

An ode to Italy's food, and its place in Italian culture

BY ENZA MICHELETTI, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 3, 2009



Russian-born Elena Kostoukovitch has lived in Italy for 20 years.

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“Did you eat?” It’s Nonna Caterina, my maternal Italian grandmother, on the phone. Right after “hello,” but often before “how are you,” she wants to know what I’ve put in my mouth today. In

detail, per favore.

Over the years, my nonna tells me plenty, too. How to make a well in a mound of flour and pour in the water, bit by bit, until the dough springs back, ready to be shaped into cavatelli, those perfect pillows of pasta. How to stuff pork sausage (the fennel is key). How to roast chestnuts (just right).

When I move to Vancouver on a university scholarship, her symbolic sendoff speaks across the miles: a set of pots and one Caciocavallo, a pouch-shaped cheese typical of Basilicata, her region of Italy.

The memories are mine, but they’re not unique. It’s a ritual, not habit, this need to talk about food. It’s part of the Italian psyche. (Nod here if you have Italian roots.)

That’s what Russian-born Elena Kostoukovitch grew to learn in her 20 years living in Italy. The title of her charming, 449-page ode to Italian culture sums it up neatly, almost tongue-in-cheek: *Why Italians Love to Talk About Food*.

Kostoukovitch’s book is a culinary journey across the boot-shaped Italian peninsula, from the northernmost Alps to the toe of Calabria, an exploration of the country dish by dish. Along the way, she acts as tour guide extraordinaire at the table, whetting the reader’s appetite for each morsel she describes while skillfully stirring in the history, politics and social mores of Italy. She devotes a chapter to each region of the country, with typical dishes and products listed. Think black truffle for Umbria, Parmigiano-Reggiano for Emilia Romagna, cassata for Sicily.

What gastronomic ambition, especially for a foreigner. Italy’s cuisine, one of the most beloved in the world, is not easy to summarize. Regional differences are prized, down to each hometown, each medieval village. But Kostoukovitch has impressive Italophile credentials. She made a name for herself translating into Russian the books of Italian star Umberto Eco. And he obliges with heavyweight endorsement in the foreword, describing how Kostoukovitch, with “the detached gaze of an outsider,” helps “Italians themselves” discover their country. (In fact, when the book was first published in Italy in 2006, it became a bestseller and award-winner.)

A second foreword, by cookbook author Carol Field, also works like an appetizer, setting the palate up for what’s to come. Field describes the author as “the ideal guide: an outsider who can see what native Italians can’t perceive as unusual or remarkable.” For instance, Field writes, Italians can’t “sit down for a meal if bread isn’t on the table.” True, so true.

In one of the best sections of the book, Kostoukovitch garners a chuckle as she outlines some of those unsaid food rules. Italian cookbooks do not describe these rules; they are just assumed. As in: “salt eggplants and let them sit, so they will lose their bitterness; pour mineral water in the meatball mixture to make them softer; cook risotto all’onda: the consistency is excellent, neither too liquid nor

too firm, when the risotto forms a 'wave' as the pot is moved."

Another thematic chapter explores the sagra, or sacred feast, so much a part of Italian tradition. Catholic saint days share the calendar with food feasts. In June, near Bologna, a sagra is held in honour of gnocchi (potato dumplings). In August, Sardinia celebrates the tomato. In November, in Cremona, they feast torrone (almond nougat). The list is long. Amen.

Another chapter takes a fascinating look at the culinary influence of Italy's Jews. From the Roman ghetto, for instance, came the idea to stuff zucchini flowers – the discards from the market – with cheese or breadcrumbs and fry them in batter. The recipe is now a "a source of pride for Italian cooking," the author notes. Exiled Jews from Sicily are also credited with making eggplants and artichokes gain a footing in Rome, thus mainland Italy.

The author is unflinching as she quotes the anti-Semitic barbs in cookbooks and other historic food texts, some dating back as far as the 1500s. It's an eye-opener, but then so is Kostioukovitch's history lesson on fascism. What better way to sum up the absurdity of Mussolini's reign than to note, as the author does, the regime's "suicidal plan" to wean Italians from pasta.

Kostioukovitch devotes quite some space to the "Slow Food" movement, which originated in Italy in 1989 as a backlash to fast food's spread. She also describes the merits of the Mediterranean diet and the roots of polenta, risotto and the two great divides of pasta: fresca (fresh) vs. secca (dry). She unveils theories about why dry pasta took hold in the south, while the north stuck with fresh, egg-based dough. (Yes, it's a bit of the rich man, poor man story.) And she gets a kick listing pasta shapes and the sauces they should be paired with, though even her exhaustive research can't get them all.

Encyclopedic, this book is. It awakens that longing to head to the kitchen, mince some garlic, pour the olive oil in a pan and start cooking. And that leads to my only criticism – or my only wish. It would have been nice to see a recipe here and there. Then again, maybe that's just the Italian in me talking.

Why Italians Love to Talk About Food: A Journey Through Italy's Great Regional Cuisines, from the Alps to Sicily, By Elena Kostioukovitch, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 449 pages, \$44