CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA

ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL EDITION



ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
ISTITUZIONE CULTURALE DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA
FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI

www.accademia1953.it

N. 397, NOVEMBER 2026

CIVILTÀ DELLA TAVOLA
ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

NOVEMBER 2026 / N. 397

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MONTHLY MAGAZINE
REG. N. 4049 - 29-5-1956
TRIBUNALE DI MILANO

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Rivista associata all'Unione Stampa Periodica Italiana

Table of contents

L'ACCADEMIA ITALIANA DELLA CUCINA
È STATA FONDATA NEL 1953 DA ORIO VERGANI
E DA LUIGI BERTETT, DINO BUZZATI TRAVERSO, CESARE CHIODI, GIANNINO CITTERIO, ERNESTO DONÀ DALLE ROSE, MICHELE GUIDO FRANCI, GIANNI MAZZOCCHI BASTONI, ARNOLDO MONDADORI, ATTILIO NAVA, ARTURO ORVIETO, SEVERINO PAGANI, ALDO PASSANTE, GIAN LUIGI PONTI, GIÒ PONTI, DINO VILLANI, EDOARDO VISCONTI DI MODRONE, CON MASSIMO ALBERINI E VINCENZO BUONASSISI.



On the cover: *graphic elaboration of* Conversation at the Café *(1896) by Giovanni Boldini; private collection*

Focus of the President

2 A restaurant is more than a kitchen *(Paolo Petroni)*



Tradition ● History

3 Treat or treat? *(Morello Pecchioli)*



Territories ● Tourism ● Folklore

5 Capers: the green gold of Pantelleria *(Giancarlo Saran)*



Restaurants and Cooks

7 When the kitchen drifts far from the table *(Sandro Borruto)*

A restaurant is more than a kitchen

The dining hall has lost its fundamental role of welcoming and hospitality.

by Paolo Petroni
President of the Accademia

Restaurants are traditionally divided into two areas: the kitchen and the dining hall. Some even have a dedicated wine cellar or wine display, but the heart of it all is the kitchen, so much that nowadays visible kitchens are fashionable (and they're not always a pretty sight). For reviews and social media, what counts is only the kitchen, especially if guided by an acclaimed or at least noted chef. The chef is often absent, but that matters little: their name is enough. When present, the chef acts as a host, greeting, welcoming, and not disdaining the occasional *selfie*.

The dining hall is frequently negligible in both ambiance and service

The salon is frequently negligible in both ambiance and service. **In Italy this has long been a sore point**: uncomfortable chairs, horrid paintings on the walls, wobbly tables, haphazard settings. **This has even worsened now**: tables have shrunk (in trendy venues they often measure 60 cm, so neighbouring conversations overlap) and settings are minimal, with no tablecloths and unwieldy cutlery. **Service has reached unacceptable levels**: waiters have been replaced by runners, improvised, underpaid staff without prospects or job satisfaction from their silent, anonymous drudgery. **But the salon was, and is, important. It is where we are welcomed**, where we spend our entire meal, where we should enjoy food in maximum comfort while basking in the pleasure of good company. How can a youngster aspire to work there? It all starts with education. **Professional hotel institutes have changed their form and function**. One only need peruse their syllabi: abundant theory, as in all high schools; a well-rounded education, certainly. But very little practice and use of equipment and raw materials. **Much studying but scant lab time**.

Perfect knowledge of the dishes prepared in the kitchen

Nowadays the salon requires perfect knowledge of the dishes prepared in the kitchen, **with constant interaction between the chef and the head waiter**, if any. A good waiter or waitress should **know how to greet graciously**, recognise regulars, fulfil customers' table preference, perceive the right moments for stepping in or away, **avoid vanishing after delivering dishes**, check if bread, water or wine are running low, bring condiments when they are needed and not at the end of the meal, and change cutlery. They should also be able to **finish a dish tableside**, use a *guéridon*, employ simple *flambé* techniques, or debone a sole. Alas, on this front we enter the realm of science fiction, as things are not improving (except rarely in luxury restaurants or hotels) but declining. The future is increasingly entrusted to personnel who, through no fault of their own, will not add decorum to our restaurants.





