

From Necessity to Virtue: The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

Anthony F. Buccini

Introduction.¹

In the early to mid twentieth century and to some degree beyond, among southern Italians both in Italy and in emigrant communities outside of Italy, there was a widespread and strong feeling of respect for and even reverence toward bread, an attitude which was intimately connected to the belief that it was in a real sense a sin to waste bread. Insofar as most southern Italians in that period were themselves either poor or of relatively limited means or at the least were in one way or another not far removed from such circumstances, it is not surprising that they generally shared a deep appreciation of frugality in the kitchen and an overarching abhorrence for the wasting of food of any kind. And yet, beside or beyond such general culinary ethics stood the particular attitude toward bread, the seriousness of which was manifested in some of the customs surrounding its treatment. For example, a whole or partial loaf had to be set down properly, oriented with top and bottom as they had been in the oven, and if, for some reason, a loaf was not standing as it should, a watchful elder would soon rectify the situation; even in the large bins of a busy bakery, each loaf would have to be arranged properly. More striking still is the custom attached to the accidental dropping of a piece of bread: the bread had to be retrieved immediately, blown on to remove any dust it had picked up, and then, according to what I take to be the mainstream and older tradition, the bread was kissed and eaten; for some, the kiss was or could be replaced by the making of the sign of the cross and, when and where hygiene came to take precedence over sustenance, the bread could be thrown out, but only after the proper gestures expressing respect, regret and contrition.

Southern Italians were not unique in having a special regard for bread, for, without doubt, similar strong feelings and even reverence toward bread have been and are parts of many cultures: one might, for example, be reminded here of the special place of bread in Greek Orthodox belief and custom or of the 'bread and salt' traditions of eastern Europe. And, indeed, though I do not know exactly how widespread the custom of respectfully kissing and then eating or saving for later a fallen piece of bread was in European cultures, I know it was still recently practiced to a degree at least in some Roman Catholic countries other than Italy, such as Portugal.

Basic foodstuffs take on a symbolic value in all cultures and such is the case with the 'holy trinity' of the Mediterranean area: wine, olive oil and, above all, bread. In the products of both high and popular culture, bread stands symbolically not just for

food in general but for other forms of sustenance as well. This symbolic value of bread grew out of its fundamental position in the diet of most elements of society in the past and to the degree that bread has lost that fundamental status, its symbolic value has become more an historical artifact and less a psychological reality. But up to the recent past, growing out of the necessity of the poor to use every crumb they had, there was a strong moral feeling about 'the staff of life,' a feeling that clearly transcended mere issues of necessity and compelled people to treat bread with the particular measure of respect described above: to waste bread was not just an act of economic irresponsibility but one of moral transgression.

In this paper, we consider the development of moral feelings regarding the use of bread and examine the place of bread in the cuisine of Italy generally and southern Italy in particular and discuss the many ways in which stale bread – which on account of economic, moral and aesthetic needs was regularly on hand – came to be a basic and esteemed ingredient in traditional cookery. In concluding, we briefly consider how the central place of bread in the diet of some communities has been lost and with it many of the uses of stale bread, along with the moral sentiment toward it.

The principal place of bread

58

The great regional diversity of Italian cuisine has become axiomatic among students of food history and cookery and also increasingly among the ever-expanding body of non-professional food enthusiasts around the world. Whereas not long ago most non-Italians may only have been vaguely aware of some general and basic differences between so-called northern Italian cuisine and so-called southern Italian cuisine, nowadays one observes a rapidly growing interest in and appreciation of genuinely regional food products and dishes, as reflected in the subjects of cookbooks and television cooking shows, as well as in the offerings of grocery shops and restaurants.

This regional culinary diversity in Italy can be traced from the present day back through the twentieth and nineteenth centuries to a remarkable degree and further back to the early modern period to a more limited degree. Yet, a great many of the regional cuisines and traditional food-ways of Italy that we admire and enjoy today were perhaps admired but not widely enjoyed by the bulk of the Italian population; rather, much of what we think of today as basic and staple elements of the regional cuisines were enjoyed regularly only by the upper and middle classes and by the lower classes and especially the peasantry either not at all or only on the rare and special occasion.

