier than animal meats**: designed to replace meat nutritionally, though lower in cholesterol and higher in fibre **they have longer ingredient lists and comparable fat content, including saturated fat, to farmed meat**. Their **cost** also remains relatively **high**: a plant burger costs, on average, nearly twice an animal one. Producers are nevertheless aware of this and ready for a **new challenge: improve their product, making it healthier and cheaper**.

Indeed, in Italy itself we can now count on plant meats (still in limited quantities) which are substantially healthier than foreign competitors, with short ingredient lists and high-quality fat such as



extra-virgin olive or sunflower oil. These are the **burgers made of peas and rice** by Emilia Foods (Modena) and the soya flour chicken, pork and beef alternatives made by Joy Food (Perugia), the latter now sold, for instance, at the Esselunga supermarket chain.

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### *Other 'future meat' scenarios*

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Soon, however, **plant-based meat will not be the only commercially viable alternative to animal meat**: here are some possible 'future meat' scenarios.

**3D-printed meat**, being developed by the Spanish startup Novameat. This is produced through a patented process called 'micro-extrusion', which uses a 3D printer to arrange vegetable protein filaments in a manner which imitates the interlacing structure of intracellular proteins in muscle cells.

**Meat from lab-cultured cells**, obtained from live animal stem cells ('clean meat'). Some startups, including Mosa Meat, Memphis Meat, Aleph Farm and Just, are finalising the first prototypes of meat using stem cells extracted harmlessly from cattle, hogs and sheep.

**Meat from pasta, bread or beer by-products**. This is the aim of the **Smart Protein** project undertaken by the School

of Food and Nutritional Science at University College Cork in Ireland, with 33 industrial and academic partners.

**Meat obtained from air**. In California, the startup Air Protein is using micro-organisms to **convert carbon dioxide into protein** sharing the amino-acid profile of meat.

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### *All this can seem like science fiction, but the challenge is real*

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This can all seem like science fiction today, since we don't know these projects' research parameters, production timelines and capacities, and costs. Yet the challenge before us is very real. We must face it and prevail swiftly **to guarantee sustainable, healthy food** for the eight billion and more humans of tomorrow, if not those of today.

Reaching this goal inherently implies a second, equally important achievement. 'Plant meat' or 'future meat' production, indeed, will free a substantial portion of our land from livestock use, allowing reforestation and the reinstatement of a habitat able to halt the biodiversity crisis and revitalise the vast carbon sinks necessary to slow global warming. I find it difficult to ignore this necessity.

**Maurizia Debiaggi**



# The intense aroma of rosemary

by **Morello Pecchioli**

*Honorary Academician for Verona*

*A plant which can radically transform the qualities of the foods it encounters.*

It has a long name: 'Queen of Hungary's aromatic rosemary water'. Its history is even longer, spanning 700 years. It is an astringent tonic, a distillate of rosemary and alcohol which for centuries has permitted women to correct minor skin imperfections they discover, with horror, in the mirror. The 'Queen of Hungary's water' essentially 'fades' wrinkles and spots. A miraculous potion? Well... It must be good for something, though, if **ladies**,

**dames and gentlewomen have used it for centuries** and can still find it on Amazon for 13.58 Euros, postage included, or in many apothecaries including on the internet for a few Euros less.

**Its history.** In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, the 72-year-old Queen Isabella of Hungary asked magicians and alchemists to relieve her unbearable rheumatic pains. One of them, **an alchemist who believed rosemary to possess magical and curative properties, formulated**





a lotion with rosemary extract, recommending the monarch to apply it generously every day to her entire body, including her neck, arms and décolleté. Isabella diligently followed these instructions, accompanying them with copious prayers.

Whether through prayers or rosemary, it seems that the queen was not only liberated from rheumatism but **gained the skin of a 20-year-old, free of wrinkles and age spots**. The thaumaturgical essence became known as 'Queen Isabella's water'. It so rejuvenated her that according to legend the Grand Duke of Lithuania requested her hand in marriage.