Treat or treat?

by Morello Pecchioli
Honorary Academician for Verona

Specialities rich in history and ritual, All Souls' sweets persist and are inherited throughout the peninsula.

On 2 November, All Souls' Day, 'sweets of the dead' rich in variety, ingredients and meanings have been prepared throughout Italy since time immemorial. Compared with such variety steeped in history and ritual, the modern, Americanised Hallowe'en with its overblown marketing of 'horror' and its tiresomely trendy 'trick or treating' is risible. Alas, Hallowe'en and the homogenisation of tastes and consumption are indeed contributing to the dilution of memory and the loss of good customs. But, thank the Lord and the bakers and the tireless dilettantes, **in many parts of Italy, traditions and recipes regarding 'sweets of the dead' persist and are inherited**. In Parma, Montepulciano, the Veneto and many other places in Italy, 'the bones of the dead' are eaten. The same happens in Palermo, where one munches on *crozzi 'i mottu* ('skulls of the dead'), and Novara with *òss ëd mòrt* ('bones of the dead'). The Perugians, more specific in their bone-crunching preferences, chomp on 'shanks of the dead', while **Neapolitans cheerfully savour *'o morticiello*** ('the little corpse'). Brescia is crazy over *pà dei morcc*, pronounced more intelligibly by the Milanese as ***pan dei morti*** ('bread of the dead'). That same bread, beatified with almonds, raisins and pepper, becomes ***pan co' santi*** ('bread with saints') **in Siena**. Romagna, land of *piadina* flatbread, draws comfort on 2 November from its 'of the dead' edition, *piada dei morti*.

The various 'dead breads' are sweet, incorporating raisins, candied fruit and cinnamon

It would be wise, now, to avoid misunderstandings or comprehensible repugnance by clarifying that the aforementioned edible bones are confectioneries: crunchy, snowy-glazed or sugar-dusted biscuits emulating bony whiteness. The Neapolitan *morticiello* is a soft hazelnut-studded nougat, and the various 'dead breads' are sweet, usually incorporating, inter alia, sugar, candied fruit, raisins and cinnamon. **Each city boasts its own recipe** which is, of course, the original and best. **Why the link** between this melancholic remembrance and sweetmeats? Let us consult the lunar farmers' almanac. "The farming year does not begin on the first of January", writes the rural culture scholar **Dino Coltro** in his *La cucina tradizionale veneta* (*Traditional Cookery in the Veneto*), "but with the remembrance of the dead. And the ritual foods for the dead are, universally, sweets": for instance, *pan trandòto* or *pan dei morti* ('bread of the departed/dead'), prepared with yellow (maize) flour and raisins, pine nuts and sugar; or *tressiàn* (etymology uncertain) and *osi da morto* ('bones of the dead'), ritual Veneto sweets once accompanying other foods on the *piato dei morti* ('platter of the dead'). In popular belief, the night between 1 and 2 November was the only one when our world and the other world, hence the living and the dead, could connect: the dead returned home, welcomed by a metaphorical banquet alongside their loved ones.



In certain valleys of Trentino, on this night which transcends human nature, there persists the custom of leaving the table set for the deceased. This region also prepares a truly unique sweet exclusive to this occasion: **'horses of the dead', leavened rolls** made from flour, milk, sugar, eggs and raisins, whitened with icing sugar, shaped like horses or horseshoes. "The link [between the sweet and the horse – Ed.] is lost in the mists of time", explains the Trentino food journalist **Giuseppe Casagrande**, "and could originate from the Roman goddess **Epona** who

oversaw horse breeding and accompanied the dead to the afterlife".

