Rites of Passage in Italy

Every day in Italy people are celebrating. Somewhere townspeople are parading down a winding medieval street to the piazza at the heart of the city while church bells are ringing. Somewhere bakers are frying ribbons of bread dough. Somewhere else men are measuring out vast stores of polenta. On the hillsides bonfires are ablaze as citizens drink hot spiced wine in the cold night air.

It is a known fact that Italians are highly sociable. Wherever they gather, whatever festivity is going on, you can almost always count on the fact that they are eating special dishes associated with the day.

But what happens at less-public celebrations, in those pivotal domestic moments after the ceremonial crossing of a threshold? Are there specific rituals of passage for birth, marriage, and death? Have special foods traditionally been served for those events, or are the familiar traditions being lost? Is chocolate now creeping into everything? Do brides prefer the chic of an all-Brazilian menu or street food served from carts to many courses of traditional dishes?

Do the articles and illustrations in American magazines—nonnas in the kitchen, organic farmers in the fields, Slow Food initiatives at work in society—reflect the realities of contemporary life in Italy?

What is really cooking in Italy today?

This article is the result of my observations, which are in no way systematic or complete. They are, in fact, completely idiosyncratic, based on what I’ve noted over the years and amplified by conversations with friends and others I’ve met in a variety of situations.

To start at the beginning…

Birth

Where births are concerned, medicine and superstition still happily, or not so happily, coexist. Home births are a thing of the past. All mothers-to-be now go to a hospital or clinic where midwives are more likely than a doctor to call the shots. But before the blessed event, some country people still insist that if a pregnant woman’s craving is satisfied, it will take away a labor pain (toglia una voglia, levi una doglia). If the yearning persists, unsatisfied, they believe the child might be born with a birthmark. This is why it is not uncommon for an obviously pregnant woman at the greengrocer to find people filling her hands with fruits and vegetables, just in case they are tastes she might crave.

Neighbors and friends have traditionally brought homemade chicken broth to new mothers. The connection of poultry to feeding a new mother can be traced to the Renaissance, when we know from the meticulous accounts of Ser Girolamo, a Florentine notary, that he went to buy a fat pigeon and three fresh eggs for his wife while she was in labor. Much more recently a friend in Assisi received a nutritious chicken soup made with una vecchia gallina, an old hen that had cooked slowly over the fire all day (as opposed to a young chicken that would give up its mild flavor in no time), made with odori (carrots, celery, onion, and parsley) and chicken parts such as beaks and heads that couldn’t be used in making chicken cacciatore.

In southern Italy neighbor women traditionally gave the new mother pigeon soup, brodo di piccione, and, as a gift, they always brought a milk-fed pigeon—so young it hadn’t yet begun to sprout feathers—with which to make more of the delicate soup. The broth, nutritious and easily digested, was believed to have helped bring in the new mother’s milk.

What hasn’t changed is the tradition of giving confetti, sugar- or spice-coated seeds or nuts, on the occasion of a new baby’s arrival. As long ago as the Renaissance,
friends and relatives who came to see the new baby would have received almonds covered with a thin layer of sugar icing. Today, when a big blue or pink ribbon on the front door announces the arrival of a boy or a girl, it is still traditional for parents to welcome visitors with confetti that is colored blue for boys, pink for girls. These days, however, the interior of the confetti may very well have a fine layer of chocolate between the nut and the sugar glaze, or it could be all chocolate or perhaps hold a hazelnut or even a dried cherry.

As children are now routinely born in hospitals and special dishes for new mothers are no longer required, beliefs about special rites for new babies are disappearing. Until recently no one would have given a baby shower for fear that presenting gifts before a baby is born might attract the evil eye, but the baby shower is beginning to catch on. A grandmother in a tiny town in Le Marché whispered conspiratorially to me that parents used to rub a baby from head to toe with sapa, a concentrated grape syrup as thick as molasses and dark as espresso, to give him force and strength. No one would do such a thing now.

Above: Adriana Nelli Stefani with her newborn baby, Livia, in Rome, November 1933.

Used by permission of the Buitoni/Stefaniini heirs.
Marriage

Although some things have changed—bridal gowns used to be green, invoking fertility, and veils were red to turn away the evil eye—weddings are still the biggest event in the lives of country people. They are a chance to pull out all the stops and create immense, lavish feasts for hundreds of guests. Even in this time of tight budgets and austerity, people with modest incomes spend enormous amounts of money and often choose to go into great debt rather than skimp and lose face. Tuscans even have a special expression, referring to such a skimpy wedding as bacea;\textsuperscript{2} dried cod, by which they mean that the event was extremely meager—no gifts, no celebratory meal, no confetti.

In the past, local customs associated specific dishes with the bridal banquet. In Tuscany, for instance, special cialde, flat wafers, and berlingozzi, an orange-flavored sweet bread, were served; in Abruzzo guests ate la grazia, a small pastry dipped in mosto.\textsuperscript{3} In Sardinia and Sicily crowds once threw wheat at the newly married couple in a ritual reminiscent of the ancient Roman ceremony of scattering wheat over the bride’s head. The wheat, which symbolizes fertility, has long since been replaced by showering the newlyweds with rice, each grain resembling a coin to bring them prosperity and good fortune.

