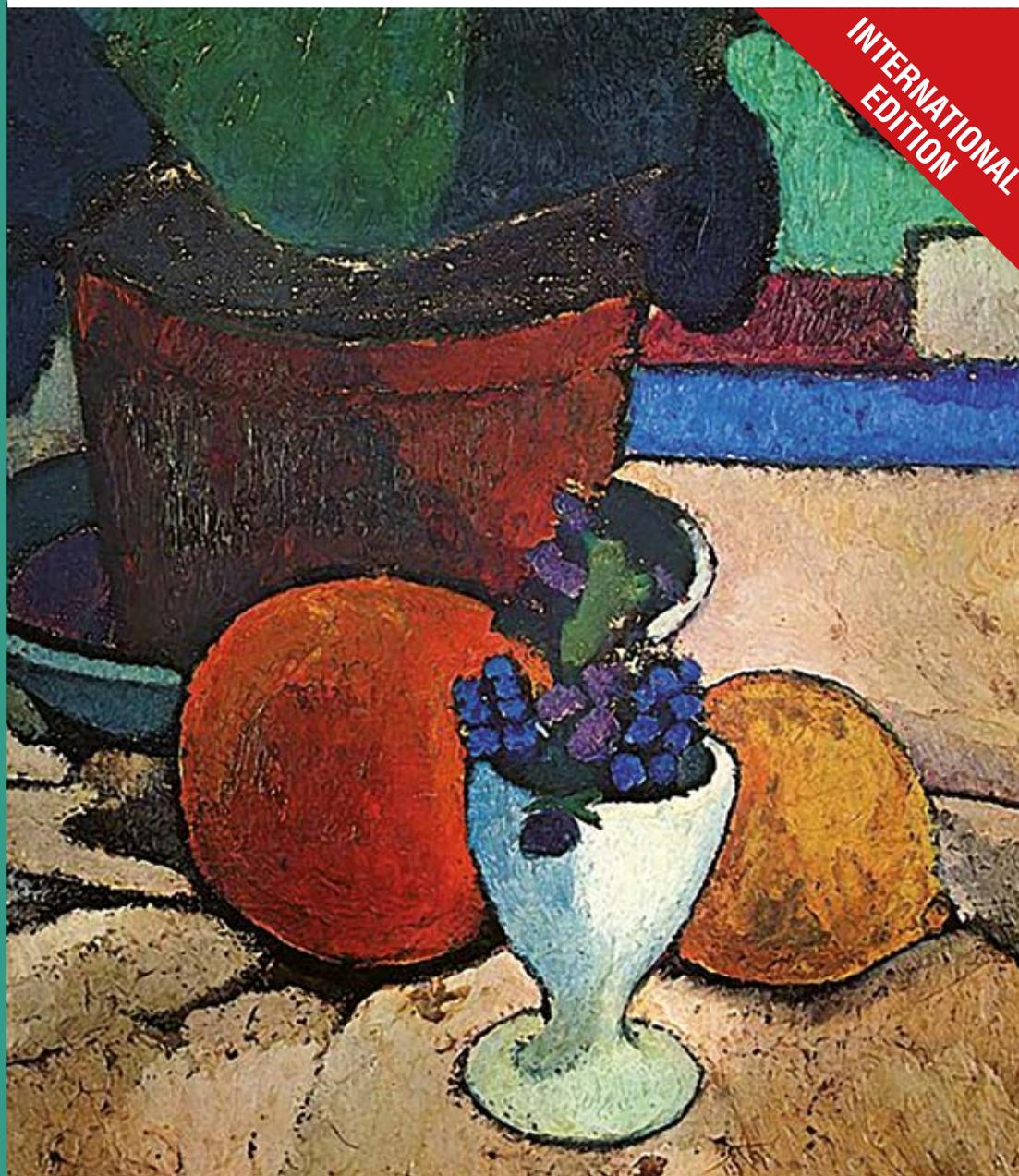


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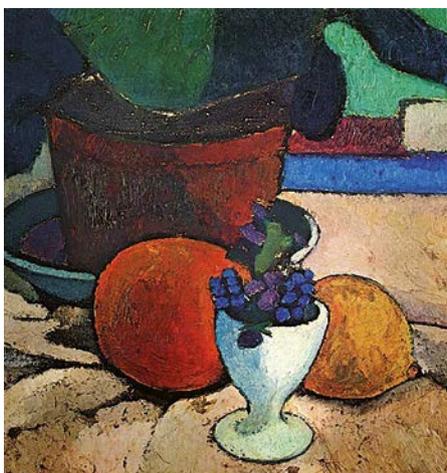
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EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE,
CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: *Graphic elaboration of Still life with leafy plant, lemon and orange (1906) by Paula Modersohn-Becker; private collection*

Focus of the President

2 The importance of restaurant tips
(Paolo Petroni)



Current Events • Lifestyle • Society

3 Espresso coffee
and Neapolitan coffee
(Ugo Bellesi)



Cuisine • Products • Food Technology

5 Saffron: from Cleopatra
to Gualtiero Marchesi
(Morello Pecchioli)



7 Mushroom bacon
(Maurizia Debiaggi)





The importance of restaurant tips

by **Paolo Petroni**

President of the Accademia

*Abroad, tips are mandatory and generous;
in Italy, rare and scanty.*

Last month's Focus addressed the grave shortcomings of restaurant service, emphasising how the situation was exacerbated by the lengthy pandemic which has apparently thinned out waiting services. We pointed out that the front of house, and not just the kitchen, is crucial for fully satisfying diners: no chef, no matter how able, can offset inhospitable, disrespectful service bereft of courtesy and proper attentiveness. We are hardly asking, though we would love that, for the return of the classic **'floor staff'** consisting of a *maitre de salle*, a *chef de rang*, a *commis*, a *sommelier* and perhaps even a host(ess) to greet customers, lead them to their tables and help them to get settled (as in Massimo Bottura's restaurant). Nowadays, other than in top-class restaurants and some 5-star hotels, that is not even imaginable.

*The topic is in the spotlight again after a recent
Court of Cassation ruling*

Through sheer coincidence, the subject is in the spotlight again following newspaper headlines reporting a recent ruling of the Court of Cassation declaring: "**Even restaurant tips must be taxed**". Let us recall that the Court of Cassation does not legislate, merely ruling on individual cases, though it can set precedents. The case in question involved a reception manager in a luxury hotel who allegedly received over 80,000 Euros in tips over a year. As usual, the law is unclear, such that the regional tax commission ruled in his favour and the Cassation against. However, the message has come through loud and clear: **the voracious tax man even sticks his hands into the tip jar**. In Italy, tips are rare and scanty, often given in cash



