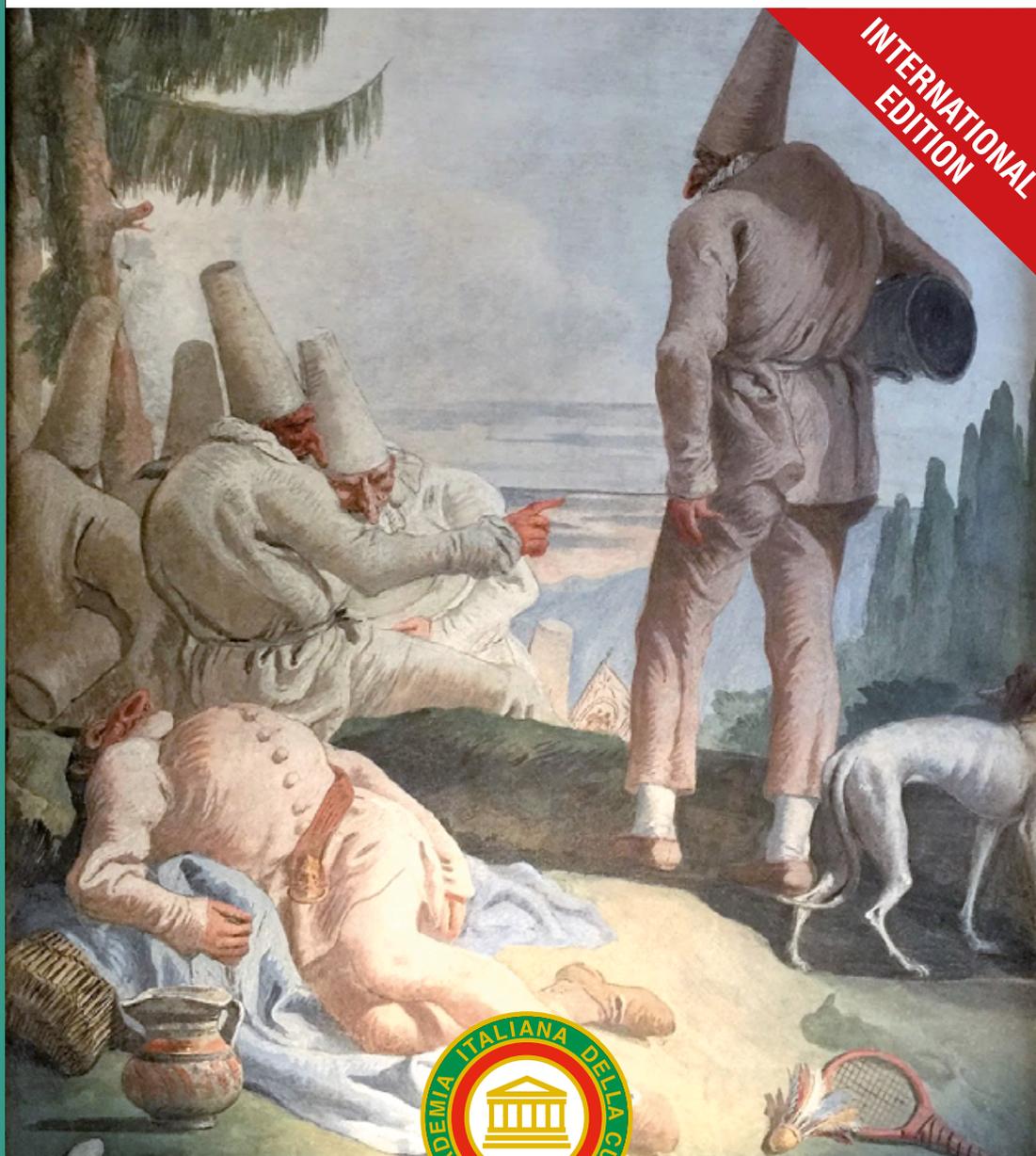


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EDITOR IN CHIEF
PAOLO PETRONI

COPY EDITOR
SILVIA DE LORENZO

LAYOUT
SIMONA MONGIÙ

TRANSLATOR
ANTONIA FRASER FUJINAGA

THIS ISSUE INCLUDES ARTICLES BY
GIOVANNI BALLARINI,
GIANCARLO BURRI,
MORELLO PECCHIOLI,
PAOLO PETRONI.

PHOTO CREDITS
ADOBE STOCK.



