

Book Review



By **Christine Salins**

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Why Italians Love To Talk About Food

By Elena Kostioukovitch. Published by Picador (\$34.99, softcover, 448 pages)

When Russian-born Elena Kostioukovitch moved to Italy to live 20 years ago, there were times when she would find herself at a dinner party and suddenly unable to follow the conversation. This wasn't because of her language skills – which are exceptionally high, given that she has translated a number of works from Italian into Russian and won awards for doing so.

Rather, it was because of the way the conversation inevitably turned towards food, as people would discuss passionately the ways in which mushrooms could be cooked, for example, or describe a fantastic extra virgin olive oil. What she discovered was that Italians talk about food a great deal, much more so than people in other parts of the world.

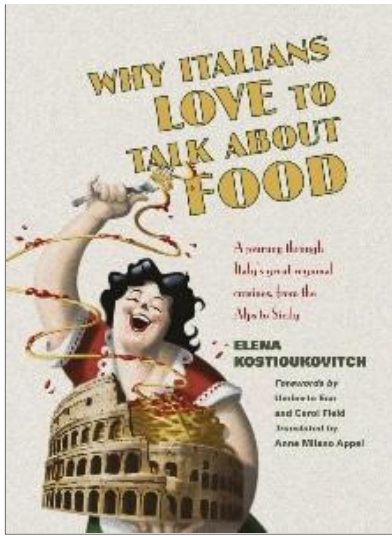
So she set about uncovering the secrets of Italian life by looking at food and the role it plays in the national conscious and unconscious. What does chicory have to do with class struggle? Why did the Fascist regime try to abolish pastasciutta? And if other people's bread tasted salty to Dante Alighieri, was it because of the tears he shed over it, or for some less romantic reason?

The fruits of her meticulous research are beautifully distilled into this fascinating book that takes the reader on a journey around Italy, from north to south and past to present, tempting us every step of the way with a dazzling array of regional specialities.

From steak Florentine in Milan to the five distinct artichoke forms sold in Veneto to the fact that many Ligurian specialities don't require plates, it's an extraordinarily comprehensive account of Italian food and cooking, peppered with snippets of history and

sociology.

It's a big book and certainly no bedtime reading, for while Kostioukovitch writes



eloquently and enticingly, there's a huge amount of information to take in and her style is quite formal and scholarly, no doubt emphasised by its translation from Italian into English. Yet it's a book that food lovers, history buffs and armchair travellers can cherish, savouring every last morsel as they follow Kostioukovitch on her gastronomic journey.

When the dinner-party conversation turns to food today, Kostioukovitch can surely hold her own.

To find out more about Christine Salins [click here](#).