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*We can swear by the health-giving properties of rosemary*

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For centuries, the unknown alchemist's 'medicine' sold briskly: noblewomen in their thirties and beyond consumed it by the gallon. Rheumatic pain sufferers also used it. Louis XIV, the Sun King, used it as a remedy for gout. We can swear by

the curative properties of rosemary. These were averred by illustrious physicians of antiquity such as **Hippocrates and Dioscorides**, who mentioned it in his book *De Materia Medica*, and confirmed by modern medicine: *Rosmarinus officinalis*, so named because of its various therapeutic uses, **invigorates the memory, acts against muscle pain and respiratory infections** (in days of yore, sprigs of rosemary were burnt on stoves to allow sick people to breathe better), favours blood circulation, and is a diuretic, digestive and antiseptic. **It also counteracts melancholia**: its sharp and penetrating aroma apparently helps to banish sadness.

In the Middle Ages, healers recommended keeping a rosemary sprig under one's pillow to encourage good dreams while deterring nightmares: a sort of dream catcher.

True? Untrue? Who knows... Rosemary's fragrance clearly titillates the palate, however. **Due to its intense aroma and pleasant flavour, it is used in many recipes**, from starters to ice cream. It infuses fragrance and freshness into meat and fish, especially roasted or baked in casseroles. It is used for flavour-

ing bread, bread sticks and flatbreads. It lends aroma to risotto, bean and pasta soup, and tripe. It is crucial in *spaghetti al grillo* (spaghetti with European lobster); delicious with roast or baked potatoes, or on pizza with cherry tomatoes or Taggiasca olives. Finely minced rosemary gives flavour to salt. Extra-virgin olive oil can be aromatised by a rosemary sprig in the bottle. Grilled meat or fish brushed with a rosemary sprig dipped in good olive oil become perfectly delicious.

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*Galen recommended combining it with food because it aids digestion*

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It was Galen, a Greek-Roman physician of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, who imported rosemary into the kitchen, recommending its association with food as a digestive aid. **It was a wonderful discovery that its benefits were gastronomic as well as medical**. Rosemary had previously been used as a medicinal herb and for exorcisms and funeral rites. Its long-lasting freshness after being picked

made the Egyptians associate it with immortality, a sort of ticket for entry to the afterlife. They therefore included rosemary sprigs in burials. The Greeks and Romans also planted it on the tombs of loved ones. **Horace recommended: "To gain the favour of the dead, offer them crowns of rosemary and myrtle"**. The descendants of Romulus burned it while sacrificing to the gods. Considered a potent remedy against various diseases and evil spirits, it was also placed over babies' cradles. A symbol of love, it was woven into crowns for the heads of bridal pairs. It was the Romans who awarded a poetic name to this plant which grows wild along coastlines, reflecting the colour of the sea in its flowers: **ros maris, 'the dew of the sea'**.

In the Middle Ages it was used for deterring evil spirits and witches. It was long considered a charm for averting dark forces and illnesses. **The persistent aroma of evergreen rosemary bushes was associated with remembrance, constancy, devotion, and memory**. It was therefore used in love potions to enchant the heart and attract fond memories. A symbol of love, loyalty and death, rosemary was the tragic witness of Juliet's and Ophelia's doomed loves.

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### *Rosemary was the tragic witness to Juliet's and Ophelia's doomed loves*

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In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Veronese poet **Berto Barbarani's *Giulietta e Romeo*** (*Romeo and Juliet*), the girl, whom a potion has plunged into a death-like sleep which, by misleading her parents, should have aided her escape with Romeo, dreams of having her beloved nearby and offering him a rosemary sprig: "Take, take, for your safety, take this, my rosemary branch". (In the original Veronese dialect: "Toli, toli per vostra garansia, toli sta rama del me rosmarin"). It is the same love token which the maddened Ophelia would like to give and receive in **Shakespeare's *Hamlet***: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember".

The birth of rosemary, harbinger of love, death and remembrance, is described in the myth of Leucothoë recounted in **Ovid's *Metamorphoses***: The sun god Apollo, consumed by passion for the winsome Leucothoë, uses trickery to seduce her. Instead of raging against the god, her father punishes her by burying her alive. When the tragedy has alas already occurred, the beautiful Apollo returns and irradiates the ill-fated maiden's grave with sunlight, and from it sprouts a fragrant shrub with little blue flowers: rosemary.

The idea of rosemary as a fortifier of remembrance arose from ancient and mediaeval popular medicine: the plant's persistent fragrance has the power to dredge up long-forgotten memories, especially the recollections and transports of love. Shakespeare's imagination? Apparently not. **A study by Northumbria University** surveying 150 people aged over 65 has reported that **elders accommodated in rooms perfumed with rosemary essence demonstrated more vivid recollection**.