directly to the person waiting on us. Cover and service charges are already included in the bill, so tips really are an extra which we give, or should give, when we are particularly pleased by our treatment. Today we often pay with credit or debit cards, and if we add a tip, it is included in the restaurateur's earnings, but should be forwarded to the waiting staff. This is a problem. Ideally, cash registers would have a tip button.

*In the USA and Britain,
tips prop up waiters' meagre wages*

In the USA and Britain, tips are more or less mandatory, hover around 15% of the bill and serve to support the waiting staff, whose wages are very low. In such circumstances, tips are reckoned as pay and are therefore taxed (slightly). We have a similar problem with home food deliverers. Essentially, as it now stands, because the tax authorities allow "donations of limited value", cash tips are preferable, though without emptying our pockets of loose change as when giving church alms: this is a clear signal that we are satisfied, the service was attentive, and the employee did something beyond simply carrying plates to the table.



Espresso coffee and Neapolitan coffee

by Ugo Bellesi
Macerata Delegate

*Which will gain UNESCO
recognition in 2022?*

Several months ago, the Italian consortium for protecting traditional espresso coffee and the Italian coffee roasters' association **asked the relevant Ministry to request UNESCO World Heritage recognition for our espresso coffee.** Unfortunately, the Italian national UNESCO commission's board of

directors **decided against presenting it among Italy's candidates** for examination by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

What happened? Something unexpected: because when decision time loomed, **a second, similar application appeared.** It had been presented, with a substantial dossier, by the **regional government of Campania, supporting the candidacy of 'Neapolitan coffee'.** The commission then refrained from examining either proposal, returning both to the Ministry suggesting it "promote contact between the applicants to facilitate a possible unified candidacy in 2022". A truly challenging task, since that synthesis could only occur through the absurd phrase 'Italo-Neapolitan espresso'. However, if 'traditional Italian espresso coffee' is recognised, clearly Neapolitan coffee will be included.