In Calabria and the South weddings always took place in the winter months. The nuptial meal, served at lunchtime, featured homemade fusilli made the day before by friends and relations who wrapped the pasta dough around a knitting needle to form its shape. It was served with a sugo di capra, sauce made from the meat of a male goat. No one brought gifts to the church. Instead, friends and relatives arrived the next day with food. They cooked for the newlyweds for as long as local tradition prescribed.

Weddings are still bound by ritual. The two most important things are the bride’s dress, which the bride often chooses with her mother and future mother-in-law as much as a year before the ceremony, and abundant food, which begins with a rinfresco, a gathering of intimates before the ceremony, with Prosecco and hot and cold antipasti served as finger food.

As many as twelve to fourteen courses offer more than almost anyone can possibly eat. The meal itself depends on whether the food is rustic or elegant, offering traditional or newly chic dishes. It also depends on where it is held—in the North or the South, in the country or city, in restaurants, large hotels, private villas, or clubs. Rarely are wedding feasts held at home, and then they would always be catered. The courses are often rich and are comprised of at least three antipasti, two or three pasta dishes, and two or three second courses and dessert. Wine flows freely. Long tables covered with white linens may be full of endless platters of such local delicacies as filled pastas and meats—think of the opening scene of The Godfather. A more elegant setting inside a historic castle or villa may feature waiters offering tagliatelle or ravioli or risotto from the cavity of a huge wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano.

These days some Italian wedding feasts are distinctly non-Italian. Because ethnic cuisines are chic at the moment, the menu may be entirely Japanese or Brazilian. A few years ago you couldn’t go to a wedding in Sicily without eating a tris di mare—smoked salmon, smoked swordfish, and smoked tuna, but raw fish, pesce crudo, is now all the rage. For her daughter’s wedding a friend in the Sicilian countryside set up a buffet with small tables offering street food, a trend that started in Palermo and became popular outside the city shortly after.

In recent years some weddings have become so informal that food is likely to be served at buffet tables. I recently heard about a wedding with a huge frying station, where guests lined up to watch experts fry tiny fish and a variety of vegetables, which they were then expected to eat on the spot. There is also a trend toward evening weddings now, perhaps because more and more people are watching their weight and don’t want the temptation of a long meal.

The tradition of a wedding cake is fairly recent in Italy. The only requirement is that it be white. It can come in a single sheet or in layers or tiers; the interior and filling can be made with any flavor the couple chooses. Traditional local sweets associated with public holidays like Christmas and Easter do not appear at weddings, although there are instances of small towns with specific sweets like i dolci della sposa, “the dessert of the bride,” a bigné made with white icing and tied with a white ribbon.

A new tradition features a dessert buffet with a selection of such individual desserts as crème caramel, flan, crema Catalan, and mousses served with the wedding cake. An even newer trend at summer weddings is an ice cream cart provided by artisan gelato makers expanding on their usual repertoire, or avant-garde gelaterie creating new colors and flavors, such as figs and burnt almonds; chocolate and pepperscino; and Greek yogurt, pistachios, and honey.

Whatever the style of the wedding, no guest leaves without a bomboniere or a tulle bag filled with white confetti, three for children, and five for adults. The odd number brings good luck.

Left: Livia Stefanini on the day of her wedding to Paolo Buitoni, Rome, 1962. A portrait of her mother, Adriana Nelli Stefanini, hangs in the background.

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Death

The ritual for funerals begins with large, black-bordered posters pasted on walls all over town announcing the death of a family member. Though the posters predate the Internet by centuries, they reach a huge audience in less than a day. Soon telegrams and phone calls begin arriving at the family of the deceased. A new piece of etiquette does allow younger people to send condolences by e-mail.

In northern Italy there is no tradition of serving food, no ritual wake or special meal connected with a death. Instead, as one woman told me, cooking is part of the mourning process, a way to process grief. Intimate friends and family bring whatever they make to the family before and after the funeral.

In the south of Italy life and death are marked differently. Families and intimate friends gather at the house to set out for the funeral together. In some places friends and neighbors used to make a bollito as the base of a ritual meal called u cunsulo for the family in mourning. Maccheroni, considered the food of weddings, could not be served. Any bread or pasta eaten during the time of mourning must have been purchased, not made at home, since the family was spared from any cooking during this time.

Traditionally, mourners were forbidden to light the fire or cook for anything from three to thirty days, so others brought them everything, including forks and knives and glasses. The neighbors washed up as well, being careful not to break anything or leave even a speck of dirt—a sign of bad luck that could come to the family or bring future deaths and mourning.

Chrysanthemums, the ritual flower of death, must never be given as a gift. No one wants to invite death into the house. Instead, chrysanthemums, cut or in pots, are set as a centerpiece on the family tomb in Sicily where people lay out a banquet on November 2, I Morti, the Day of the Dead. At home, meanwhile, families set the table for relatives who are said to rise up from their graves on the night between November 1, All Souls’ Day, and November 2. They then sack all the pastry shops and toy stores in town to bring gifts to the house. When children get up the next morning they run around looking for the presents; as they come upon gifts, they shout out thank yous to their dead ancestors.

