

Book Reviews

Delizia!: The Epic History of the Italians and Their Food.

By John Dickie.

New York: Free Press, 2008.

368 pages.

Pomodoro!: A History of the Tomato in Italy.

By David Gentilcore.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

254 pages.

How Italian Food Conquered the World.

By John F. Mariani.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

270 pages.

In the past three decades Italian food, already a very popular culinary tradition, has gained unprecedented status as well as global diffusion. Italian food has been the exclusive domain of family-style eateries, ice cream parlors, and pizza shops, and now, in addition, high-end Italian restaurants are listed among the most prestigious establishments in world-class cities, receiving equally heartfelt accolades from both critics and patrons. As Italian gastronomy acquires new relevance, the publishing industry has been producing a growing number of titles dedicated to the cultural, social, and political aspects of the long and complex history of the cuisines of Italy, a history that is still largely unknown to most Italians, despite their assertions to the contrary. How did Italian food become what it is today? Why does it speak to so many people all over the world? Where did the infinite variety of local and regional cuisines originate? How did the dazzling—and, frankly, quite confusing—assortment of wines, cheeses, breads, vegetables, and salamis come to be? These are some of the questions that three recent books have addressed, adopting different approaches and focusing on various aspects of the Italian culinary past.

The most encompassing in terms of intention and historical periods covered is John Dickie's *Delizia!: The Epic History of Italians and Their Food*. Dickie, a lecturer in Italian Studies at University College London and the author of the robust *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia* (2004), does not aim at offering a systematic and comprehensive chronicle. Rather, he chooses events and periods that, in his opinion, are the most interesting and significant to understand the long evolution of Italian dishes, ingredients, and customs. The book begins with a discussion of events that took place in the twelfth century, hinting at the previous waves of populations that had already deeply shaped the Italian landscape and its food production for a couple of millennia. Each chapter highlights a period, a specific city, and events that have somehow left a mark on Italian food. He fittingly argues that Italian food has been strongly influenced by the expectations, styles, and economic demands of urban consumers. Lesser-known Italian figures such as Bonvesin de la Riva, Giulio Cesare Croce, and Masaniello, along with key authors in the history of Italian gastronomy, such as Bartolomeo Sacchi (known as

Platina), Cristoforo Messisbugo, Bartolomeo Scappi, and Pellegrino Artusi, are introduced in the narration without minimizing the impact of foreign fashion, emigration, and external cultural influences that helped shape the history of Italian food.

Dickie clearly takes pleasure in dispelling some of the myths that have proved to be particularly enduring in the Anglo-Saxon world, such as the perception of Italian food as peasant fare, a myth now revived by the pervasive tourist fantasy of the Tuscan—and increasingly Umbrian—countryside. At the same time, he appears to succumb to other myths, as illustrated by the following excerpt: “Italian food has charisma. And its charisma derives from an almost poetic relationship to place and identity. The main reason why Italians eat so well is simply that eating enriches their sense of where they come from and who they are” (5). His reference to the supposed innate and passionate sense of belonging that Italians feel toward specific places and communities risks downplaying the equally crucial (although mundane) economic and political dynamics—two important components that are actually often referenced in the book. While Dickie critiques the Mulino Bianco cookie commercial for embracing the rural fantasy commonly associated with Italian cuisine, he does not fully tackle the impact of industrial production and marketing on Italian foodways, ignoring fast food, frozen food, and all sorts of cheap, unhealthy, mass-produced items that many Italians consume regularly. However, Dickie’s style is extremely engaging, and the book is a great read even for people not particularly interested in food per se.