A symbolic sharing of food with the living

In Sicily, too, there was the belief, still extant in some areas, that on the night preceding the 2nd of November, the dead return home and symbolically share the food of the living. **A *cannistreddu*** ('little basket') **of ritual foods was prepared** for them. The dead reciprocated by giving sweets to children, who experienced that night with fear ("You'd better sleep, or the dead will scratch your feet") and excitement. **Andrea Camilleri**, in "The Day the Dead Lost Their Way Home", nostalgically recounts: "On the night between the first and second of November, every Sicilian home with a *picciliddro* [child] became populated with familiar spirits. We *nicareddri* (youngsters), before going to bed, would place under it a wicker basket which, during the night, the dear departed would fill with sweets and presents for us to find upon awakening. The sweets were the ritual ones, called 'sweets of the dead': marzipan shaped and painted to resemble fruit, 'honey branches' made from flour and honey, and other delights, such as *viscotti regina*, *tetù*, *carcagnette*. Invariably present was the *pupo di zucchero* [sugar doll]".

The *pupi ri zuccaro* (sugar dolls), figurines representing deceased loved ones; **martorana fruit**, perfectly sculpted with almond and honey marzipan; ***biscotti regina*** ('queen's biscuits'), **made of shortcrust and covered in sesame seeds**: these were only some of the 'sweets of the dead' that exuberantly creative Sicilian bakers provided for children and gluttons on the Day of the Dead. The *cannistru* of the *picciliddri* also contained **hand-shaped sweets** ('apostle's fingers'), ***'nzuddi*, almond biscuits** made by the nuns of San Vincenzo in Messina, *piparelle* (almond biscuits), *crozzi 'i mottu* ('skulls'), *rame di Napoli* ('Naples copper'), **soft, chocolate-covered cocoa biscuits typical of Catania**, and ***paste di garofano*** ('clove biscuits'), so called because of the clove water used in their preparation.



Since antiquity, fava beans have been doggedly pursued by superstition

The entire Italian peninsula abounds in ***fave dei morti*** ('beans of the dead'): crunchy **fava-shaped biscuits** chiefly containing flour, sugar, almond paste, egg white, grated lemon zest and icing sugar. Since antiquity, the hapless fava bean, considered symbolic of death for its deep-sunken roots and black-speckled flowers, has been doggedly pursued by superstition and shunned as a plant of bad omen. Even **Pellegrino Artusi** mentions this in his preamble to recipe 622 (consisting of three recipes, actually) of *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (*Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*): "These little biscuits are customarily made for commemorating the dead. This tradition must be rooted in remotest antiquity, as fava beans were offered to the **Fates**, **Pluto** and **Proserpina**". The ancient Egyptians, **Artusi** maintained, considered fava beans unclean: beware of offering them any, especially black ones, equivalent to wishing them dead. A highly distinctive and complicated **'non-dessert' is *colva pugliese***, also called 'grain of the dead', especially common round Foggia. It is **rich in ancient symbolism**, both pagan and Christian. Containing boiled wheat, minced dried fruit, raisins, dried fig pieces, chocolate flakes, pomegranate and cooked must, it represents death and resurrection. Until quite recently, in many villages on All Souls' Day one could find stalls along the cypress-lined roads leading to cemeteries selling the sweets and biscuits associated with the recurrence. This is now rare. **In Villafranca near Verona**, for over half a century, **the 'gondola' of Bortolin**, a legendary local confectioner, has appeared at the cemetery gates on the first and second days of November. The current Bortolins represents the third generation, selling, as their grandfather did, **the 'pastries of the dead': flaky pastries filled with layers of crème pâtissière**. Exiting the graveyard with mouthfuls of requiem prayers, mourners queue up for comforting treats to take home.

Morello Pecchioli



Capers: the green gold *of Pantelleria*

by Giancarlo Saran
Treviso Academician

Caper history and curious facts revealed in a small museum.