This last point draws attention to a commonly ignored or underappreciated fact about Italian culinary culture, namely, that regional diversity, especially at the level of the official and historical regions (*regioni*) such as Liguria or Tuscany or Calabria, is but one parameter of variation in the nation's patterns of alimentation. For within each of the historical regions and operating across the regional borders are further important parameters of variation, such as that of socio-economic class, to which we

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

just alluded, and basic contrasts, that correspond to significant divisions in culinary habits; that is, in addition to the oppositions of class such as rich vs. poor or bourgeois vs. working, there are other significant oppositions, such as urban vs. rural, coastal vs. interior, plains vs. mountains. To be sure, these oppositions are of steadily diminishing significance at the present time but as one looks at progressively earlier periods, they correspond to increasingly noteworthy differences in diet and foodways.

The complex intersection of cultural historic, socio-economic, and climatic-geographical factors has produced over time the remarkable culinary diversity of Italy but within the complexity one can detect some basic principles around which several of the aforementioned oppositions tend to cluster. To be specific, both diversity of ingredients and overall nutritional quality of ingredients has tended, not surprisingly, to be higher in the diet of the rich than in that of the poor, but aligning themselves in a general way here are also the oppositions of urban vs. rural and coastal vs. interior. Of course, this kind of gross generalisation has the weakness of ignoring all sorts of extremely important exceptions and interesting wrinkles but it does bring to light the fundamental historical division in the culinary culture of Italy, which is not northern vs. southern but rather, in the first place, coastal vs. mountain, and allied to that, bourgeois vs. peasant. Though this claim may seem at first blush unsurprising or even trivial, it is not, at least insofar as much of what is today thought of as fundamental to Italian cuisine in a general sense and assumed to have had that status throughout time, was in fact largely only marginally present in the diets of large portions of the Italian population. Specifically, pasta, seafood and olive oil, though perhaps always more or less universally appreciated and desired, were rarely consumed by the peasants of the non-coastal areas of Italy. And if one considers the geography of the country and its socio-economic history, one realises that before the early to mid twentieth century, the diet of many Italians was in some very basic ways quite different from what it is today. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century notion of the Mediterranean Diet, especially as the term is romanticised in advertising copy and bandied about in mass media, is something of an abstraction and idealisation with an ultimately real but surprisingly qualified foundation in reality.

That an accomplished student of Italian culinary traditions can write – with justification – that [today] ‘the main Italian staple made of wheat flour is certainly pasta (Parasecoli 2004: 47) attests to the degree to which the basic eating habits of Italy have changed over the past hundred years and in particular how they have become progressively more bourgeois. Into the early twentieth century, bread was without question the main staple in the Italian diet, for it not only appeared at virtually every meal for the general population but for many Italians it typically did so as the primary element of most of those meals. Though wheat has been divided between use for bread and use for noodles, as well as pastries and such, from the Roman days of ‘bread and circuses,’ its undisputed primary use was for the making of bread.

Now, in saying that it is only a fairly recent development that one might conceive

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

of pasta as the 'main Italian staple made from wheat flour' and not bread, we are most certainly not claiming that pasta is either a more or less recent development in the history of alimentation in Italy nor that it has been an unimportant element in Italian culinary tradition; on the contrary, pasta has long been an important and genuinely beloved part of the culinary repertoire of almost all the regions of Italy but the frequency with which it appeared on tables was by all accounts far less than it is in current times. In fact, in general it tended to be in a sense a luxury item and thus was until recently a rare treat for the poorest elements of society and something that only relatively well-off people could enjoy on ordinary occasions. Rice had a similar status in most of the country. Indeed, in rural Italy, for a couple of hundred years before the twentieth century, maize and potatoes seem generally to have been a far more significant element in terms of nutrition of the broader population's diet than either pasta or rice, even if these last two foods have generally held a higher place in Italian culinary imagination and aesthetics than the two starchy imports from the Americas.

