

# CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA



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**L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA**  
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORO VERGANI  
E DA LUIGI BERTETT, DINO BUZZATI TRAVERSO,  
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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 Amorous couple with lettuce, artichokes, peas and other vegetables, with a squirrel (1630-1637) by Adriaen van Utrecht and Theodoor Rombouts; private collection

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# Tears of the stars

*The joy of recognition, and the barbs that come with it: the hard life of 'fine dining'.*



René Redzepi



David Kinch

**T**his is the type of news that leaves (even self-appointed) gastronomists reeling worldwide. **René Redzepi's noma** in Copenhagen, the world's undisputedly best restaurant according to the prestigious review 'The World's 50 Best Restaurants', will close at the end of next year. How so? Charging a minimum of 500 euros a head, always full, with a six-month waiting list for gastrotourists from all corners of the world, it's nevertheless closing up shop. Unbelievable. The acclaimed chef tersely blamed prohibitive costs, a need to rethink the industry, and the necessity for a total reorganisation of the workplace and staff. A restaurant with hundreds of applicants for unpaid internships can't sustain its expenses: something is off here. With its three Michelin stars, and celebrated for such modern, vivacious 'new Nordic' dishes as "grilled reindeer heart on a bed of fresh pine and saffron ice cream in a beeswax bowl", it nevertheless can't keep going. Californian chef **David Kinch** has also recently closed his three-starred restaurant, **Manresa**. He agrees that fine-dining restaurants are unsustainable, with exorbitant costs, huge waste, gruelling shifts, repetitive assembly-line tasks and staff exploitation. Ethical problems also arise, therefore.

*The starry glitter conceals an opaque world of anxiety and fear*

What is now happening to Redzepi, who declares himself willing to continue the operation as a "food innovation laboratory", recalls what befell the now-forgotten **Ferran Adrià**, owner-chef of the then acclaimed three-starred **El Bulli** near Roses, on the Costa Brava. A champion of molecular gastronomy, he closed his expensive and well-frequented restaurant in 2011, dedicating himself to literary activities and research. So, beyond the

**by Paolo Petroni**  
*President of the Accademia*



Ferran Adrià

television appearances, talk shows, cooking programmes, public engagements and fawning interviews, there is a concealed, opaque reality of anxieties and fears which have little to do with cooking. Today's high-class restaurants need press offices, social network experts and PR and advertising agencies. Major sponsors and journalistic praise are indispensable. **All this burdens not only the pocketbook but also the body and soul.**

*The psychological aspect is what celebrity chefs fear the most*

Some have two, three or more restaurants bearing their names and must oversee them, hire personnel worthy of their reputation, and keep well-stocked wine cellars whose square footage is also a huge expense. But what most frightens celebrity chefs is the psychological aspect. **It's hard to maintain that pace** and especially to endure the fear of losing some influencer's favour. Losing a star spells disaster. Some couldn't bear it and committed suicide; others rejected the honour. But those are rare cases. Mostly, receiving a third star is a dream come true to restaurateurs who see their life's work being richly rewarded. But for diners, all that changes is the cost of a meal, which nearly doubles, as does the time spent waiting for a table.





# A thoughtful defence of Italian food and wine traditions

by **Vittorio Marzi**  
Bari Academician

*Nutrition is a serious  
and worrisome  
problem.*

**A**mid nebulous worldwide debate about the causes of dangerous climate change, a slew of recent publications have analysed the role of agriculture in environmental pollution and how predicted population growth and increased food availability relate to anthropogenic pressure. As has rightly been observed, **assessing humanity's overall effect on the environment is not easy**; nevertheless, data from several studies agree that the agricultural and

food sector is among the chief polluters, accounting for approximately 30% of ecological damage. Agriculture's greatest contribution to carbon dioxide emissions is due to meat and meat-derivative production, responsible for around 12% of emissions, followed by dairy products with 5%, whereas growing vegetables accounts for about 2% and cereal cultivation a mere 1%. Therefore, **sustainable food has become one of the most frequently discussed issues in modern society**, especially in developed nations whose high standard of living also causes **food waste**.

