

Michelangelo and Food for Thought

Judith Harris (June 10, 2015)



After the Japanese, Italians live longer than citizens anywhere in the world, according to a UN report released last month. A crucial reason is the Italian diet, with its roots in the past, which includes farmland owned by Michelangelo. Statistics show, moreover, that Italian food and wine exports earned the nation over \$30 billion in 2014, or almost one-third more than just five years before.

NAPLES – After the Japanese, Italians live longer than citizens of any nation in the world, according to a United Nations report released last month. It gave two reasons: the national health system and the quality of Italian food – diet, produce, tradition. Hardly surprising, then, that the theme of the ongoing world's fair in Milan, Expo, is "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life."

Expo's menu of ideas stretches into the past as well as the future. Just this week a group of Italian geologists with a passion for their country's history are donning aprons to present the foods eaten by Michelangelo and others during the Renaissance. At their pavilion at Fuori dall'Expo on Via Puntaccio 8, in the Brera district, they will lecture to visitors on links between food and the Italian countryside in history, and also offer a taste of foods from history, from spelt to chicken.



"Leonardo da Vinci had a vineyard in Milan, and Michelangelo had farmland at Casteldurante, where cheeses were produced for him," Prof. Rodolfo Coccioni said in a telephone interview. A geologist with the University of Urbino's Department of Earth Sciences, Cultural Heritage and Landscape Analysis, Coccioni managed to retrace the pastureland on three poderi (farms) and the house near Casteldurante which Michelangelo had rented near today's Urbania. There sheep and cow milk was blended to create the soft, delicate "Casciotta di Urbino."

"Michelangelo passionately liked this fresh and sweet-tasting cheese, today called caciotta. The animals were nourished on a particularly tender grass that grows after the first mowing of a field." Such was his fondness for the caciotto from Urbino that, as Coccioni points out, Michelangelo penned this rhyme: "L'anima mia dal corpo ha tal vantaggio, che se stasat' allentasse l'odore, seco non la terre' 'lpan e 'l formaggio.'" (The sense is that "My soul has such advantage over the body, that the very odor is sweetened by the earth, with bread and cheese.")

Michelangelo was hard at work on both the Capitoline Hill in Rome and the cupola of St. Peter's Basilica when he rented the pastureland and house from his butler and collaborator, Francesco Amatori. According to a notarial document dated Feb. 12, 1554, found by Coccioni, Michelangelo promised to pay Amatori twenty-five lire worth of the cheese to ensure that "the beasts" were kept in good condition; their wool was to be used to stuff mattresses. The pasture lands located are known today as Campi Resi, C. (for Cornelia) Colonnelli and La Ricciola, and have particular "geological and geomorphological characteristics, steep, and prevalently sandy and hence light and dry. At one point Cornelia Colonnelli sent to Michelangelo in Rome six "casciotte" plus a 13-pound prosciutto.

Is it therefore any surprise that food still matters in Italy, and that its cheeses and prosciuttos are sought worldwide? The extraordinary success story of Italian foods is food for thought. According to a new report by the Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali foundation (Censis), Italian food and wine exports earned the nation over \$30 billion in 2014, or almost one-third (30.1% over 2009) more than just five years before. Parmigiano is a major export product, but so are such lesser known Italian products as bread from Altamura, whose sometimes giant loaves made from durum wheat flour are slow-baked in wood-burning ovens for as many as 24 hours, and maintain their freshness for a week. (I know: I buy Altamura bread whenever I can find it.)

Germany imports more Italian foods and wines than any other country (around \$5.2 billion, up 17.3% over 2009). Gourmet France is second at \$3.7 billion, up 20.5% in five years. Far outweighing the advantage of the lowered value of the euro versus the dollar, the U.S. is the third largest importer of Italian foods, earning Italy \$3.4 billion a year, an increase of almost 38% over the previous five years. The European Union officially recognizes 876 alimentary products, including 273 foods and 603 wines.

As for the Italians themselves, Censis reports that they actually eat healthier foods than even a few years ago, and that the number of strict vegetarians (presently 5 million) is on the rise, as are its 46,000 biological farms, an area where Italy is the European leader.

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