60

What determines the diet of the poorer classes has historically been more a question of availability than choice and so it was with the staple foods for the bulk of the rural population of Italy before the current period of vastly increased prosperity.² Most important is the fact that the high value of wheat assured that the tenant farmers, sharecroppers and day-labourers who worked to produce Italy's wheat got to eat precious little of it, with most of the produce being shipped to market and destined for urban and well-off consumers. Throughout the modern period up to the twentieth century, the limited access to wheat and especially to highly refined kinds of flour meant not only that pasta was a luxury food for much of the Italian population but, in fact, so too was bread made wholly from wheat. Indeed, there existed a whole range of bread types, depending on the quality and kinds of ingredients used to make them, which closely reflected the economic circumstances of the consumer and which were conceptually linked to the relative station and worth of the social groups that ate them.

At the two extremes of this range of basic bread types were *pane bianco*, 'white bread,' which was made of refined wheat flour, and *pane nero*, 'black bread,' which was made of a combination of ingredients. The former was, of course, expensive and sufficiently so for the general populace in Calabria that in that region the phrase *donna di pane bianco*, 'lady of white bread,' came to be equivalent to the term *signora* (Helstosky 2004: 14). Even if made with less refined grades of flour, bread made solely from wheat was, depending on region and sometimes also time of year, often an extreme luxury and, again, in Calabria, the habit of reserving such *pane di grano* – that is, 'bread from wheat grain' – for people in ill health and especially those on their death-bed, gave rise to a popular turn of phrase: to say that someone *è a pane de ranu* meant that he is close to death (Storchi 1985: 156; cf. Teti 1998: 80).

At the other end of the spectrum was the black bread, which varied considerably across space and time in its exact constitution but which always involved the presence

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

of substantial amounts of non-wheat flour, typically alongside some more or less limited amount of coarsely milled wheat flour. The non-wheat ingredients could include spelt, rye, buckwheat, oats, barley, millet, chick-pea, fava, chestnut, the potentially toxic chickling vetch and, after the diffusion of New World products, maize and potato. Given such a wide variety of possible ingredients, it seems safe to say that these peasant breads varied greatly in their flavour, their nutritional value, etc., and in certain times and places, the product could surely be quite good. Compared to *pane bianco*, *pane nero* was, of course, not only darker in colour but also often rather more coarse and dry in texture and heavy in consistency. When circumstances rendered the better grains unavailable and only the other kinds of ingredients were at hand in any appreciable amounts, the peasants' black breads could apparently be quite unpalatable with regard both to flavour and texture and of very limited nutritional value (Teti 1998: 79).

Whether the peasants' black bread was good or bad, it had to be eaten, for the other elements of their diet – the legumes in the winter, the greens and garden vegetables in the spring and summer, and the typically meagre quantities of fish and animal products – were pretty much all to be viewed as *companatici*, that is, as accompaniments to bread. Under such circumstances, it is by no means difficult to imagine how the reverence for bread, however old it was in origin, had come about and been maintained, especially with the psychological reinforcement it received from the sacral role of bread in the Universal Church. The means of physical survival, associated with the body of Christ and spiritual salvation through Catholicism's central sacrament, bread was literally and figuratively life and any disrespect toward it or wasting of it could not help but be viewed as sinful.

61

The secondary uses of bread

In general, there is an interplay between technological, agricultural and economic necessities and limitations surrounding food production and preparation and the nutritional and aesthetic needs and desires of consumers; out of that interplay arises the cuisine of those consumers. In the case of the rural poor of Italy in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the opposing influences or forces were clearly out of balance and these people's inability to overcome the externally imposed limitations and satisfy their nutritional needs and aesthetic desires was keenly felt. With specific regard to the place of bread in their cuisine, we have already noted above how the expense of wheat and, to various degrees at various times and places, the dearth of other, better, ingredients for bread forced people to eat loaves that were both nutritionally and aesthetically unsatisfying.