This non-recognition surprised, and somewhat disappointed, the vast sector which revolves around producing a cup of espresso coffee. **Consider just the many coffee-roasting companies in Italy,** the bars and cafés in every city, the coffee machine producers, and the people working in that sector. Consider also the representatives of businesses which distribute the various brands of coffee roasted in Italy or the coffee machines themselves. One of these is in Belforte del Chienti, in the province of Macerata, and exports its products to 124 countries worldwide, thereby disseminating 'traditional Italian espresso coffee' and, with it, Italian culture, even gaining fans in Asia, where tea has always been the dominant beverage.



In 2016, the University of Camerino created an international coffee research centre

This company has even teamed up with the University of Camerino, creating an international coffee research centre in 2016. This is the **“Research and innovation coffee hub”**, directed by Professor **Flavio Corradini**, who is obtaining **excellent results in research, scientific studies to improve the quality of espresso**, and education. Several highly qualified people and PhD students (including a young student from Kazakhstan) work there under the guidance of the scientific coordinator, Professor **Sauro Vittori**. The work includes efforts to optimise the coffee extraction process for specific machines in bars and restaurants. Among the team’s projects (all published in English in important international scientific journals), there is a mathematical model for coffee extraction. The centre is frequented by young people coming from all over the world to gain experience and specialised knowledge in the coffee sector. In recent years, the organisers of bartending world championships have always used machines produced in Belforte for their practical tests.

The first European café opened in Venice in 1645

Those familiar with coffee history will be well aware that the first European café opened in Venice in 1645. The first in Britain, instead, opened in 1651 in Oxford. Venetian merchants began importing coffee from the 17th century, and as early as 1615, **ships of the Most Serene Venetian Republic were buying coffee in Istanbul. So it was that in 1665, Venice was recognised as the world’s de facto coffee capital.** In 1683, the famous café ‘All’Arabo’ (‘The Arabian’) opened in St Mark’s Square; shortly thereafter, there were 30 cafés in that square, and 200 throughout Venice. In 1720, **the Caffè Florian opened, again in St Mark’s**



Square: today it is recognised as the world’s oldest café. In that case, Venice, like Naples, could also request UNESCO recognition for its coffee heritage. **Trieste also has its firsts.** In the 19th century, **it was practically the port for half of Europe, including the inland Balkan areas.** Indeed, coffee purchased in Alexandria was unloaded there, thence reaching other destinations by rail. Trieste then had 66 import companies, four of which imported coffee, as well as ten coffee roasters and 98 coffee retailers. **Famous cafés included Greco, Flora, Garibaldi, Caffè degli Specchi** (‘Mirror Café’), **Stella Polare** (‘Pole Star’), **Corso, Vesuvio, alla Miniera** (‘Mine Café’), and more. Their fame depended not only on the coffee served, but also the fact that they were frequented especially by literati, writers, nationalists, intellectuals and the high society of the time. So Trieste, boasting its own points of pride in coffee history, could also pres-

ent its own UNESCO coffee application.

Is Neapolitan coffee the same as Italian espresso?

Finally, we could ask: “Is Neapolitan coffee the same as Italian espresso?” There is one clear answer: “Essentially, yes, but **when we think of Neapolitan coffee, our thoughts fly to Eduardo De Filippo**, savouring a *tazzulella* (‘little cup’) of coffee on a balcony in a famous film; and then, to the *cuccuma* and *moka* coffee pots, the *cuppetiello* (paper cone over the *cuccuma*, or drip coffee machine, to preserve its aroma as the water drips through), the coffee fragrance invading every corner, the ritual of the ‘suspended coffee’ which one pays in advance at a café to benefit a needy stranger - and then it becomes another matter entirely”.