To know that island is to love it. "Pantelleria is a continent nestled within an island", asserted **Italo Cucci**, a journalist and newspaper editor from Romagna who **has chosen the windy isle as his abode since 2011, as have many others**, each with a story to tell.
Pantelleria is a little treasure box containing manifold wonders. Its dry stone walls have UNESCO recognition: an impressive 12,000 km of structures painstakingly assembled stone by stone to protect arable land. Another **UNESCO heritage item is the head-trained bush vine** (*vite ad alberello*), a generous, expertly tended source of intriguing *zibibbo* wine. **Then there are capers, the island's 'green gold'**.
Reliable historical sources include a text of the mid-fifteenth century by **Nicolò de Nicolai, geographer to the French king Henry II**: "This island, with its craggy mountains and sea cliffs, yields a profusion of cotton and capers…". Three centuries later, **the agronomist Pietro Calcara emphasised the economic and commercial value of capers** for the island's society at the time. In the late ninetheenth century, **Arturo Bruttini affirmed that caper exports "yield considerable profits for landowners"**. This constant crescendo culminated, in the 1980s, in a **production of 1,200 metric tonnes, followed by a sudden crash a few years later**. Whether due to **the difficulty of harvesting them** or the **progressive development of tourism which yields easier, less labour-intensive profits** as people discover the island's beauty, production fell quite rapidly to 50 metric tonnes. Lately, thanks also to **PGI recognition from 2006, production is gradually rising** and now approaches 200 metric tonnes.



Strong points of Pantelleria capers

Pantelleria capers have several strong points. Firstly, **the climate of an island** positioned at the centre of the Sicilian Channel (between Sicily and Tunisia), far from both coasts, **causes considerable temperature variation between day and night** and thus the development of **polyphenols which give capers their unique, intense fragrance**. There is also the mineral-rich **volcanic terrain** which promotes **enhanced production of glucocapparin**, making the capers **more aromatic and harmonious**. These work synergistically with **painstaking selective breeding for optimal firmness and crunch**. All this blends with tradition, strongly rooted among families down the generations. There is little rain on Pantelleria; therefore **capers are preserved in dry salt rather than brine**. Instead, brine is formed when the capers' own moisture is extracted by the salt through osmosis. **Therefore, the capers age in their own juice**: this **additional particularity creates a unique flavour**. Yet **the real difficulty is another: har-**



vesting them "so that this quintessence of sun, sea and salt might then bring to the table the taste of Pantelleria". **This pratice is ably described by Gabriele Lasagni**, another Emilian-born elective islander. "Dawn has just broken. One knee on the ground, the other bent as if in supplication; squatting on one's heels or bent like a bow… this is how capers are picked". The cinematic long take continues: "Hands move quickly: we must hurry before the sunshine becomes too hot and unbearable", so that harvesting Pantelleria capers "*is among the most exhausting tasks in existence: legs and back seem ready to break*. From these gestures of dignified devotion to earth-bound toil the capers of Pantelleria are born." **Harvests are distributed between summer and early autumn**, repeated approximately twelve times to pick the unopened buds, which is what capers are, every 8-10 days, thereby making the most of the plant's productive capacities.

The small but fascinating Caper Museum

This perception of dedication and humanity has fuelled Lasagni's intuition, blending the local and the historical, of bringing to life the small but fascinating Museo del Cappero (Caper Museum), unique in Italy and probably the world. **In its three rooms one can observe the fascinating world of capers unfolding** without the need for squatting on one's heels as dawn breaks. One can **view traditional tools** that are still used in artisanal processing: for example, the *birrina*, a sort of large awl for perforating the earth to hold the plants, and the *panaro*, a small basket for holding the initial harvest, later poured into the *zimmile*, a basket attached to a donkey's back. In a small room, **a fascinating video shows the salting procedure**: strong arms daily stir the capers and salt in a large container called a *tinossa*, favouring lactic acid fermentation. In its first phase, salt accounts for 40% of total weight; in the second, 25%. **Capers are then sorted by size**, with calibres varying from 4 to 15 millimetres, by using *crivelli*, sieves vigorously shaken by hand, before being sent in wooden boxes or barrels which traditionally departed from the nearby port of Scauri. **Many and curious are the branding stamps identifying various categories of capers**: Pernice, Occhiello, Lacrimella, Puntina ('Partridge', 'Buttonhole', 'Little Tear', 'Little Point') and many others. **Until the 1950s, Pantelleria could count on a merchant fleet**, distinct from its fishing fleet, **numbering fifty sail ships** calling at ports from Trapani to Naples.