But beyond the basic issues of the quantity and quality of bread available, there was a further crucial limiting factor: their access to the ovens and fuel needed to bake their bread. The very poorest of the rural and urban poor did not have ovens of their own, nor did many of the less desperately poor. For these people, communal

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

or professional ovens had to be used and they could bake bread only occasionally, because the expense of heating an oven demanded, a large quantity had to be made to amortize the cost. The consequence of this occasional ability to bake – perhaps once a week or every other week or even in some circumstances only at much greater intervals – was that the loaves tended to be large and were necessarily consumed in varying states of desiccation and staleness.

Bearing the above in mind, namely, that the basic bread of the poor was in effect not intended to be eaten fresh out of the oven and for the most part was expected still to be the main form of sustenance when dry and stale, the reference to the uses of bread to be discussed here as secondary betrays the modern perspective of a time when freshness in bread is expected and stale bread is generally unwanted and routinely thrown in the trash.

Yet, between the world of the rural poor of eighteenth or nineteenth century Italy, in which giant loaves of homemade bread, baked once every now and again, represented the main food for entire families, and the modern consumerist world in which factory made bread is expected to be available fresh any day and time, there exists a middle place where the exigencies of grinding poverty no longer demand that one consume little more than *pane nero* at every meal and yet the feelings of reverence toward bread have remained alive and along with them a strong sense that one must not waste bread under any circumstances.

62

I grew up, among the descendants of people who had escaped the poverty of southern Italy by emigrating to the United States and it is primarily from that particular perspective that I discuss the secondary uses of bread, though I draw connections to parallels elsewhere in Italian culinary traditions and beyond.

Se non è zuppa è pan bagnato. The problem of what to do with stale bread and more specifically, how to make it less of a challenge to tooth and jaw, is surely as old as bread itself and so too is the prime solution, namely, to soak or cook the bread in water or broth. And indeed, this practice is known to have been used already in the ancient Near East where, for example, there is attested in Hittite a word – borrowed from Luwian – for bread soup.³ Indeed, the word *soup* almost certainly Germanic in origin and probably originally referring to the bathed bread rather than the bath itself, long ago became an international word with cognate or borrowed forms in all the languages of western Europe. In traditional parlance, Italian *zuppe* have remained true to the old sense of the word and involved the bringing together of the liquid element with bread, as reflected in the Italian expression analogous to the English ‘six of one, half dozen of the other,’ which is *se non è zuppa è pan bagnato*: ‘if it’s not soup, it’s soaked bread.’

While Italian *zuppe* traditionally include bread of one sort or another, either in the form of slices of relatively fresh or toasted bread, fried slices or croutons, or slices or chunks of stale bread, there are throughout Italy a number of other terms that are also used to refer to the union of liquids and bread. Probably the best known

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

of these outside of Italy is *pancotto* or *panecotto*, literally, 'cooked bread,' which in some places is thought of in terms of more or less set combinations of locally favoured ingredients but from a broader perspective implies little more than the idea of a dish comprised of a cooked liquid or broth that is used at once to flavour and soften stale bread. Whether it is possible to offer neatly contrasting definitions for *zuppa* on the one hand and *pancotto* on the other seems to me unlikely, though for what it's worth it is my feeling that there is a difference in emphasis and in relative quantities: in a *zuppa*, the bread complements the chief ingredients of the soup and in the sorts of dishes that typically sport the name *pancotto*, the central ingredient is the bread. In my experience, the liquid element of *pancotto* tends to be thin and watery in consistency; soups can be more or less watery but tend toward having a thicker consistency.