PUBLISHER
ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
VIA NAPO TORRIANI 31 - 20124 MILANO
TEL. 02 66987018 - FAX 02 66987008
PRESIDENTE@ACCADEMIA1953.IT
SEGRETERIA@ACCADEMIA1953.IT
REDAZIONE@ACCADEMIA1953.IT
WWW.ACCADEMIA1953.IT



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L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI
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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 from the Pulcinella Room by Giandomenico Tiepolo; Museum of 18th-Century Venice, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice

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The Academy on its seventieth birthday

*Far from having completed its mission,
it remains a bulwark
defending our food culture.*

Besides choice and financial ruin, two things can close down a society or association: having served its purpose, or the impossibility of so doing. A simple example: if we create an association whose aim is to construct a building, it is disbanded once that edifice is completed. But it is also disbanded if the project proves unfeasible for whatever reason: the association has lost its *raison d'être*. This applies perfectly to the establishment of our Academy 70 years ago by Orio Vergani and his co-founders. Their goal was very clear: **“to protect the traditions of Italian cuisine, whose improvement it promotes and favours in Italy and abroad”**.

Does our cuisine still need protection?

The question, therefore, is: does our cuisine still need protection? **Does the Academy still have a reason to exist?** Has its purpose been served? In recent years our cuisine has improved in many ways, especially abroad where its quality has vastly increased. Yet **persistent dangers and insidious tendencies require constant vigilance**. Our cuisine's contamination by the 'nouvelle cuisine' fad of the '70s, especially through the activities of then-celebrated restaurants and chefs, required lengthy and patient intervention by the Academy to avert certain absurdities jeopardising our traditions. Our publications, conferences and restaurant guides, among other things, helped our most iconic dishes to evolve and modernise intelligently. But **new threats are now emerging**: on the one hand, some restaurants aim to impress and raise prices by producing miserly but prettily arranged, colourful portions, nestled on beds, reductions or pools of coulis, with

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia



plates decked in drizzles or powders and names long enough to resemble recipes. **On the other, the public and EU regulations inflict cruel blows**: the 'nutriscore' traffic-light labels that penalise our best products, whether industrial or artisanal; ignoble allegations regarding the terrible health costs of wine; and most recently, the arrival of insects and **cricket flour that could end up in pasta, in biscuits, anywhere**.

Government bodies ask us to counteract these threats to our traditions

When communicating with ministries of every hue, we are always implored to counteract such dangers, which threaten our exports, our traditions and even the Mediterranean Diet, heretofore fêted and now under attack. Even during our most recent meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture (as reported on the inside back cover), **the Academy was invited to monitor and combat these innovations brought by globalisation and the economic interests** of some companies. Far from having reached its goal, on its seventieth birthday the Academy remains a crucial bulwark in defence of our food culture.





The sweetest saint of all

by **Morello Pecchioli**

Honorary Academician for Verona

*It is St Valentine,
Patron Saint of lovers.*

"O sweet kisses, o tender caresses", sings Mario Cavardossi, awaiting the firing squad while recalling poignant moments shared with Tosca. Setting aside Cavardossi, Tosca and those caresses, let's focus on the kisses. St Valentine is the patron saint of lovers. His feast day will be celebrated with millions of real, smacking, and finally maskless kisses, and millions of chocolate kisses too. The first go straight to the heart. The second reach it via the palate. Sweet kisses in a broad sense: not only the classic Perugina chocolate kisses (*Baci*), but **sweets**

of all kinds – pastries, chocolates, cakes, heart-shaped tiramisù... Throughout Italy, the patron saint of sweethearts 'brands' doughnuts, biscuits, bonbons, bouquet-shaped Mantuan 'rose cakes': decorated, iced, jam-filled, candied, **but all sharing a theme: hearts.**

Saint Valentine is the sweetest saint of all. Bakers should raise a statue to him in Verona, city of lovers, alongside Juliet's: Romeo wouldn't be jealous.

In Terni, the saint's birthplace, bakers offer a dizzying variety of love-themed creations, from short-crust hearts with coloured sprinkles to salted caramel chocolates.

In Bussolengo, the Patron Saint is venerated with a great feast and a typical sweet

Bussolengo, a small capital of romance on the road between **Verona and Lake**

Garda, venerates the Patron Saint with a dedicated feast and a typical sweet: **St Valentine's Kiss, whose wrapping bears the famous quote from Guy de Maupassant**, "A kiss is the surest way to be silent while saying everything". Every year the municipality holds an amateur pastry competition for Valentine's Day sweets. The only rule: **competing bonbons or other sweets must be red.** Like the heart. In the 12th century, a church of St Valentine was built in Bussolengo, where the parents of epileptic children implored the Saint to cure their progeny while droves of impoverished peasants threw themselves at the feet of his statue (it's beautiful and still exists) praying that he might spare their only cow from rinderpest. **St Valentine's church** was enriched between the 14th and 16th centuries by two splendid fresco cycles, one inside and one outside, narrating episodes from the martyred bishop's life; this artistic treasure is, by itself, worth a visit.