A varied array of delicious recipes

Pantelleria capers are cultivated in small dedicated plots called *margetti*, protected by dry stone walls, but **are also found scattered around thanks to the wind** which pushes the small and light caper seeds far from their plants, **but especially thanks to lizards**. Craving the sugary exudates of caper fruits, lizards ingest their seeds too, and thus transport them to crevices, walls, and other unlikely locations inaccessible even to the wind. **Pantelleria is Italy's main caper source with approximately 78% of the harvest**; the rest is also mostly produced in and around Sicily, primarily in the Aeolian Islands thanks to those whom Lasagni calls '**magical caper growers**'. Production is now safeguarded by a **Cooperative of around 150 members, founded in 1971 by Antonio Bonomo**, one of the island's historic producers, succeeded by **Rosario Cappadona** and now by **Emanuela Bonomo**, a worthy heir to her father Antonio.

Capers of many virtues are tiny mines of health benefits. Rich in **quercetin, a natural antioxidant** that counteracts the formation of free radicals, they protect joint cartilage. They also contain **rutin, which inhibits platelet aggregation**, favouring microcirculation, besides many other active ingredients with skin and metabolic benefits. In recent years, **even alternative caper parts and processing methods have been exploited**. For example, **crunchy caper leaves** can enliven soups or salads. **'Caper salt', which is in fact 'caperless'**, is the fluid that they release during the salt preservation process. **A rich variety of delicious caper recipes** runs the gamut from simple pizzas, whether Neapolitan or Sicilian, to the alluring *spaghetti alla puttanesca* so dear to Pulcinella. **Some even earn stars, thanks to Massimiliano Alajmo and his white risotto with coffee powder and Pantelleria capers**. For those roaming the island's *dammusi* (traditional stone houses), there are **three unmissable classics: Pantelleria salad**, with boiled potatoes, mackerel, onions, olives, tomatoes and herbs; **Pantelleria cous cous with fish and fried vegetables**; and **pasta with *ammogghio***, the local version of pesto, with tomatoes, garlic and origano. Lest we deny ourselves every possible experience, **there's also caper ice cream**: try it and see.

Giancarlo Saran

When the kitchen drifts
far from the table

by Sandro Borruto
Delegate for Area dello Stretto-Costa Viola

From catering to restaurants, centralised production promises uniformity, safety and reduced expenses. But at what cost, potentially, to the identity of Italian cuisine?

The restaurant kitchen has long been the place, materially and symbolically, wherein food became a dish: behind the door separating the salon from the stoves, vegetables were cleaned, stock was prepared, and there was much kneading and cooking. The dish reached the diner following a brief journey within the same building.

No longer can we take this unity of location for granted: in a growing number of restaurants, **some food is prepared elsewhere** and then travels to the point of consumption where it is finished and plated.
This is nothing new: centralised kitchens have existed for decades in catering for schools, hospitals and refectories receiving meals from cooking facilities. **The new development is its entry into restaurants**. The deciding factor is not whether it is progress or a threat, but how to maintain quality without severing the links between a dish, an occupation and a place.

A system already present in Italian life

Catering and restaurants fulfil different needs. The first ensures a safe, balanced meal for a well-defined group within the possibilities of a service contract. Instead, restaurants are designed for diners who freely choose where to eat, and seek not only nourishment but a welcoming, often locally meaningful ambiance. Thus the same system can be differently judged: **nobody is surprised if schools receive meals from a central kitchen; opinions will radically differ when a traditional restaurant**, presented as a guardian of authenticity, **serves food prepared elsewhere**.
Catering exists on a large scale: school catering contracts alone exceeded 5.7 billion euros in value during the four-year period of 2019-2022. Meals might arrive still warm or be cooked, cooled and then reheated at the destination ('cook and chill'). That system allows purchase control, but safety depends on the entire supply chain: correct cooking may be rendered futile by excessively slow chilling or incorrect reheating.