Other names for generally similar combinations of soupy preparations and bread – usually stale – are *panata* or *panada*, *pan bollito*, 'boiled bread', and *acqua cotta*, 'cooked water.' More regionally bound names of dishes of this sort from the south are *licurda*, featuring fresh favas and bread, and *licurdia*, an onion based soup with bread, both from Calabria, and *cialdedda*, which in Lucania denotes a soupy dish with tomatoes and bread.⁴

While the subject of this paper is secondary uses of bread in Italian cookery and thus features the uses of stale bread, a special kind of baked product that is perhaps not immediately thought of as bread in the usual sense very much deserves to be treated here, namely, the breads that are twice baked – *biscotti* or *pane biscottati* – in order that they can easily be preserved for long term use without becoming stale. It seems highly likely too that this product was conceived of as a further way to maximise every bit of energy generated in the heating of the oven for a large-scale 'bake.' In the cookery of Campania and more generally of southern Italy, there are two forms of biscuit used in ways analogous to the ways that stale bread is used, namely, *biscuotti*, often made by baking a second time a (partially or wholly) sliced loaf of just baked bread, or *freselle*, which are made by making small ring-shaped or doughnut shaped breads, baking them and then slicing each one horizontally to leave two rings, which are then baked a second time.

These biscuits can serve as the core ingredient in many of the preparations in which stale bread is used but also have their own traditional applications. In my own experience, a favourite use of *biscuotti* involves soaking them in a spicy tomato sauce and serving them alongside shrimp or mussels or other kinds of seafood that have been cooked and dressed in that same sauce. For *freselle*, two common and quite different preparations spring immediately to mind. The one is of a soupy nature and involves the soaking of pieces of *freselle* in what is known as 'bean water' (*acqua di fagioli*), which is to say the water left over from the cooking of dry (usually *cannellini*) beans, which can be augmented with some of the beans themselves, and dressed with olive oil, oregano or parsley, and black pepper; the simplicity of this dish belies its

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

deliciousness.⁵ Another common way to eat *freselle* is in a dish known in continental southern Italy as *caponata* which is not to be confused with the Sicilian eggplant dish that bears the same name. Southern Italian *caponata* is in essence a salad in which the most substantial component is the desiccated bread. Pieces of *freselle* are softened by being dunked in water and then are dressed with slices of tomato, olive oil, salt, garlic and oregano, optionally also celery, black olives and capers.

A couple of further observations about *biscuotti* and *freselle* deserve mention here. One point is that while versions of these items made with refined white flour exist, whole-wheat versions seem to have always been more popular and in that way perhaps reflect a peasant or poor person's tradition in which the bread was necessarily not 'white.' Another point to be mentioned is the degree to which the southern Italian biscuits resemble in form and use the traditional biscuits of Crete and mainland Greece, the *paximadia*, though in Crete and Greece these remain even closer to an older tradition in that they are most often made with mixtures of wheat and other grains, especially barley.

These dishes that feature softened dry or stale bread are clearly not especially in vogue, either in Italy or in emigrant communities of Italians, much less with the many non-Italians who appreciate the cuisines of Italy; consequently, they are not especially well known outside of their traditional settings. To this there is, however, perhaps one major exception: With the remarkable popularity of Tuscany as a tourist destination and of its cuisine as an important cultural aspect of a region that bears a definite cachet, it seems the Tuscan analogues of these bread-based dishes have gained some popularity and their own measure of cachet among cognoscenti. Among the soupy preparations, Tuscany's *ribollita* is surely known to a degree outside of its native region and outside Italy as well and in the class of bread-based salads, which includes the aforementioned southern Italian *caponata*, the Tuscan *panzanella* is also well known outside its home region and is, for example, appearing now regularly in the foodie-mass media of the United States. A further traditional Tuscan dish that uses old bread is *pappa al pomodoro*, a thick sort of a soup made with cubes of stale bread, garlic, tomatoes and basil or sage. As in the other cases, the Tuscan dish has some close analogues in other regional traditions of Italy and among southern Italians, a dish that is essentially identical to the Tuscan *pappa al pomodoro* in ingredients but slightly different in method of preparation exists: whereas in Tuscany the cubed bread is typically fried in the pan to which are then added the tomatoes, the versions I know involve the making of a simple tomato sauce in which slices of stale bread are subsequently cooked. In this style of dish is *'u pesce fujjute* ('the escaped fish') from Termoli, Molise, which features slices of stale bread standing in for the fish that fled, cooked atop a base made with olive oil, onion, tomato, sweet and hot peppers along with some water.

