

# **A** GASTRONOMY UNAFFECTED BY THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: ETHNIC CUISINE KNOWS NO GEOGRAPHICAL OR CULTURAL FRONTIERS

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*Keywords:* gastronomy, culture, globalization

*The best time for planting a tree was twenty years ago;  
The second best moment is now...*

....a proverb to remember and to support the fact that change is always an opportunity and the best way to realize ideas and projects.

Why the union between gastronomy and culture in reference to this proverb?

Its significance lies in considering how the holistic value of the two can be superimposed and are, moreover, referable to the following considerations.

The preference for certain foods and not others, depends on geographical, environmental, economic, historical, nutritional factors and, as such, can be traced back to a cultural origin: in other words, the same food is shared among the same community members and thus has a social, communicational and cultural meaning.

On the other hand, food emphasizes the differences between groups, social classes and cultures, reinforcing their sense of identity. It defines ideological, political, ethnic boundaries, or conversely, is a means to learn about other cultures, to mix civilizations, to find a road to interculturalism.

And, speaking of identity, among those of an economic, social, religious, philosophical order, we focus on ethnic identity, in other words, those foods – referring to gastronomy in particular – that in all traditions are a distinctive and significant mark of its history and culture.

Presenting an informative picture on the current situation of the food industry, statistics show that this is the sector that best survives the economic crisis, confirming a growing interest for the importance that nutrition plays for man, because the art of eating well, is also considered as a way of defining the level of welfare and quality of life of a people or a community.

In the far from peaceful economic revolution presently under way, a new model has been introduced into the art of cooking represented by ethnic cuisines, which contribute to the economic performance of the gastronomy trade. They include:

- *ancient cuisines, which made abundant use of rice, herbs, spices, brown sugar, cocoa, jams, pastries, fruit and bottarga (a particular fish roe), which were then imported into Europe;*

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- *teas of the sumptuous courts, the victors of the colonial campaigns and the people;*
- *Arab cuisine and medicine of the tenth century* – stigmatized by Abu Bakr âlRâzî in his treatise on dietetics in which he states “... those who understand the nature of food are more enlightened” – that re-propose their culinary traditions to the Western world.

Ethnic cuisines, which in the last 40 years have spread considerably throughout Italy, have become the ambassadors of culture, history and religion of eastern countries offering “mutton, roast or stuffed pigeons, pies with seasoned meat, rice pudding, appetizers made with sweet and sour vegetables in Syria and Jordan, meat rolls in vine leaves with Palestinian yogurt, croutons with pureed sesame, broad beans, eggplant, chickpeas, aromatized with mint leaves and dressed with olive oil, in Egypt, where in the Middle Ages, European travelers who visited Cairo spoke of about 12,000 delis” as well as cakes made with almonds and peanuts in North Africa, pistachio nuts and puff pastry in the Middle East, um ali, a sweet Egyptian specialty with almonds and pine nuts or baklava in the Arab world, prepared with puff pastry, almonds and honey, cut into small diamond shapes, the kunafeh used from Egypt to Palestine and prepared with almonds covered with puff pastry and honey.

In addition to these foods there are: *drinks such as mint flavoured green tea, palm sap, coffee aromatized with flowers in the countries of the Maghreb and with cardamom in the Middle East, sharbat, lemon juice flavored with vanilla and finally, as an addition to desserts and sweets, orange blossom water to give refinement and other aromas.*

The development of ethnic gastronomy provides the consideration that food, unlike men, knows no geographical or cultural boundaries and, as such, provides an opportunity for contributing values of style and integration, enriching the world scenario of good food, in the same way as in the past when French, Italian and Chinese cuisine were developed and incorporated into the world, recognized by a vast public and respected by the greatest gastronomes in history.

Today the phenomenon of globalized migration generates discontent, but the penetration of extremist-populist tendencies in European countries has always been facilitated by poor cultural and economic resources and a weakening in the ability to mediate of mass parties, by an artfully developed and disseminated anti-politics among ordinary people such as workers, those involved in the commercial sector, pensioners, the unemployed or underemployed and housewives, currently amplified and driven by the dominion of web-politics.

The great frailty of state borders, now useless in containing the exodus of tens of thousands of people fleeing, mainly from Arab regimes in a continuous and tragic struggle, raises the question of how insignificant and marginal they have become and is a cause for reflection on the validity of their defense. What is puzzling though are the rash decisions of a delegitimized political class that is attempting to stop the exodus by using coercive systems or agreements that weigh negatively on the history of the peoples and the development of their democracy and culture, even to the point of seeing farcical walls being constructed to throw dust in the eyes of the most ardent xenophobes in order not to lose votes.

All this confirms the awareness that state boundaries, many times invoked in the past to stem human migration, are only the product of the will of a few to create plat-

forms of national identity subordinate to power, a modern prerequisite for all wealth and the growth of personal leadership.