St Valentine's Day is also a day for messages: decorated cards, cloth embroidered with symbols and words of love (hearts, rings, flowers, lockets, entwined strands, almonds), and other keepsakes which clog postal offices, though nowadays billets doux can also travel by sms or whatsapp, with emojis and emoticons replacing painstakingly crafted cards or embroidery or even well-wrought words. But can love really be declared by emoticon? Luckily not every-

The event "Verona in love" seen from above



one is mobile-crazy. The Greeting Card Association estimates that worldwide, on 14 February a **billion greeting cards** travel by post like Cupid's arrows. And if love is unrequited? No matter: Valentine cards may also serve as keys to unlock the beloved's heart.

*English literature marks
the 14th of February
with poignant words*

It was **Geoffrey Chaucer**, a founding master of English literature, who 'invented' this lovers' day, initiating a romantic tradition which lasted from the Middle Ages until the advent of mobile phones. Chaucer versified the ancient idea that birds choose their mates on 14 February, St Valentine's day. Apparently, according to popular beliefs at the time, birds begin courting on that day, a prelude to springtime love and rebirth ("The hawthorn blooms on St Valentine's day", says a proverb). One legend narrates that the saint favoured a young, timid couple's love by sending a pair of doves to fly around them, their amorous cooing encouraging the youngsters to overcome their shyness, exchange endearments and swear eternal love.

An equally eminent figure in English literature, **William Shakespeare**, the bard of Stratford-upon-Avon, increased the fame of love's patron saint by having the sweet, unfortunate **Ophelia** speak words brimming with mournful love: "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day, all in the morning betime, and I a maid at your window, to be your Valentine." The poor girl, maddened beyond endurance by love, nursed the illusion that **Hamlet** might cease dithering philosophically over skulls in favour of a fleshier focus (her). Alas, we all know how that ended. "*Je suis desja d'amour tanné, ma tres douce Valentinée...*" This is the **oldest surviving 'Valentine' written by a man to his beloved**, and also among the sweetest and saddest. "I am already sickened by love, my sweetest Valentine". These melancholic words were written



by **Charles, Duke of Orleans** while confined within the sombre Tower of London after the battle of Agincourt (1415) during the Hundred Years' War. He remained a prisoner by the Thames for 25 years. Far from his wife **Bonne of Armagnac**, the 21-year-old Charles poured his overwhelming love-sickness into this love note. Charles and Bonne would never meet again: she died before his release. History does not reveal what killed her, but we romantic souls cannot help imagining that she pined away because of separation from the man she loved.

*Other saints perpetuate
the ancient tradition
of lovers' gifts*

The calendar also includes a saint who competes with St Valentine in **Livorno**. This is **Catherine of Alexandria**, also a virgin and martyr, much venerated in the Middle Ages. In the Tuscan city, the saint's day on 25 November is marked by an ancient custom: engaged or married Livornese women give their men marzipan 'St Catherine's apples' in return for the marzipan 'love fruits' received by those men on All Saint's Day, the 1st of that month. Beyond the sweet exchange, Saints Valentine and Catherine are linked by a seasonal oddity. According to the aforementioned mediaeval tradition, 14 February was the day of springtime re-

birth, while 25 November, according to the farming calendar, was the first day of winter, when fireplaces and schoolhouse earthenware stoves were lit. There is a saying "bring out the kindling for St Catherine". Like all special days in peasant culture, this was also celebrated with special sweets.

In Romagna, especially **round Ravenna**, an old custom persists: children are given 'catherines', namely short-crust biscuits (dolls or hens for girls; roosters for boys) covered in coloured sugar or chocolate and colourful sprinkles. In the 1920s, a poem in the Romagnolo dialect by the physician and poet **Aldo Spallicci** encouraged children to cry for their 'catherines': "*Par Santa Catarena e gal e la galèna, la bèla bambuzena, pianzi burdel s'avli di brazadel*". Translation: "For Saint Catherine, the hen and the rooster and the pretty doll; weep, child, if you want your biscuit". With all due respect for St Catherine, **the world's best-known love saint remains St Valentine**. What about singles? Who thinks of them? **St Faustino**, whose feast day, 15 February, follows Valentine's. We know not who entrusted the patron saint of Brescia, martyred in the 2nd century AD, with protecting the unwed. Some speculate that the market required a patron and a party for those without a love to celebrate the previous day. Others (probably singles) note that Faustino derives from the Latin 'faustus', meaning 'lucky'.