'Cause meatballs like you don't bounce. We proceed now from the group of dishes described above, in which bread features as the primary or one of the primary ingre-

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

dients, to one in which bread is a major element but, especially from the modern standpoint, is conceptually of secondary importance.

First among these dishes are the myriad of variants on the meatloaf or meatball theme (*polpettone, polpette*). Though these preparations are certainly enjoyed by rich and poor alike, they are widely recognised as being an especially handy way for those who have little or no access to high quality cuts of meat to get the most out of what is on hand. In many parts of Italy and especially in the rural south, muscle meat was rarely available for much of the population and when it was, it was often the very tough meat from the carcass of a working animal that was too old or ill to be useful.⁶ The toughness of the meat could be overcome through grinding and the overall quantity could be stretched through the inclusion of stale bread. But whereas one may be inclined to think of the bread element of meatballs as filler, it actually can also serve to render the texture of the meatball lighter, more tender and juicy. For the bread to serve in this way, there must be a sufficient quantity of it and it must be in the right form. In my experience, the quantity of bread used by the most accomplished and traditional cooks is quite substantial, in the range of 40 per cent of the quantity of the meat used, and the form of the bread employed should be the crumb from a stale loaf which is then soaked. As Schwartz (1998: 271) has noted, the greater availability of meat for Italian immigrants in the United States has not necessarily had a good effect on the production of meatballs, for the tendency is for many cooks to decrease the bread filler and to use dry breadcrumbs instead of the soaked stale crumb, yielding meatballs that are dense and heavy and quite unlike the traditional version.

65

Also to be mentioned here is the traditional use of the soaked crumb from a stale loaf as the principal component of stuffings for vegetables, especially in instances where the cavity to be filled is fairly large, as in the case of bell peppers.

Pangrattato and Mollica. In Italian, a distinction is made between two forms of bread that can both be referred to as 'breadcrumbs' in English. *Pangrattato*, literally 'grated bread,' is indeed made by grating thoroughly desiccated or stale bread and thus corresponds to the substance most commonly called 'breadcrumbs.' *Mollica* in Italian corresponds to the term 'crumb' – as opposed to the crust – in talking of bread but then is also used to refer to this substance as used in dishes, where it can be toasted or fried and end up resembling dry breadcrumbs.⁷ Be that as it may, it seems that in the modern kitchen, it is increasingly the case that the one very well-known use for stale bread is the production of breadcrumbs (*pangrattato*), which continue to be used in a wide variety of ways: as coating for all kinds of foods that are to be fried, as toppings for baked dishes, as fillings for vegetables and, as mentioned above, as 'filler' in preparations featuring minced or chopped meat or fish, including in the stuffings used in such pasta as ravioli and tortellini.

Further uses of breadcrumbs in Italian cooking – both *pangrattato* and *mollica* – is their use as a dressing or topping in pasta dishes. Of these, the most widely known examples outside of Italy are probably ones which have their origins in the

traditional regional cooking of Sicily: *pasta con le sarde*, pasta with sardines, and the no less delicious *pasta con i broccoli arriminati*, pasta with cauliflower, both highly seasoned dishes that include anchovy and saffron, as well as a number of other ingredients. Toasted breadcrumbs are an integral part of the dish with sardines and a very common addition to that with the cauliflower. Toasted or fried breadcrumbs are a traditional topping for pasta in the southern part of the mainland and in Lucania (the modern region of Basilicata). One of the most famous dishes combines home-made long noodles made with the aid of a thin metal spoke (*maccherone al ferro*, also known as *ferretti* or, in dialect, *firzuli*) with a dressing of garlic, ground red chile and breadcrumbs, all of which is fried in olive oil or lard (Palazzo, Chapter 5). Analogues to this supremely simple dish are known in many other parts of Italy, from Sicily all the way to Tuscany (Bugialli 1988: 54).

Reasons for using breadcrumbs as toppings on pasta dishes surely include both their positive contributions in taste and texture and also their availability to people unable to afford much cheese, but it should also be noted that in using breadcrumbs and not using cheese, many of these dishes get a boost in taste and texture while remaining completely free of animal products and thus are appropriate for consumption on Catholic fast days according to the old, conservative rules.