The exploration of the globalized history of Italian food, through its uninterrupted contacts and exchanges with the outside world, is also the main motif of David Gentilcore’s *Pomodoro!: A History of the Tomato in Italy*. The author takes a different approach and focuses on one single ingredient, the tomato, perceived as quintessential for Italian cuisines, although only relatively recently introduced. Monographic volumes on a single food have become a mainstay in Food Studies catalogs, and the tomato has been the main protagonist before, notably in Andy Smith’s *The Tomato in America: Early History, Culture, and Cookery* (2001). However, Gentilcore shifts the reader’s attention away from the Americas toward Europe and the slow penetration of exotic products across the Atlantic. The author uses his produce of choice as the entry point to investigate the social and cultural transformations that have molded Italian cuisine as we know it. Based on a solid knowledge of existing literature on the topic, the book examines literary and artistic representations, scientific iconography, agronomy and medical treatises, and technology manuals to illustrate how Europeans, particularly Italians, were trying to make sense of their changing reality.

Gentilcore is able to examine details and specific events without losing his focus on long-term historical developments. His familiarity with the Renaissance and the modern period does not take away from his ability to relate the more recent events and developments that turned tomato and tomato sauces into recognizable and beloved symbols of the Italian culinary identity, both in Italy and the rest of the world. The history of pasta and its uses, the technical advances in the artisanal preservation and processing of tomato paste and conserves, the success of industrial production of bottled and canned tomatoes, partly due to the growing demand from Italian immigrants overseas, as well as the expansion of the tomato agribusiness in the areas around Parma and Salerno are narrated with gusto and infectious excitement for the subject matter.

Since the expansion and growing popularity of Italian food is turning into a true global phenomenon, the overall premise of John Mariani’s *How Italian Food Conquered the World*

is timely and relevant. It can be useful and illuminating to consider all Italian cuisines, both in Italy and in other countries, as interconnected and mutually influential. Mariani points out that “there *was* no Italian food before there was an Italy” (5), highlighting the brief history of Italian food as a national cuisine connected to a specific country.

The book offers a great amount of meticulous research, the exploration of numerous restaurant menus, some interviews, and a few personal stories. However, it only partly accomplishes what its title promises. Instead, it focuses mostly on the development of Italian-American cuisine and the restaurant scene, with little attention to the food of Italian communities outside of the United States. Since Mariani is American, it is understandable that his interests lie in the territory with which he is most familiar, and, in fact, he does demonstrate a deep knowledge of the lay of the land. It would have been interesting to read how Italian food has been co-opted by and adapted to culinary traditions all over the world, as, for instance, in the case of *wafuu* pasta in Japan, with its infusion of local ingredients and techniques.

Furthermore, the global forces, invasions, and cultural influences that have shaped Italian cuisines for centuries are cursorily addressed only in the first chapter. He glosses over many important global contributors such as the impact of imported ingredients including rice and tomatoes, the waves of populations that had settled more or less temporarily in Italy, the involvement of Italian cities in Mediterranean trade, and many other factors that constitute the basis of what is grown, produced, consumed, and exported today. Although the book is geared toward the general public, Mariani’s approach might reinforce the perception of Italian food as the apparently ancestral, barely developing set of traditions with which popular culture seems to be enamored. However, Mariani vigorously reinjects history and change into the narrative with the unification of Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period that also coincides with the beginning of mass migration to the Americas. From that point on, Mariani aptly observes how food in Italy, especially in terms of economic development, technology, and production, has been influenced by its connections with the communities overseas (an argument also underlined in Gentilcore’s book). The creation of fettuccine all’Alfredo, the adventures of Harry’s Bar, the growing availability of fresh ingredients thanks to FedEx and other delivery services, and the development of the idea of the healthy Mediterranean diet are good (and thoroughly enjoyable) examples of these exchanges. However, at times the analysis of the relationship between the Italian cuisines on both sides of the ocean—which Mariani correctly considers fundamental to understanding current developments—turns episodic and anecdotal, which risks hiding long-term structural and cultural transformations.

Mariani’s book offers many interesting and useful observations to understand the development of Italian cuisine in the United States. Nonetheless, some points are lost in the landslide of details about restaurants, chefs, restaurateurs, and celebrities whose names are provided with implacable precision. It is almost an overload of information that at times reads like a society page, a who’s who of the Italian-American food world. However, the book has the merit to start a conversation that deserves to be pursued and expanded about the global reach of Italian food.

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