The significant presence of immigrants is, inevitably, producing a new style of political communication that the media spreads and amplifies, often proposing it as being responsible for the increase in crime and the degradation in urban areas, as well as the source of problems of transformation relating to the economy and social life, but without recognizing that these people, fascinated by the European way of life, wish to become a part of it. Such coexistence simultaneously produces the spread of new family relationships, products, technologies and habits that are rapidly absorbed by the host populations.

Italy is no stranger to this reality, because when in February 1990 "... the effects of the statement on geographical limitation in national legislation ceased..." and which had been established by Italy on signing the Geneva Convention, it began to experience the overcrowding of cities by the non-EU homeless who found shelter in railway stations, under bridges, in abandoned buildings and industrial structures, as well as unguarded archaeological complexes.

As a result, albeit in too many cases outside the rules, new organizations appeared to manage a food market of ethnic products typical of their native lands, in order to meet the mandatory nutritional needs of a growing foreign population, which traditional Italian gastronomy has to come to terms with, as it attracts an increasing number of consumers fascinated by the new, the exotic and the unusual. At the same time, an extensive market exists parallel to the national market in clothing, sold mostly by itinerant sellers in the streets and on crowded beaches, and to the market in low cost labor.

From data reported by Unioncamere – Infocamere, it states that from 2011 to 2014 the catering sector grew by 1.6% and that nearly one in three new restaurants that opened was ethnic.

The Milan Chamber of Commerce has studied the phenomenon in more detail and claims that in 2013, of about three thousand restaurants opened in the city (+ 7% from 2011), one in three is run by foreigners. In Lombardy, 22% of the restaurant business is foreign.

Regional cuisines, on the other hand, recorded a decline in sales of 25% and, according to Fipe (Italian Federation of Public Enterprises) – Confcommercio, in the past three years the number of restaurants and pizzerias managed by foreign entrepreneurs has increased by 39%. In fact, since 2011, Istat, the Italian Institute for National Statistics, has added ethnic fast food to its basket.

Besides political effects, the situation has led to a new economic order in the distribution of foodstuffs intended for the new population that has settled here and of goods in general, creating new points of production, especially for ethnic gastronomy which, on the whole, is unknown to the somewhat sedentary Italian.

It naturally follows that the Italian population mixes, more or less consciously, with the new populations that at times it turns away from without thinking, but then spontaneously accepts their food and goods, appreciating their quality and exotic attraction.

The change, often traumatic, is at the origin of the development of society and resisting it is a sign of cultural and social backwardness, exaggerated egoism and creative blindness.

It is evident that an unwanted change can be attributed to modifications in market economy, aggressive competition, the inability of leadership to offer credible alternatives, shifts in consumer tastes, new technologies, natural disasters, but above all

to the low propensity for devoting oneself personally to exploiting the resources that undoubtedly exist.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "We must become the change we want to see". It is necessary, therefore, to experience this change to direct it in a positive way towards what we want to become.

It is therefore important to highlight the necessity of taking advantage of those emerging organizations that influence the traditional trading system, by guiding them along the high road of principles based on western models to stimulate adequate demand through investments.

In conclusion, it can be said that there is a thin, anguished doubt about the possibility of being able to express the identity and tradition of one's own country and that there is a dark fear about the future. This has been evident in passing from local cultures to a global culture and also through the atavistic difficulty, arising from a diversity in vocabulary and mentality, of realizing the last critical step relating to "technology transfer".

In truth, a feasible model that allows concrete results to be achieved is related to a conceptual term: creativity. Transferred to the food industry, it can be expressed through participation, involvement, feelings, but also in practical terms of workability, profitability, management.

Hence, ethnic identity represented by gastronomy, as a manifestation of that creativity, can rightly retain the hallmark of its own history and culture, but it can and must also be a vehicle of knowledge and experience that goes beyond national confines.

### Biographical notes

**Piergiorgio Tupini** is President of the *Accademia della Cultura Enogastronomica* in Rome and Professor (Technical School) at the "Free School of Engineering and Applied Sciences in Industry", Fribourg, Switzerland. He is a former lecturer in the Master "Hygiene and Environmental Safety" and expert on "Political Economics" at the University of Rome "La Sapienza." As Director of the Environmental and Food Sector USL RM1 (local health service) and then Director of the Technical Department ASL RMC, he has carried out work in various fields, achieving important results, with reference to limitation of atmospheric and environmental pollution, interventions for the rehabilitation of the environmental and food sectors in the historical center of Rome and in the campaign against smoking in public places. He has also conducted investigations in hospitals on matters of hygiene and safety, as well as in establishments, laboratories and food markets in Rome. He has published over 100 articles and 3 monographs.