Morello Pecchioli



Pistachio: delicious green gold

by Giancarlo Burri
Padua Academician

*A precious culinary ally,
not only for sweets but
savoury dishes too.*

Having delectably mastered the role of star in the multifarious world of ice creams, and of side-kick for other dishes both sweet and savoury, as the cold closes in the pistachio also revisits its beloved snack persona to grace apéritifs or after-dinner moments.

What we eat is the seed, known in China as 'the smiling nut' thanks to its half-opened shell, of *Pistacia vera* L., of the family *Anacardiaceae*: among the oldest known cultivated trees, originating in ancient Persia. It is a dioecious

(having separate male and female specimens), anemophilous (wind-pollinated) plant which **bears fruit every two years**; what agronomists call the 'off year' allows the plants to develop fruits and flowers more vigorously the following year.

Millennia of history

Abundant sources attest to the pistachio's millennia of history as an élite product, from **Jacob's** precious gift of



pistachios to **Joseph** (Genesis 43:11) to the legendary plantations for exclusive use by the **Queen of Sheba** and **Nebuchadnezzar**. Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, XIII.10 and XV.24) recounts that the pistachio was brought to Rome in 39 AD by **Lucius Vitellius**, governor of Syria, becoming an **ingredient in refined recipes** including the rich and prized **gustacium**, containing pistachios, apricots, walnuts, hazelnuts, dates, eggs, capers and olives, and served with pieces of flatbread spread with *moretum* (herbed garlic cheese) or *allec* (a by-product of *garum*).

Pistachios were later cited as a refined food by the Greek physician **Anthimus** (*De Observatione Ciborum*, 6th century AD): "*Pistacia vero et ipsa bona et apta sunt*"; by Bishop **Antonio de Guevara** (*Epistolas Familiares*, 1539) in his chronicle of meals given to the **Holy Roman Emperor Charles V**: "They serve him peacocks, partridges, capons, blancmange, pistachios of divers kinds"; and by **Messisbugo** (*Libro Novo*, 1566) as 'among the condiments' with which the sumptuous dinners of the Este family were liberally strewn: pies, flaky pastries, fried pastries, fritters and green vegetable omelettes.

The pistachio's nutritional and therapeutic properties

Galen (*De Naturalibus Facultatibus*, 2nd century AD) mentions the curative properties of pistachios, "most useful to the liver and its blockages", as does **Michele Savonarola** (*Libreto de tutte le cosse che se magnano*, 1452) in his dietary advice to Duke **Borso d'Este**: "This goodly nutrient soothes the liver, aids the chest and lungs and likewise comforts the kidneys, and certainly few other fruits are to be so lauded". Nowadays the pistachio is also credited with an excellent nutritional profile and interesting health benefits. It is **quite calorie-dense** (562 kcal/100g), consisting of slightly under 50% fats, but those are mostly **'good' fats**, such as mono-unsaturates (principally oleic acid: the same as in olive oil)



and poly-unsaturates, mainly linoleic acid, an **Omega-6 fatty acid, which combats blood cholesterol**. For the record, only **43% of Italians** know that a 30g portion of pistachios contains 50 pistachios, and a mere **27%** know that such a portion has only 160 calories. Pistachios are **rich in minerals, including potassium, calcium and especially phosphorus** (whose contribution to glucose tolerance contributes to preventing type 2 diabetes), and B vitamins. Interestingly, pistachios are high in **two carotenoids which rarely occur in dried fruit**: lutein and zeaxanthin, associated with reduced risk of age-related macular degeneration.

Prized Italian pistachio varieties

26 February is World Pistachio Day, when the non-profit association American Pistachio Growers releases its figures on worldwide pistachio production and consumption. According to their latest statistics, **Italians eat pistachios throughout the day, with a peak during their afternoon break**. Over 1 in 2 Italians claims to eat them as an after-lunch **snack**, with **apéritif** time in second place: 47% of respondents enjoy them with drinks alongside olives and crisps during happy hour. Surprisingly, the statistics reveal **enduring appreciation for Italy's modest**

crop (about 1% of world production, against 50% from the USA, followed by Iran and Turkey), chiefly because home-grown pistachios are used in different ways from imported pistachios, mostly destined for the ice cream and sweet industry.