Sweets for the occasion include pupi di cena, tall, brightly colored dolls made of melted sugar poured into molds and painted. For years they were in the form of the knights Roland and Tancred, but now contemporary figures like Batman and Spiderman have entered the local pantheon and are more popular.

In Sicily and southern Italy fava beans are considered the emblematic dish of death. Ancient Greeks saw the black spot on the leaves as the stain of death and refused to eat them, while the Romans acknowledged the connection of favas and death and served them at funeral banquets. Today favas are honored on the Day of the Dead in the form of fave dei morti, dead men’s cookies, and ossi dei morti, bones of the dead, both made with ground almonds and egg whites.

Italy Today

Traditional food still appears in public and private rituals, but the Italy of today is a far different country than it was before the end of the mezzadria, the sharecropping system that essentially indentured families of agricultural workers to the landowner for whom they worked. Once they were freed to move wherever they liked and find wage-paying jobs (which happened in Tuscany only in the late 1960s, and even later elsewhere), many Italians faced an entirely new way of life, sometimes better but sometimes dislocating and more difficult.

I knew some of the members of a four-generation family who worked on a farm in Tuscany that belonged to their landlord. Their stone house had small, glassless windows and a fireplace that provided what heat they had. The family ate beans and potatoes with whatever herbs and wild greens they found nearby, made rudimentary pasta with a little oil, and lived with unrelenting scarcity. When the mezzadria was finally outlawed, the husband continued working for the landlord, but now with wages. The wife was hired to cook in the landlord’s trattoria, and for the first time she used such ingredients as aged Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, pancetta, and prosciutto. She was cooking authentic Tuscan food.

Long before Italy was awash in arugula or balsamic vinegar, many people lived like that family, or in a somewhat less modest situation, making do with what they grew or what was available locally for very little money. La cucina povera was the basis of the Italian diet. Ritual food was local food; traditions did not change for decades, even centuries.

The Italy of today has seen dramatic social changes in the last thirty years. Supermarkets are overtaking mom-and-pop shops. Convenience has become an important value to women who have paying jobs but who must still feed their families, look after the household, and carry on whatever traditions are meaningful to them.

Meanwhile, regional borders are ever more porous. Italians are curious about new chefs and cooking styles. Food comes from all parts of the country. Trucks carry the breads of Puglia to the north of Italy and return with special forms
of pasta once made only in a small group of villages. Industrial products of multinational companies are changing the tastes of long-recognized cheeses, meats, and even herbal preparations. Slow Food, an organization born in Italy, is dedicated to preserving the products that carry the flavor of the terroir of individual villages and towns, and to educating people about the importance of “making consumption and agriculture local once more.” It is working to help preserve the values of the past in a rapidly changing Italy.

Birth and death, two of the great turning points in the intimate life of a family, carry with them an immense emotional valence. Foods served to acknowledge those momentous events were and sometimes still are offered within the context of genuine and authentic tradition. Yet Italy has become a richer country. Neighbors no longer feel it necessary to cook for new mothers or grieving families. Instead of bringing food to a family with a new baby, women now bring a little outfit.

The celebration of weddings, the most public of the three rites of passage, keeps changing the most. I’ve heard about incredibly luxurious wedding dinners that are almost like competitive events. There is extravagant spending beyond the wildest dreams of most people, but the spending does not have much connection to authentic Italian food. On the other hand, such weddings are sometimes showcases for some of the best chefs in the country, a chance to taste the food of now, the trends that will sweep across a country in love with two spouses: novelty and traditional cuisine.

I often have mixed feelings about changes in Italian ritual. I realize that some of the practices and the food that accompanies them derive from times of poverty. Certainly I wouldn’t wish poverty on anyone, but I am always happier to taste the genuine food of a village, a city, a region and feel part of the continuity of the country’s social and culinary history.

It’s not only foreigners who want Italy to continue embracing family and friends with its delicious food. But to be that Italy, the Italy that many of us love and want to continue knowing, requires that “Italian food can only reinvent itself by pretending it has stayed the same,” as John Dickie writes in his excellent book Delizia! “Change only comes in the guise of continuity; novelties must be presented as nostalgic relics.” Italy’s passion for eating artisanal, traditional, handmade food is genuine, as is the ingenuity of some large-scale industrial producers who bring everything from wheels of cheese to ethically made pastas to the Italian table. The food and form of weddings, for instance, are constantly changing, while Slow Food is promoting a modern Italy with ancient values. Ads feature old men surrounded by multigenerational families in the shade of trees, presenting pictures of an earlier Italy even though, in some cases, they are actually using an emotionally charged context to promote the food of large companies. Yes, private rites of passage may change and incorporate new ingredients and dishes, but the Italians continue to value the past and its deep connection to food. What seems old may be new and what is new may seem old. Both make legitimate claims on their place in tradition.

**Notes**

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