Ugo Bellesi





Saffron: from Cleopatra to Gualtiero Marchesi

by **Morello Pecchioli**

Honorary Academician for Verona

*Symbol of elegance,
luxury, beauty, health.*

Since time immemorial, saffron has been considered a symbol of elegance, luxury, beauty and health. The pharaohs deemed it a potent medicine for its resplendent gold colour. Four

thousand years later, modern science confirms that *Crocus sativus* has **curative properties**. Research from Iran, the world's foremost saffron producer, reveals that the spice is a **natural anti-depressant**. Other university research demonstrates that, being rich in vitamins, minerals and carotenoids, it is an effective **antioxidant**: it fights ageing and cellular degenerative diseases. However, one shouldn't overdo it: saffron is **toxic if consumed in large quantities**.

Lovers of the yellow Milanese saffron risotto need not fear: they can ask for seconds or even thirds, risking, at worst, not poisoning but mere indigestion.

*It is a precious resource,
almost as expensive as gold*

For Minoan kings, Homeric heroes, Roman patricians, saffron was a precious commodity. It still is, being almost as expensive as gold: **a gramme of top-quality saffron threads can cost 35 Euros or more**, while the precious metal fetches little over 40 per gramme. It must be borne in mind that **to obtain 1000 grammes of saffron** one must harvest, strictly by hand, give or take a flower, **250 thousand fresh flowers during the 30 days** in which this particular crocus blooms: between mid-October and mid-November. Buyers of saffron powder sachets for a few Euros in supermarkets should be aware that their contents probably owe more to chemistry than botany. The Athenian **Isocrates**, a master of rhetoric who lived 400 years before Christ, spared no expense in this regard. He wouldn't go to bed unless his pillows were strewn with that very crocus: the aroma of safranal that they exuded lulled him to sleep. **Cleopatra** made abundant use of a saffron body lotion to dazzle **Caesar** (and later **Mark Anthony**) with the seductive golden gleam emanating from her ample décolletage. Should we credit the splendid lady pharaoh for saffron's reputation as an aphrodisiac over the centuries? In an age when many priests inherited their chastity from father to son, Cardinal **Richelieu** employed a saffron jam similarly to how **viagra** is used nowadays. The 16th-century French physician **Ambroise Parè** instructed his impotent patients to eat rice seasoned with the golden spice. Was he aware of the contemporary Milanese risotto? **The**



condiment's aphrodisiacal fame had not waned. Just a century ago, clinics addressing female sterility prescribed it for infertile women.

Modern research vindicates Cleopatra: saffron indeed makes skin healthier and more attractive. **The cosmetic use of *Crocus sativus*** was well known in imperial Rome: **immersion in saffron-scented water** was both a pleasure and a status symbol. As from the bed of Isocrates, the aroma of safranal also rose from the *balnea* of the Caesars - the very same that issues from the divinely fragrant **Milanese risotto**, about whose birth legends abound.

Legends on the birth of Milanese risotto

Our favourite origin story involves an apprentice of the Flemish glass painter **Valerius van Diependale** (also known as 'Valerio Profondavalle' or 'Valerius of Flanders'), commissioned with creating the stained-glass windows of Milan's cathedral. The young, capable but impecunious apprentice, unable to afford a golden trinket as a wedding gift for the master's daughter, used the saffron with which his teacher coloured glass a vivid golden hue to confer similar brilliance upon the risotto served at the wedding banquet. The year was 1574. It was a triumph. Not only did its characteristic aroma, which rose like a prayer to the vast Gothic temple's topmost spire (before the *Madunina*, iconic statue of the Virgin Mary, was placed atop it), and its distinctive taste immediately charm the Milanese, but the guests also understood its auspicious double symbolism: **rice and gold augur a fertile and happy life** to the bridal pair, professional success for the groom and abundance for all the partakers.

Four centuries later, **Gualtiero Marchesi made that risotto even more precious** by layering a fine sheet of gold foil over it. In his book *Oltre il fornello (Beyond the Stove)*, the king of Italian cooks confesses his love of saffron: "It is one of those spices whose generous, burgeoning aroma transmits its unmistakable, dominant imprint on to whichever food hosts it".