Noodles and Dumplings. One last category deserves at least brief mention in this review, though for the most part the dishes that belong here are from outside the southern Italian regions that have been our central focus. The use of bread and breadcrumbs to form noodles and dumplings seems to be a practice that is far more a part of northern Italian traditions and, moreover, can be seen as one of a number of culinary features that are shared between the northern regions of Italy and southern Germany and Austria and further on in neighbouring Slavic lands. Given that, it's not surprising that some of the most famous examples of this use of bread from Italy come from the German-speaking region of Trentino, namely *canederli* (German *Knödel*) and the local bread-based dumpling that goes under the name *strangolapreti* ('priest-strangler'), a name that is used for various kinds of noodles or dumplings elsewhere in Italy.

At some distance from the German-speaking areas there are bread-based noodles and dumplings from various places in northern and north-central Italy and it appears likely that this tradition was once more widespread than it is today. A dumpling made with bread that cannot be overlooked here are the *pisarei* of Monferrato in Piemonte, which are made with flour, breadcrumbs and water and are dressed with beans and a sauce featuring tomatoes, aromatic vegetables and pancetta. According to Bugialli (1988: 190), virtually the same dish is traditionally made in the relatively far-off Piacenza, in Emilia-Romagna. More widespread in this last region, as well as in neighbouring Tuscany and Le Marche, are the bread-based noodles known generally as *passatelli*. These noodles always include as their basis breadcrumbs, eggs and parmesan cheese and are cooked in and eaten with broth (Bugialli 1988: 321–3).

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

That analogous dishes were once made in the south of Italy seems quite possible but certainly there are no widespread or well-known counterparts to the *passatelli* of the north. I know, however, of one dish that is from a practical standpoint a bread based form of pasta, namely, the dumplings known as *scescille* from Molise. Much like *passatelli*, these are made from breadcrumbs, eggs and grated cheese but, rather than being cooked in broth, they are cooked in a sauce of olive oil, tomato and onion. Conceptually, these dumplings seem to stand halfway between the classic dumplings of Italian cookery, *gnocchi*, and meatless meatballs, which are or at least once were a widely known treat of the *cucina povera* of southern Italy.

Death of a tradition

I once wrote in reference to *panecotto* and more generally to the use of stale bread that 'what for many would seem like something barely worthy of eating, would be turned into a treat that you would find yourself longing for.' Sophia Loren (1998: 24) wrote in the context of recalling the appearance of dishes featuring stale bread on the family table that 'in absolute childhood innocence, I'd wish those hard times would come upon us more often.' Perhaps there is a bit of bourgeois sentimentality behind such statements, romanticizing of things that seem much better in memory and at a certain distance. To be sure, the tendency has been for Italians both in Italy and elsewhere to reduce the centrality of bread in their diet, with pasta taking an ever larger role. And among Italians outside of Italy, assimilation to non-Italian culinary culture has resulted in many cases to an almost complete loss of any special reverence or feeling toward bread and with that an equally large-scale reduction in the secondary use of bread in their cookery.

The loss of the sense of reverence for bread and of the concomitant sense of a need to use every bit of it one has is the loss of a fundamental cultural principle that signals a change in the entire cuisine itself, even if, at the surface, many or most dishes continue to be made in the same ways as always. To make an analogy to language, individual dishes are like individual words but an ethical belief such as that concerning bread forms part of the grammar of a cuisine, and a fundamental change of the grammar is significant not only in the short term but increasingly so in the long term.

Perhaps those who are inclined to sing the virtues of the uses of stale bread are guilty of foolish sentimentality but for some of us, the moral compulsion to save and use every scrap of bread is too strong to give up and, in fact, the dishes made with that old bread too delicious to abandon.

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

References.

