

Kebab Wars

George De Stefano (February 11, 2009)



Are ethnic food bans a sign of "gastronomic racism?"



"Italians are so weird about food," my friend Francesco remarked to me. "Nobody is as fussy about it as we are."

I don't know whether the second part of Francesco's commentary is accurate. The French, for example, have been known to be a bit exacting about their soufflés, confits, and charcuterie. But Francesco, who emigrated from Puglia to New York when he was in his early teens, certainly is right about Italian food weirdness. Right now in the madrepatria, or rather, in two of its northern regions, they're going pazzo pazzo about cuisine, culture, and national identity.

Call it the war of the kebabs. In Lucca, the local right-wing government has banned new "ethnic" food outlets from opening within the ancient walls of the Tuscan town. Milan, also governed by the right, has followed suit, with the anti-immigrant Lega Nord party imposing restrictions "to protect local specialties from the growing popularity of ethnic cuisines."

Luca Zaia, Italy's agriculture minister and a Lega Nord member from the Veneto region, applauds the crackdown on non-Italian food. "We stand for tradition and the safeguarding of our culture," he huffed. He further said that "foreign" food places, whether "they serve kebabs, sushi, or Chinese food," must cease "importing container loads of meat and fish from who knows where" and use only Italian products.

According to the Times of London, when Zaia was asked whether he'd ever eaten a kebab, he indignantly declared, "No - and I defy anyone to prove the contrary. I prefer the dishes of my native Veneto. I even refuse to eat pineapple."

Can you believe that people like Zaia are running Italy's government these days? That the country has as its agriculture minister an ignorant xenophobe who won't permit a slice of pineapple to pass his lips?



Though incredible, it's quite believable, as these are the sorts of people that make up Premier Silvio Berlusconi's ruling "People of Liberty" coalition, an unsavory assortment of nativists, unregenerate fascists, Vatican errand boys and corporate crooks, a good number of them mobbed-up.

Not surprisingly, it's the Lega Nord that's behind a trend that critics in Italy have dubbed "gastronomic racism." I suppose it was inevitable that, after demonizing immigrants themselves as a leading cause of Italy's ills, the nativists would attack their cultures. And cuisine, as Italians well know, is a central component of culture and identity.

There's a fierce, and often quite ugly, struggle going on in Italy right now over culture and identity, as a land that poor people once fled is attracting poor people from other countries. Most of these new arrivals are of non-European backgrounds, from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, as well as Eastern Europe. For quite a few Italians, mainly but not only those in the north, the immigrants represent a threat, an alien invasion. They're coming into an old, tradition-bound country where, until quite recently, Sicilians and other southern Italians represented the Third World Other.

(And maybe they still do. Massimo Di Grazia, a government official in Lucca, when asked if any "ethnic" cuisines would be allowed within his city's walls, said that French food was no problem. But he was uncertain about cucina siciliana, because the island's food incorporated Arab influences.)

One response to the arrival of so many immigrants in Italy has been to tighten the borders of culture, to define what is Italian and what is not, with "Italian" signifying all that is good and pleasant, and all else consigned to the category of "foreign," that is, strange, alien, bad. "We" eat "the dishes of my



native [insert region]; “they” eat suspect things like kebabs, sushi, and dim sum.

There is, of course, an economic component to this “gastronomic racism.” Agriculture Minister Zaia accuses kebab shops of using imported meat. But Mehmet Karatut, the owner of one of Lucca’s grand total of four such shops, told the Times that he only buys Italian meat. Davide Boni, a Lega Nord politician in Milan, complained that people like Karatut are willing to work long hours, which according to him constitutes unfair competition.

Besides being reactionary and bigoted, this outbreak of culinary protectionism -- or gastronomic racism -- is absurd, since “Italian food” is hardly a homogeneous thing. The food of mainland Italy and the islands is the variegated product of previous waves of conquest and migration, a cuisine (or rather, many cuisines) that historically has incorporated ingredients of non-Italian provenance. The tomato, for example, which came from the New World and was initially scorned by Europeans. Agriculture Minister Zaia wouldn’t be able to enjoy risotto, one of his region’s “native dishes,” if Saracens had not introduced rice cultivation to Sicily.

As chef Vittorio Castellani told the Times of London, “There is no dish on Earth that does not come from mixing techniques, products and tastes from cultures that have met and mingled over time.”

Can you imagine what Luca Zaia would say about New York City, and especially about Queens, the multicultural borough where I live? He’d see restaurants, cafes, diners, and street vendors serving the foods of the world – pizzas and pupusas, curries and arepas, tacos and pad thai, Fujian soup and Turkish lahmajun. “But where is your American food?” I can imagine him asking. And my reply would be, “This is America, this is our food.”



So Minister Zaia, live a little. Try some kebabs. They can be great. Kind of like spiedini, which I'm sure you've heard of, even if they don't come from the Veneto. Then have a few slices of pineapple for dessert. Your world won't fall apart.

But then again, maybe it might. Which wouldn't be a bad thing at all.

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