Saffron has inspired myths and legends. It has suggested recipes to cooks, verses to poets, even styles to ancient couturiers. **A symbol of light and sovereignty, it was habitually used for dyeing the sumptuous robes of kings.** The Phoenicians, masters of dyes, used it for colouring bridal veils. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid translated a Greek myth into Latin: Crocus, a winsome youth who hobnobbed with deities, requitedly fell in love with Smilax, a nymph who, however, was also desired by Hermes, the messenger of the gods. He of the winged sandals, feeling betrayed, flew into a rage, transforming the beautiful Crocus into a bulb and the unfortunate Smilax into a thorny flowering vine, *Smilax aspera*, variously known as 'rough bindweed', 'salsaparille', and in colloquial Italian, *stracciabraghe* ('trouser-shredder'), a relative of the sarsaparilla (*Smilax ornata*) which became famous as the favourite food of the Smurfs.

'Crocus' became 'saffron' thanks to the Arabs

'Crocus' became 'saffron' thanks to the Arabs, who **spread it throughout their empire, but especially in Spain, in the 14th century.** They reintroduced it in the West after the spice had sunk along with the Roman Empire. Once the glory of Rome had faded, so did the cultivation, sale and use of this dainty plant. The Arabs, who called it *za'farān* (possibly deriving from a Semitic root 's-p-r', denoting 'yellow', or from a Persian etymology of *zar-paran*, 'threaded with gold') brought it back into fashion. The modern Persians also call it *za'farān*; for the Venetians, who for the sake of trade would negotiate not only with the followers of Muhammad but even with the devil himself, it was and remains *safrān*. The Venetians would coin the adjective *safranato* indicating top quality in a food

or other product: *safranato* is the perfect *porcino* mushroom, or the raw ham of Montagnana, or *risi bisi* (rice and peas), though its recipe calls for no saffron.

Born in the Middle East, it is grown in many countries around the Mediterranean basin.

It arrived in Italy from Spain thanks to a Dominican friar who, luckily for us, preached better than he practised.

An inquisitor from the Abruzzo region, **Domenico Santucci da Navelli** was present at the council of Toledo in 1230. There, he became enchanted by saffron. Unable to export it legally - which was proscribed on pain of death - and ignoring both fear and the divine commandment against stealing, he hid *Crocus sativus* bulbs in the hollow of a walking stick and took them to his native village near L'Aquila. Planted underground, they grew so well that soon entire fields of saffron crocuses enlivened the plains between the Gran Sasso, Maiella and Velino mountains. In the 15th and 16th centuries, many transalpine spice merchants made the journey to L'Aquila to buy saffron directly from its growers.

Abruzzo saffron retains its high status among gourmets

Abruzzo saffron retains its high status among gourmets. One must acknowledge that the crocus threads abundantly grown in Umbria, the Marche, Tuscany and **Sardinia, the region where it was introduced by the Phoenicians**, are equally delicious and precious. This is attested, inter alia, by a 1st-century subterranean Roman tomb wall inscription found near Cagliari. It is a husband's declaration of love for his deceased wife: "May these ashes of yours, o Pomptilla, watered by dew, be transformed into lilies and green fronds whence roses will bloom and the fragrant saffron and inextinguishable amaranth will shine forth".

Morello Pecchioli



Mushroom bacon

by **Maurizia Debiaggi**

Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Academician

Within the continuing current interest in plant-based 'meats', now mushrooms are the latest potential sources of bacon, steaks and more.

Sustainability is in the foreground these days. The debate on the 'environmental cost' of meat and milk always makes headlines, and many food companies have therefore set themselves the goal of creating products that are not only healthy and nutritious, but also respectful of our planet. Thus, following Impossible Food, Beyond Meat and No Milk, **the plant-based meat and milk industries are attracting even more attention thanks to mushrooms and the bacon they can yield.** Indeed, the fungal mycelium, a complex of filamentous root-like cells called hyphae which constitute the fun-

gal vegetative apparatus, could revolutionise global markets in the near future.