Italy produces three pistachio varieties, all highly prized: the Sicilian pistachios from **Bronte** (Catania) and **Raffadali** (Agrigento and Caltanissetta), both ennobled by **PDO** status, and those from **Stigliano** (Matera).

The **'Green Pistachios of Bronte'**, known as *frastuca* in Sicilian dialect, are harvested every two years on the *sciara*, the volcanic earth, around Mount Etna. **Ob-long and slightly flattened**, they have a purplish, woody shell, and their fruit's emerald hue is caused by its **high chlorophyll content**. **Highly aromatic and tending towards sweetness** (hence it is neither salted nor toasted), it is sold in dried form, whether in its shell or out, peeled or not.

Substantially similar is the **Raffadali Pistachio**, whose greater sweetness is imparted by the calcareous earth where it grows.

Stigliano Pistachios have a delicate flavour and aroma, which make them suitable for widespread culinary use; **they are mostly used in pastry and ice cream production**.

Let us enjoy these jewels of our food heritage, in splendid isolation!

Giancarlo Burri



How to age fish

by **Giovanni Ballarini**

Honorary President of the Academy

Rediscovering ancient customs while exploring new taste frontiers.

Since antiquity, many types of seafood have been eaten after a brief or longer period of storage, during which their flesh underwent processes of maturation or ageing. More recently, the idea has become established that seafood must be eaten freshly caught. “Fish has twenty-four virtues and loses one each hour”. “Guests are like fish: they stink after three days”. Are these and other prov-

erbs, deriving from folk wisdom, still completely valid, or, as with other foods, especially meats, is ageing useful or even desirable for certain fish? This is not a purely theoretical question: **how far should we experiment with ageing fish?** While exploring new flavour frontiers, might we lose the taste of the sea? How applicable to fish are techniques developed for meats, cured or otherwise?





What happens to fish when it is aged?

What happens when we age fish? This is not intended as an exhaustive reply to each and every such question; the aim here is to **draw attention to how a few fish respond to ageing procedures which some eminent cooks are starting to use** and which will inevitably gain popularity.

With proper ageing, fish muscles become dryer but without losing too much moisture; their **texture becomes more compact**, fondant, almost creamy, thanks to **the enzymes that relax the muscles which harden** during and after fishing. Weight can drop considerably, up to 30%; colour darkens, especially externally, with more orange or dusky hues. Meanwhile **some aromas gain potency** because muscle enzymes transform amino acids into aromatic molecules, concentrating their flavour. As with long-aged meats, **the aromatic spectrum broadens**, acquiring depth and intensity reminiscent of some cured meats; but unlike those, fish assumes the characteristics of a differently fresh food, neither cooked nor raw. **Ageing reduces cooking times** and increases crispiness and the fragrances released by Maillard's reaction. **Shelf life also increases** because dry ageing is also **an alternative preservation method** besides the already established vacuum

and freezing methods. It is also a midpoint on the cooked-raw trajectory which is currently being explored for many fish; this partly explains current interest in it.

Ageing is particularly suitable for large fish

Ageing particularly suits large fish, **through there is no dearth of research on ageing smaller fish**, whose ageing times drop to a few days. Furthermore, **flavour and fragrance peak at different times for different fish**; however, for most fish **it is axiomatic that they must immediately be cleaned of the most perishable parts** (scales, organs, gills, the vein under the backbone, and any non-meat part that could swiftly deteriorate with bacterial proliferation); also, the outermost skin layer should mostly, but not always, be removed. Some wrap the fish in rice paper or cotton which absorb some liquids without causing too much dryness. **Throughout the ageing process, the fish must be kept scrupulously dry**, away from water and ice, which favour bacterial growth. **Processing should be swift and occur at low, near-freezing temperatures**, and in a near-sterile environment, because fish have a different bacterial burden from meat. **Humidity is another crucial parameter**: the larger the fish, the higher the humidity should be, or drying will be

uneven. As a guideline, 0-2 degrees Celsius and 70% humidity are the default. **There's no standard ageing time**: it can be 2-3 days, but a **large grouper** may need up to forty, a **tuna** three weeks, a **dentex or large pandora** a week to ten days, and an **octopus** likewise.

A well-aged fish smells of the sea

A well-aged fish smells of the sea and **can be eaten raw** or cooked, making the most of its tender, more flavourful flesh and golden-brown crispiness when cooked, since **proper ageing enhances flavour and brings out the best in the freshest fish**.

So, as we wondered earlier, how far can, or should, we push experimentation with fish ageing before we risk losing the distinctive taste of the sea? The debate remains open.

Giovanni Ballarini