- Buccini, Anthony F., 'Western Mediterranean Vegetable Stews and the Integration of Culinary Exotica' in *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2006), pp. 132–45.
- , 'On *Spaghetti alla Carbonara* and Related Dishes of Central and Southern Italy' in *Eggs in Cookery: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2006*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2007) 36–47.
- Bugialli, Giuliano, *Bugialli on Pasta* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).
- Capatti, Alberto, and Massimo Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*, trans. Aine O'Healy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- Helstosky, Carol, *Garlic and Oil* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).
- Lambertini, Egano, Enrico Volpe and Antonio Guizzaro, *Miseria e nobiltà nella storia della cucina napoletana* (Napoli: Tempo Lungo, 1999).
- Loren, Sophia, *Recipes & Memories* (New York: GT Publishing, 1998).
- Melchert, H. Craig, 'Prehistory' in *The Luwians*, ed. H. Craig Melchert (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 8–26.
- Palazzo, Isabella, *Il pane quotidiano: l'alimentazione lucana dall'Unità ad oggi* (Calice Editore; online: http://www.starttel.it/palazzo/1_copertina.html).
- Parasecoli, Fabio, *Food culture in Italy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).
- Schwartz, Arthur, *Naples at Table* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).
- Simeti, Mary Taylor, *Pomp and Sustenance: Twenty-five Centuries of Sicilian Food* (New York: Henry Holt, 1991).
- Storchi, Mario R., 'L'alimentazione nel Regno di Napoli attraverso i dati della statistica murattiana' in *Studi sul Regno di Napoli nel Decennio francese (1806–1815)*, ed. Aurelio Lepre (Napoli: Liguori, 1985), pp. 145–61.
- Taddei, Francesca, 'Il cibo nell'Italia mezzadrile fra Ottocento e Novecento' in *Storia d'Italia, Annali 13, L'alimentazione*, ed. Alberto Capatti, Alberto De Bernardi and Angelo Varni (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1998), pp. 23–61.
- Teti, Vito, 'Le culture alimentari nel Mezzogiorno continentale in età contemporanea' in *Storia d'Italia, Annali 13, L'alimentazione*, ed. Alberto Capatti, Alberto De Bernardi and Angelo Varni (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1998), pp. 65–165.

Notes

1. This paper is dedicated to my friends, the Masi brothers, Frank, Joe and Sam, at the Italian Superior Bakery, Chicago. It is part of an on-going series of studies on the culinary ethno-history of the Mediterranean area and has been preceded by Buccini (2005) and Buccini (2006). As always, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Amy Dahlstrom for the various ways in which she helped me with this paper. I also thank Frank Masi, for all that he has taught me not only about the traditions of his family and neighbourhood, but also about the making of various traditional Italian breads: *mille grazie al mio maestro*.
2. For a discussion of the diet and food-ways of the rural population in north-central Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Taddei 1998, and regarding bread, especially p. 30ff. Treatment of the diet of the rural population in the south of Italy can be found in Teti 1998, with a discussion of bread on pp. 76ff. Broader overviews of social history and food in Italy can be found in the relevant chapters of Capatti & Montanari 2003, Helstosky 2004 and Parasecoli 2004.
3. Melchert (2003: 17–8): 'The inflection of NINDA *harzazun* -*harzazut* – 'bread-soup, ribollita' shows that it is also a Luwian loanword [into Hittite].'
4. In Puglia, however, the name *cialdedda* or *cialedda* often refers to a drier dish, more like the

The Secondary Uses of Bread in Italian Cookery

Neapolitan *caponata* discussed below, with the stale bread being just moistened with water before being dressed with oil, tomatoes, etc.

5. According to Lambertini et al. (1999: 159), between the world wars, it was often joked about that many Neapolitan working class families would subsist all during the week on nothing but soupy beans and bread and then splurge on Sundays with a grand dinner of maccheroni and meat.
6. See, for example, Storch 1985 on the availability of meat in various parts of the south in the early nineteenth century and the reliance on sick or dead work animals as the main source of meat in the poorest regions.
7. Cf. Bugialli's (1988: 53) discussion of the distinction between *mollica* and *pangrattato*; a slightly different formulation is offered by Simeti 1991: 12.