The project of a New York start-up investigates possible uses for mycelium

This is the goal of the New York start-up **Ecovative Design**, which invested at least 10 million dollars only two years ago on research about the mycelium and its possible uses, naming this project the **Mycelium Foundry**. **Its mission is to create meat alternatives - and be-**





yond. Its environmental aspirations, which begin with **meatless bacon**, transcend nutrition and include the elaboration of biodegradable packing materials, cruelty-free leather and cosmetics, and biodegradable plastic substitutes. **The results have been encouraging and concrete, and to present this ambitious endeavour which Singapore is following with great interest**, let us begin, as in the title, with **mushroom 'bacon'**.

Though the spin out Atlast, Ecovative Design uses mycelium to tackle the sustainability problem in food production. This informed the development of **the 'super ingredient' MY** (an abbreviation of mycelium) **and MyBacon**, which, containing 10% protein and 15% carbohydrate, not only has a **good nutritional profile, but is also free of cholesterol and GMOs** and has **a third of the fat and half the calories of 'real bacon'**.

MyBacon is already commercially available in America

The product is already commercially available in America, **currently costing about as much as high-quality bacon**. This is not a 'minus', because we must consider that producing this 'Earth-friendly' requires 100 times less water than the equivalent amount of pork, which substantially reduces its environmental impact.

Fears of excessive processing can also be allayed, as MyBacon contains only six ingredients: MY-celium, coconut oil, sug-

ar, salt, natural flavours, and, since food should also look appetising, beet juice to produce the required rosy hue. Bacon, without a side of guilt: good for us, for the planet and for our favourite recipes!

How can we go from mushrooms to something which tastes of meat?

How can we go from mushrooms, or rather their mycelium, to something meaty in taste and, crucially, in texture? **It all begins with veritable 'biological programming' to 'domesticate mushrooms'** and grow them on an industrial scale. In other words, the mycelium is cultivated in large incubators recreating the conditions it requires to grow underground. Through a process of solid-state fermentation, mycelium can grow into any shape: it is easy to mould it into different forms and textures. What is most interesting and differentiates this from other plant-based meats, which are extruded and often highly processed, is that this method creates an 'integral' structure, with almost no processing. In this manner, the mycelium becomes a large 'flossy' block of compact 'mycelial tissue', a **unified, structured item**: we need only slice it, submerge it in a special marinade - and hey presto, MY is now MyBacon!

Thanks to this particular characteristic, this product is poised to occupy a premium niche compared to other plant-based meats which are in 'ground' hamburger or sausage form.

Will it be 'one small step' from bacon

to our beloved steak? The co-founder of Ecovative Design, **Eben Bayer**, has already declared that **new developments could be on the way, such as steaks obtained from mushrooms called *Fistulina hepatica***, commonly (is it a coincidence?) known as 'beefsteak', which he himself defines as "one of nature's best whole plant-based meats".

But these timid forest inhabitants have yet more surprises in store for us. Mycelium formation processes allow us to optimise its structure according to the desired texture, determining porosity, density, reticular structure and fibre orientation. Hence not only MyBacon, but also MycoComposite, a biomaterial for packing, and MycoFlex, a biodegradable material used for the cosmetics and apparel industries.

Mushrooms as a basis for an even greater variety of products?

Could mushrooms be a foundation on which to build a future of even vaster product variety? **Seemingly, yes:** we can, indeed, find mycelium in a plate of 'eggs and mushroom bacon', in containers to transport or protect fragile materials, in makeup sponges, in **facial treatments** infused with hydrating or anti-wrinkle oils, in **stuffing material** for outerwear, and in footwear. The subterranean system of renewable, highly versatile mushroom roots has even attracted the attention of famous **fashion designers** including **Stella McCartney**, who has launched Mylo, a **mycelial leather** of which she has created garment prototypes and her **iconic Falabella bag**, and **Hermes**, which has announced **the launch of Victoria, its first bag made of mushroom-derived leather**.

I have no doubts about the fashion component, but will MyBacon soon also reach Singapore? It's more than probable, since the city-state has pledged to produce 30% of its food through technological means by 2030!

Maurizia Debiaggi