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### *A plant which inspires poets and singers*

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Rosemary inspires poets and singers. **The famous hedge from Giacomo Leopardi's celebrated poem *L'Infinito*** (*Infinity*), in Recanati, included **rosemary shrubs**. This was noted by the landscape architect **Paolo Pejrone**, commissioned with its restoration in the Orto delle Monache (Nuns' Garden), where the poet loved strolling: "The hill immortalised in *L'Infinito* should regain its rather anarchic authenticity, populated by ancient and unassuming plants, such as rosemary shrubs and wild lilies". **Leopardi the gourmet also loved the fragrance of rosemary at the table**: his Neapolitan chef Pasquale Ignarra prepared intriguing dishes redolent of rosemary and thyme.

The journalist **Licia Granello** acknowledges the plant's evocative quality: "Rosemary is a herb which can radically alter the characteristics of the dishes it

meets. A tough herb, infused with Mediterranean DNA. Close your eyes, take a sniff, and you'll relive the essence of summer at the beach".

The words of **Fabrizio De André** in "Canto del servo pastore" ("Song of the Servant Shepherd") are poignantly vivid: "Where the rosemary blooms there's a dark spring / where my destiny walks, there's a thread of fear". Less poetic is **Zuccherò** in "Menta e rosmarino" ("Mint and Rosemary"), a metaphor for how different he and his ex wife were and how their love was therefore doomed: "We'll meet tonight / mint and rosemary / and I've rained blows on the night to be close to you".

Let us conclude by sharing an ancient belief popular among marriageable maidens: on St Agnes' Eve (20 January), if they braid a sprig of rosemary and a sprig of thyme together, they will see their beloved and future husband in their dreams. It doesn't hurt to try. You never know.

**Morello Pecchioli**



Francesco Hayez:  
*The last kiss of Romeo and Juliet* (1823)



# The problem of single-use plastic

by **Gabriele Gasparro**  
*Rome Delegate*

*We must limit the consumption of plastic cups, containers, dishes and cutlery.*

**W**e return to the subject of single-use plastic, a problem which is assuming epic proportions. Trailing other countries, Italy is trying to establish a 'green' strategy to curb consumption, aligning itself with what other European nations are already doing.

The problem, however, also has notable economic and manufacturing ramifications, as it involves numerous industries in the sector. Many producers' and distributors' associations, including the

Confindustria (Italy's employers' federation and chamber of commerce), have applied pressure against hasty, insufficiently vetted changes.

The European Commission has suggested a "European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy" aiming to reduce dangerous pollution, especially by single-use plastic, and has issued a directive on measures for EU nations to adopt in this regard. Among these, a very important policy is that of reuse, whose advantages far outweigh those obtained by reducing





packaging or using eco-friendly substitute materials.

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*A report on the opportunity to abandon single-use plastic*

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The Break Free from Plastic movement and several European NGOs have published a report on the feasibility of abandoning single-use plastic in favour of reusable materials. The study focuses particularly on certain types of single-use items, often used in food and beverage retail, comparing these with several reusable

material projects launched successfully in various European countries.

**The consumption of styrofoam single-use cups** for coffee or other hot beverages, for example, will **have to be drastically reduced by 2026** according to the European directive. To understand the scale of the problem, suffice it to say that in Germany 2.8 billion single-use coffee cups are used annually, and 3 billion in the UK. Less than 1% of these are recycled. Also widely used are **carry-out food trays**, of which Italy is in the list of the 13 top users. 50% of these are incinerated, while almost all those remaining end up in landfill. **The most serious problem,**

**however, is disposing of plastic bottles and bottle-caps:** a vast number are left on beaches and swept out to sea. In Europe we use a staggering 46 billion plastic bottles, with Italy in first place. We're also first in the world for mineral water consumption. **Cutlery and crockery** are also among the single-use products which most frequently litter beaches, and this may be why the Ocean Conservancy considers single-use plastic **the most lethal threat for marine birds**, mammals and turtles.

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*From 2021, single-use cutlery and crockery sales will be banned*

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From July 2021, the sale of such products will be forbidden, and this has caused some perplexity, since **Italy is among the foremost producers of such items in Europe, exporting 30% of the total.** The magnitude of this problem necessitates the urgent investigation of measures aiming to mitigate the consequences of single-use plastic consumption. One possibility is **reusable material**, though this would require customers to accept food from slightly worn dishes, and manufacturers to make adequate products using durable and easily washable materials.

**Gabriele Gasparro**