*Various publications,  
including scientific ones,  
urge moderate consumption*

An example is a recent publication bearing the interesting and original title *Il piatto sostenibile* (*Sustainable Sustenance*), edited by **Luciana Baroni**, a physician

specialising in Geriatrics and Neurology with a Master's degree in Nutrition, and **Alberto Berto**, a successful chef with a degree in economics who prepares entirely plant-based recipes. **The authors believe that we should eat plant-based foods**, both because reducing animal agriculture will promote 'sustainable sustenance', **indubitably benefiting the health of our planet**, and because natural plant-based food confers many important health benefits, as explained in the book: "A plant-based diet represents the 'gold standard' of nutrition, as lifestyle medicine confirms. Or at least, it represents the ideal towards which we should all strive. Our bodies do not require animal-derived foods (meat, fish, dairy products or eggs); they are a choice, and we should not consider them obligatory for a balanced diet". Many eminent physicians have endorsed vegetarian diets. The late Professor **Umberto Veronesi** affirmed in the introduction to his book that "We can be vegetarian; indeed, we must". Vegetarianism is available to all,

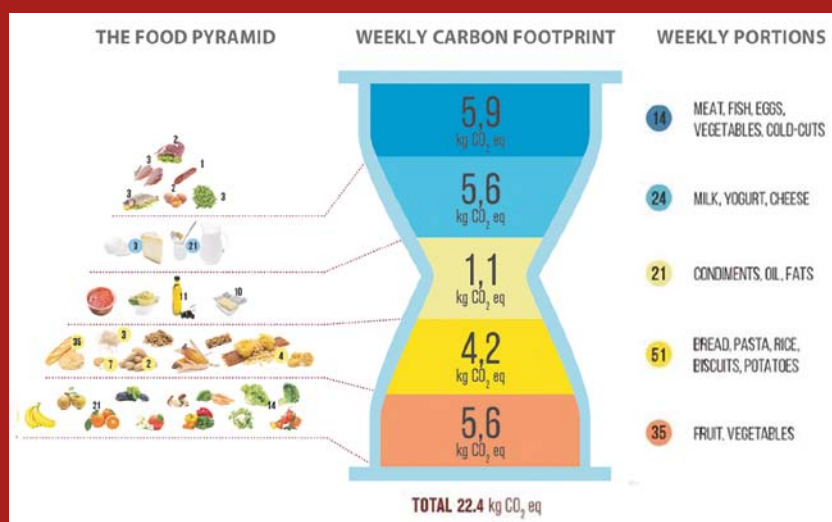




and promotes a healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature but also rich in flavour. **His book is not just for vegetarians**, but also for those wishing to live better and longer (Veronesi U., Pappagallo M., *Verso la scelta vegetariana [Towards a Vegetarian Choice]*, 2011, Giunti Editore). The Nobel laureate **Rita Levi Montalcini** agreed, famously declaring that "The aim of medicine is not adding years to life, but adding life to our years". "If the average lifespan is around 80 years, its healthy portion is in reality around 50 years. Transforming that 30-year gap into a period of healthy life", she explained, "would not only mean elevating our quality of life but also freeing crucial resources for the National Health Service".

### *The link between diet and its environmental effects*

The call for moderation made in the *Trattato de la Vita Sobria (Treatise on the Temperate Life)*, on a healthy lifespan, published in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Venetian nobleman **Alvise Cornaro**, has inspired the Association named after him to promote and support studies and research on the theme. **An important work on sustainable food is the volume *Il cibo perfetto (Perfect Food)***, a painstaking investigation whose authors analyse every phase of food production, from the fields or breeding facilities through processing and packing to distribution and consumption, determining its environmental effects in a rigorously scientific manner (Marino M., Pratesi C.A., *Il cibo perfetto, aziende, consumatori e impatto ambientale del cibo [Perfect Food: companies, consumers and the environmental effects of food]*, Edizione Ambiente, 2015). This interesting study sheds light on the link between dietary choices and environmental effects during production and consumption. **Its main conclusion has been that food habits aligned with the Mediterranean Diet would be both personally and ecologically beneficial** without negative consequences for the economy.



The Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition's Double Pyramid and the Environmental Hourglass represent the current link between the nutritional aspects of food and the environmental effects of producing it.

### *One global priority is the problem of increased food availability*

While appreciating such studies on sustainable food, we must consider the urgent global priority of increased food availability, **which remains incompletely solved; indeed there are negative predictions for the future.** "The most recent projections", notes Professor **Paolo De Castro**, "indicate substantial price increases in the coming years, and **most scholars agree that the**

**long era of cheap, abundant food has ended**, followed by a new age of scarcity (De Castro P., *Corsa alla terra, cibo ed agricoltura nell'era della nuova scarsità [The Scramble for Earth: food and agriculture in the era of new scarcity]*, Donzelli Editore, 2012)". In the interesting but alarming article "Risorse finite, da oggi la Terra va in rosso" ("Exhausted resources: from today, Earth is in the red"; *La Stampa*, 20 August 2013), the journalist **Ugo Mercalli** maintained that less than eight months into the new year, natural reserves had been exhausted and we were running on backup rations. The article emphasised that **80% of the**



**world's population lives in countries, including Italy, which are 'ecological debtors':** they use more natural resources than they produce. Recent news regarding the worrisome increases in gas, petrol and grain prices confirms current difficulties maintaining our standard of living. It seems evident that, given the circumstances, **a technological overhaul of every agricultural sector is urgent**, as borne out by the success of the green revolution in the second half of the last century, which allowed us to meet growing demand for food while keeping its prices relatively stable.

Alas, for various reasons, proposals for a second green revolution have not obtained unanimous consent for using new technologies; instead, sustainable development is the favoured model even for agriculture.

### *Protect existing agricultural land while increasing production*

The late and lamented Professor **Franco Scaramuzzi**, President of the prestigious Georgofili Academy, wrote in an article: "We feign ignorance of the fact that current global food production must be doubled by the middle of this century, as authoritatively and repeatedly pointed out by the FAO. All nations are called upon to commit to this crucial goal, starting by safeguarding whatever agricultural land they still have available and increasing productivity per hectare" If sustainable sustenance is at the forefront of our collective preoccupation with climate change, we must recall food's traditional role in every age, as exemplified by a famous aphorism by **François La Rochefoucauld**: "Eating is a necessity; eating intelligently is an art".

*De conviventia, or On the Virtue of Coexi-*

*stence*, is a classic Latin text by the foremost exponent of Neapolitan humanism, **Giovanni Pontano** (1429-1503). "Whatever the natural inclination, dear Giovanni Pardo, of one man to associate with another, it seems to me that two among the most important things aid this natural sociability, namely common interests and the custom of sharing a table". As far back as 1953, the writer and journalist **Orio Vergani** presciently intuited the cultural value of daily food habits, choosing to form an Academy, in the tradition of the Italian Renaissance, aiming to protect our customs. Through all these years, that Academy has had the great merit of safeguarding Italy's precious food heritage, whose distinctive regional contributions have made it unique. Let sustainable sustenance and vegetarian diets remain the province of physicians, while we **vigilantly guard our culinary traditions**, loved around the world.

**Vittorio Marzi**







# Bread and butter 4.0

by **Elisabetta Cocito**  
Turin Academician

*Butter has made a glittering and very 'social' comeback.*

**B**iting into a slice of buttered bread sprinkled with sugar, and feeling on one's lips the creaminess of the butter and the pleasant contrast between its subtle tang and the sweetness of the sugar, before sinking one's teeth into another contrast created by the proximity of crust and crumb: those past the first flush of youth were lucky recipients of that simple, delectable method of enjoying a healthy breakfast or hearty snack.

That generation, reaching adulthood, has mostly **relegated butter to the category of 'unhealthy foods'**, only enjoying a very occasional bite of (perhaps warm) buttered bread (chiefly during hotel stays or restaurant meals): a sinful pleasure no longer seasoned with sugar or salt, but with ill-concealed guilt. Health trends, changed lifestyles and, crucially in the past few decades, the boom of margarine and hydrogenated fats bolstered by an insistent barrage of spurious publicity (now strongly countered by science) made butter far less frequent in kitchens and on tables.

