

MAFIA AND PIZZA: HISTORY IS SERVED. CONVERSATIONS WITH JOHN DICKIE

di Micol Ferrara

The historian and journalist John Dickie is a professor of Italian studies at the University College of London. He has long written of different aspects of Italian History: his research includes the representation of South Italy, the cultural history of liberal Italy, organized crime and Italian cuisine. In the interview for the monographic number of the «Giornale di Storia», *Dall'orto alla tavola. Per una storia dell'evoluzione dei prodotti e dei gusti alimentari tra XVI e XXI secolo*, Dickie reflects on the value of food as culture and he explains the transposition on television of his book *Con Gusto. Storia degli italiani a tavola* (Laterza 2012) in the program *De Gustibus*, not the usual talent show nor the more classic recipe program that is already a hit on TV, more than just a collection of the History of gastronomy, century after century, it concerns of a charming scene of costume on gastronomic curiosity. and on how even food has made history. A different way to narrate food, culture, and tradition that brings on good wishes to be able to see "more History on television".

Professor Dickie, as a reminder to our readers, you are an Academic History teacher as well as a television host. What was your study course and above all how much did specializing in Italy influence your "passion for food"?

My parents had me when they were quite old, and so they had a very traditional British way of eating. Just to give you an idea: I did not try either wine vinegar or olive oil until I was 18 years old! So my academic interest in Italy—I started studying the language at 18—was also an education in eating. I spent my first year in Italy in Turin in 1984-5. I'll leave you to imagine the impression that a first taste of bagna cauda made on someone with my background!

Mafia and Pizza are probably the two most well-known Italian words. After your interesting research on organized crime, what inspired you to write: Con gusto. Storia degli italiani a tavola? Which sources did you use and out of the many, how did you select the stories that you gave voice to?

For all the vast differences between the subjects of mafia and food, they had in common that they both shape popular perceptions of Italy around the world. Yet beyond the stereotypes, of course, they both say something very profound about Italian society, and you have to understand Italy really well to understand both the mafia and the richness of Italian food. So the challenge as a historian and a writer was the same: to start writing an explanatory historical narrative with what people knew about an important Italian phenomenon—or at least with what they *thought* they knew—before getting much more nuanced and complex. I really struggled to find the right way to write *Con gusto*, because the subject of Italian food is so vast and diffuse. Then I thought

of using an insight first articulated by the Genoese historian Giovanni Reborà: that Italian food culture is essentially urban. So it made sense to avoid confusing readers with too much information by giving each chapter a unity of time, place, and action by setting it in an individual city at a specific time.

In 2015 the producer Sherin Salvetti offered for you to become a protagonist of the show De Gustibus. One of the few TV programmes, if not the only one, that tries to unite to genres: history and food, to describe the History of Italy through food. How did you find this experience?

Fascinating, exhausting and brilliant fun. I was lucky enough to work with a great director and production team. Like any TV series, *De Gustibus* was a team effort. I had done some TV presenting before *De Gustibus*, but nothing quite so big—or that required me to be a “personality” as much as a journalist. So it was a huge learning experience, and I would never have made it without great help and instruction.

How can you transform a literary text, such as your book, in a quick and accessible product to the vast public? What are the costs/benefits of distribution?

I think you have to trust your production team: they know that a form that works for a work of popular history like *Con gusto* might not work for a TV series. For example, setting each episode in a single city like the book would have been too static and boring. So the structure had to change. Then of course there are practical considerations like the budget. In one of the chapters of the book I follow a ship-load of Italian migrants on their way to South America in the late nineteenth century. We simply couldn’t afford to do anything like that! Although many of the stories and themes of the book make it into the TV series, we had to do new research to find new subjects that were more *visual* than literary, and so were better suited to TV. For example, we heard that there was going to be reconstruction of one of Napoleon’s battles in Italy in Piedmont while we were filming, and thought it would be a great way to say some of the things we wanted to say.

An interesting aspect that I would like to examine with you is precisely the connection between history and food, eating habits and divulgation/diffusion by the media, so what’s behind such a captivating and successful program like De Gustibus. And what do you, on the other hand, think of programs such as Masterchef?

I’m afraid I don’t watch any cookery programmes. I find them boring.

Moreover, thinking about classic Cinema. Which movie do you think has been able to best represent culinary art or the art of eating? Or simply the one you are most “attached” to?

It’s not an original choice, but I don’t think you can get past two films from 1954: *Miseria e nobiltà* and *Un americano a Roma* with their wonderful pasta scenes. That’s Italy on the verge of its rapid transformation from hunger to plenty.

Knowledge and Taste have a common origin. Once they were cousins, then with the passing of time they got lost and today they seem as though they don’t know each other anymore. Do

you believe that between Fast-food, Slow food and Eataly, people are more conscious of how they are nourished? Do we eat more with our head or with our stomach?

I think people have always eaten with their head as well as their stomach. Or at least they have as soon as they had the economic resources needed to concentrate on more than just filling their bellies. Think for example about the close association between food and medicine. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance the Galenic theory of the humours told the wealthy a great deal about how they should eat. That's partly what was behind the great fondness for spices in that era. Then there was also the religious obsession with lean and fat days. Now we are beginning to become much more environmentally conscious.

Milan's 2015 Expo was inspired by "nourishing the planet. The Energy of Life". This year is the year of Italian food and in Bologna FICO (Fabbrica Italiana Contadina- Italian Agricultural Factory) is being inaugurated. Why all this success? Is it a sign of aversion to the industry for a more genuine return to farms and a bucolic world? Doesn't the image seem more like a postcard rather than real life? A bit like the invention of the Mediterranean diet, don't you think?

The idea that food is rustic and natural is a very powerful myth that has lost none of its attraction over the years.

Today as eating can be considered in its own right a social act; what are the more evident changes in the consumption of food in Italy and Italian food abroad, that you have experienced?

What interests me about changes in the way we eat is the way our diets reflect social changes. The rise of the working mother. Urbanisation. Food's inclusion within the machinery of fashion and life-style. The greater mobility of the population. And so on, and so on.

The UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development (20 years still, and the earth will be populated by almost 10 billion people). It's not only a matter of taste. Food is the knot around which the main political and social games will be played in the next 20 years. How do you hypothesize the eating table of the future?

Now there is a very, very difficult subject. There is one change I would like to see. I think, and I hope, that meat will become unfashionable for environmental reasons. Not that people will stop eating it entirely, but it will become less common and less central to the diet of the majority than it was in the years of post-war prosperity.

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