Restaurants adopt the model

Chain restaurants' market share in Italy has risen, according to Deloitte, from 7% to 10% since 2019. **A chain restaurant can produce doughs, bases and sauces in one location**, distributing them to branches using less space and reduced personnel: the kitchen doesn't vanish, but is divided between lengthy processes in the central workshop and last-minute preparation in each branch. Cost cutting is not guaranteed, however, as the central kitchen requires large-scale refrigeration and temperature control.
In catering, uniformity is a plus; in restaurants, Italian cuisine is not founded merely on repetition, but on **local variation and seasonality**, while centralised kitchens favour stable recipes. The danger



is an apparently varied but substantially uniform cuisine: differently named restaurants fed by the same basic templates from the same kitchen.

Centralisation also modifies work: though a production centre offers more regular hours, role specialisation may impoverish education. If doughs, sauces and stocks arrive ready-made, **new generations will not learn how to make them, and cooks will risk devolving into executors** of procedures elaborated elsewhere.

Centralisation doesn't necessarily mean impoverishment: a specialised laboratory can acquire good raw materials and maintain recipes alive that a single restaurant might no longer manage to sustain. The question is not where the saucepan is, but **which culture determines production**: if the laboratory correctly retains ingredients, recipes and preparation times, that is organised artisanal work; if it only serves to reduce personnel and manufacture the appearance of authenticity, it becomes a homogenisation machine.

The province of Reggio Calabria as a test case

The province of Reggio Calabria **instructively demonstrates when centralisation supports food heritage and when it risks flattening it**: within a small radius there coexist the seafood cuisine of the Straits, the Greek-inspired cookery of Bovesia, the pastoral culture of Aspromonte and the recipes from the Piana and Locride areas: traditions that would even be flattened by the generic label 'Calabrian'.

Some products lend themselves well to organised production: *stomatico* cake, *piparelli* biscuits, *torrone* nougat from Bagnara, preserves, cured meats and bergamot preparations can begin life in specialised laboratories without losing their characteristics. A case in point is the stockfish stew ***stocco di Mammola***: soaking and cleaning the stockfish requires time and experience, and centralising this was already a historical custom. However, once it moves to the kitchen to be prepared *alla ghiotta* (tomato-based 'glutton' stew), it must still be handled with specific expertise.

The same applies to **the *struncatura*** pasta from Piana di Gioia Tauro, whose character depends on pan-finishing, and the Greek-inflenced ***lestopitta***, which must be fried just before serving and would lose its fragrance if pre-cooked.

Cuisine from the Straits of Messina imposes even stricter limits: **swordfish, frostfish and many other fish depend on freshness and rapid cooking**, and enforced centralisation would separate them from the sea and those who value their quality.

In the Reggio Calabria area, the decisive distinction is not between home and laboratory cooking, but between preparations that can be separated from their place of consumption and those that require immediacy: centralisation can support culinary heritage maintenance as long as it refrains from lumping the Costa Viola, Piana, Bovesia, Aspromonte and Locride areas together indiscriminately.

Waste, transparency, balance

Centralised production can reduce waste - restaurants and other food services generate about 11% of EU food waste - but a prediction error can increase it, on top of substantial resource expenditure for transport and refrigeration.

Restaurants lack the transparency typical of catering: menus can imply home cooking without clarifying that some food preparation was undertaken elsewhere. Precision would require avoiding such expressions as 'home-made' if these are misleading: trust is fostered by congruency between what is claimed and what is provided.

Italian cuisine has already welcomed fridges, freezers and low-temperature cooking: **there's no reason to condemn centralisation itself, but we must differentiate between respectful innovation and impoverishment**, centralising what benefits from that scale and not what requires freshness and a professional human touch. Italian cuisine won't lose its identity when a sauce is prepared a few kilometres away, **but when it becomes impossible to recognise a style, a territory, a history**.

Sandro Borruto