We may have inherited butter-wariness from our Roman ancestors who, despite knowing it (they called it *butyrum*), considered it a barbarous food used by nomads and pastoralists: the condiment of civilisation was olive oil. **Only at the end of the Early Middle Ages did but-**

**ter appear frequently in official recipe books.** In a text from 1475, the gastronomist Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as **Platina**, acknowledged butter's nutritional value, **encouraging its use.** It would also be endorsed by **François Chapusot**, head cook to the British Ambassador in Turin, who wrote in his cookbook of 1851 that "so important is butter in cuisine that cooks would be lost without it. It seems an exaggeration, but it is the simple truth".

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*In the kitchen, too, the pendulum swings*

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Since cuisine is not immune to swings of the pendulum, we can observe how butter, ostracised in recent years with consequent loss of market share, **is now on the upswing.** As with many aspects of modern life, apparently more influenced by fashion, and especially by social media, than by the wise counsel of nutritionists and physicians, this ingredient is conquering hearts, minds and stomachs not in its old-style guise as a humble pat, but in a flamboyant and very 'social' new garb. This is the **'butter board', born in the USA** but gaining popularity across the pond, as do all stateside fads. Understanding the birth of a trend is always tricky, but clearly this one is **wildly popular online and even among chefs.** 'Butter board' sounds glamorous to those attuned to the Zeitgeist; it admittedly loses much of its charm in Italian translation, which betrays its nature as **a board, chopping or otherwise, slathered in softened**





**butter sprinkled with whatever whimsy suggests.** We Italians traditionally view wooden chopping boards as informal, at best as complements to a rustic meal or a hefty mid-afternoon snack, bedecked in cheese and charcuterie or topped by piping-hot polenta. Ancestral to the *apericena*, the foodie apéritif, we have witnessed it over the years hosting the latest culinary darling: cured lard from Colonnata, artisanal salami, cheese and honey, compotes or 'exotic' chutneys.

Now that chefs have, often exaggeratedly, trained us to focus on the scenic and visual aspects of food and 'plating', **the rustic board has become a colourful, vivid palette.**

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*The new trend calls for a wooden board slathered in butter with multifarious toppings*

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The new trend, which is also gaining ground on Italian soil, calls for a wooden board slathered in butter topped with any combination of ingredients to be savoured in small portions, creating gastronomic experiments for every palate: **from salty to sweet, from the gently fruity to the bracingly spicy, from the delicacy of honey to the refinement of salmon.**

The buttery substrate can itself be enriched by admixtures of spices, lemon, sauces, edible flowers or salt: the only limits are imagination and artistic flair. Indeed, hosting a tasting session for one's whimsical experiment can be a fun social pastime, a party game in which sundry varieties of bread are felicitously paired with unexpected flavours. However fashionably decorated, what remains intact is **conviviality: a collective ritual to be experienced and discussed in good company.**

This trend **could hardly go unnoticed by chefs:** indeed, stylistic suggestions are cropping up, such as that of **layering fish carpaccio, sprinkled with mint or lemon balm, over whipped lemon-infused butter.** Another suggestion: butter blanketed in roast peppers, minced anchovies, pear and hazelnuts. These examples show how ultimately, as often happens, tradition is not abandoned but merely adapts to the times. Who doesn't recall the appetisers of butter and anchovies, raw ham or salami surmounted by curls of butter, or, when peak refinement was required, salmon and butter served on special occasions, especially at Christmas, once a certain level of financial well-being had established itself in our nation? The butter board might be considered an extreme evolution of those bygone recipes: hardly surprising in a society such as ours, always eager

to lunge towards whatever showy novelty springs on to the scene.

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*The 'butter board' could spearhead a return to butter consumption*

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This fashion could have the positive effect of restoring dignity and its rightful place at the table to this redoubtable culinary co-star, unjustly banished for too long.

**Good Italian butter** is nutrient-rich and made from the sweet cream of high-grade milk, skimmed no more than 48 hours after milking. The butter board could provide a good 'springboard' for a buttery comeback, with the proviso that butter be enjoyed sensibly, hence, **not in excess.** Importantly, we have documentary evidence of butter dating as far back as 4,500 years ago, when milking and butter production, by rolling a milk-filled container back and forth to churn it, were depicted on a Sumerian limestone tablet. Butter, with its ups and downs, has accompanied humanity since time immemorial. The butter board may be one of many passing fads destined for oblivion, but butter itself will surely continue to accompany us on our journey through history.

**Elisabetta Cocito**





# Traffic-light labels: *a complex issue*

by **Maurizio Di Ubaldo**  
*Madrid Delegate*

*The EU decision  
is postponed until  
spring 2023.*

**A**s a means of regulating vehicular traffic, they have undoubtedly improved our lives ever since their introduction in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they are now ubiquitous in cities. However, though traffic lights ordinarily impart a sense of safety, their migration from the crossroads to the supermarket may have quite the opposite effect, potentially misleading consumers and endangering their health. Months ago, the European Commission announced that the draft EU regulations

on frontal food labels, originally to be introduced in late 2022, need more gestation time; it now seems likely that **the proposal will be presented in early 2023.**

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## *EU regulations on food labelling*

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This important piece of information should cause us to reflect on this multifaceted issue, since **Italy has excellent reasons to oppose the adoption of regulations**



which may harm consumers' health and the rights of citizens and businesses, especially small and medium ones, and whose momentum could end up damaging foods crucial to the Mediterranean Diet, which UNESCO recognises as part of humanity's Intangible Cultural Heritage, shared between several countries including Spain. Italy should encourage an evidence-based, open debate on this issue with a view to promoting healthy nutrition by informing consumers accurately. We therefore clearly support the EU's laudable goal of reducing obesity and non-infectious diseases, but it is equally obvious that **great risks are associated with colour-coded 'front-of-pack' labelling systems** such as Nutriscore, based on an oversimplified, **artificial discrimination between foods** classified as 'healthy' and 'unhealthy'.

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*Italy is asking the European Commission to consider the matter conscientiously*

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Scientists agree that communication with consumers through **front-of-pack labels must inform and educate**. Limiting the message to a simplistic assessment of each isolated product is misleading and often counterproductive, neglecting to consider the quantities consumed and the consumer's overall diet and state of health. Italy is therefore asking the European Commission to evaluate the situation carefully before presenting a proposal, which **first and foremost must be demonstrably beneficial to consumers' health**. **Nutriscore's 'red light' often means a priori condemnation** of foods that are perfectly compatible with a healthy diet if consumed sensibly in terms of portions and frequency. This applies to many foods which are central to the Mediterranean Diet, which, if associated with a healthy lifestyle, demonstrably protects against obesity and non-infectious diseases. It is, instead, surprising that **many products green-lit by Nutriscore are highly processed** and not recommended for frequent consumption by most nutritionists



as well as having large carbon footprints. This is because Nutriscore assesses food based on a 100g portion, irrespective of type, thus penalising foods typically consumed in smaller portions. In short, the green is as dangerous as the red, and **the traffic light doesn't work**.

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*Unhealthy ingredients are often used to adapt products to an algorithm*

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Nutriscore can also be **a powerful commercial weapon** for larger food and wholesale companies, which have the financial clout to adapt their products to the algorithm, improving their score against those of competitors, even though such modifications can often be accom-

plished **by using artificial additives** or other harmful ingredients.

We are therefore at **a delicate and crucial juncture**, as recently acknowledged by high-ranking EC officials; and for this very reason, frontal food labelling should not be forced into a binary choice by **traffic lights which give misleading signals**. Italy therefore hopes that the Commission's proposal for early 2023 will take these important considerations into account, favouring a front-of-pack labelling system that fully informs consumers by **providing balanced, accurate, and above all, complete and impartial data**.

Let us hope that Spain, which accords due importance to the Mediterranean Diet, consumers' health and the defence of local products, will share Italy's desire for a judicious perspective on this issue.

**Maurizio Di Ubaldo**

