
Paradise

of
Exiles



Adam

Federman

‘If one travels one eats,’
wrote D H Lawrence in *Sea and Sardinia*.

But not always well, and not always happily. Today the thought of eating poorly in Italy is sacrilege. One would be better off denouncing the Pope than returning from a week in Tuscany to report that the food was only so-so. From Mario Batali and Frances Mayes to Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater, the good things that Italy has to offer are there for the taking. Italy is the land of milk and honey, or wine and olive oil. If the food isn't growing in your backyard or falling from branches sagging with the weight of overripe fruit, it is spilling out of storefronts or being dragged from the sea. If it isn't being eaten, it is being talked about. And if it isn't always superb, it is never bad.

Frances Mayes, in *Bella Tuscany*, the follow up to her best seller *Under the Tuscan Sun*, writes that ‘The food, everywhere we've eaten, is great, the best.’ Oliver, a culinary empire unto himself, with restaurants in Amsterdam, Australia and the UK, something approaching 20 published cookbooks and until recently, a supermarket endorsement, says in *Jamie's Italy*, that he ‘should have been bloody Italian, with no disrespect to the folks in Southend-on-Sea.’ Mario Batali, in his television

show *Mario Eats Italy*, literally ate his way across the country, Rabelaisian fashion, consuming vast quantities of wine and sampling everything from hog jowls to venison goulash. And Nigel Slater, food writer for the *Observer*, writes that ‘Italy has become our second gastronomic home.’

But it wasn't always so. Midway through their nine-day tour of Sardinia in 1921, Lawrence and his wife Frieda stopped at an inn in the town of Sorgono. Having learned that the Albergo d'Italia, recommended in Baedeker, is no longer there, the weary travellers are given lodging at the only hotel in town, a pink-washed building with ‘Ristorante Risveglio’ printed on its façade. The room is far from adequate: the bed is thin and flat, the chamber pot broken and filthy, the floor so dirty Lawrence would rather not touch it with his own boots; there is ‘an expanse of wall charted with the bloody deaths of mosquitoes,’ stains on the bed sheets, and various odours drifting in from the stable yard outside, which happens to be the view from the window.

Lawrence and Frieda walk around for a while and finally return, enraged, disappointed, and hungry. They are led by candlelight through the

bar to what is called the dining room. It is pitch dark except for an oak root fire whose flames, Lawrence writes, 'are like fresh flowers.'

Eventually, a bearded elderly man with black eyes and an immovable face enters the dungeon-like room. He is carrying a long spear, an iron rod, with an unusual, flattened object threaded onto it. It is a whole kid, with its 'head curled in against a shoulder, the stubby cut ears, the eyes, the teeth, the few hairs of the nostrils.' The man attaches the pole to one side of the fireplace, holding the other end in his hand. But it keeps slipping and falling into the ashes. He finally arranges a pile of stones to support the spit and begins to slowly roast the meat. People come and go. A young chambermaid in headdress enters, followed by a fat young soldier.

The roaster leaves and returns with another, thinner pole, this one skewering a chunk of raw pig fat. He holds the fat into the coals, and when it catches fire holds it over the kid. 'All over the roast fell the flaming drops,' writes Lawrence, 'till the meat was all shiny and brownly. He put it to the fire again, holding the diminishing fat, still burning bluish, over it all the time in the upper air.'

The wait is painful. A bus arrives from Oristano. Another man dressed in brown

velvet enters with his own dinner, a few joints of kid and a handful of sausages. Meanwhile the fire is slowly dying down. It is near eight o'clock when the old man takes the kid from the fire and examines it as if it were some 'wonderful epistle from the flames.' It looked and smelled amazing, not at all burnt, its brown exterior still dripping with fat.

Lawrence and Frieda are then seated with three others, and after the inevitable bowl of minestrone, the meat is brought to the table. There are only five pieces, and the innkeepers have kept the best cuts for themselves.

'What arrived was five pieces of cold roast, one for each of us,' writes Lawrence. 'Mine was a sort of large comb of ribs with a thin web of meat: perhaps an ounce. That was all we got, after watching the whole process. There was moreover a dish of strong boiled cauliflower, which one ate, with the coarse bread, out of sheer hunger. After this a bilious orange. Simply one is not fed nowadays! In the good hotels and in the bad, one is given paltry portions of unnourishing food, and one goes unfed.'

This is not the only disappointing meal, though it is perhaps the most dispiriting. Lawrence writes of many 'infernal dinners': of thick, oily cabbage soup; a massive yellow

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omelet, like some log of jaundiced wood; cakes one would dare not buy after looking at them; calamari that are like boiled celluloid; tasteless meat, and bread as hard as a ship's biscuit.

Lawrence was not alone in his criticism of Italian food. Nor was he a trailblazer. Italy, over the past 500 years, has attracted more visitors and has been written about more than any other European country. From Goethe and Stendhal, to Dickens and William Dean Howells, Italy has served as a kind of literary rite of passage. And it was not only the writers who took notes. Richard Lassels, a Roman Catholic priest who travelled through Italy several times, in *The Voyage of Italy* (1670) credits the Italians for using forks and knives (the fork had not yet arrived in England),

but notes that they over-roast their meat and 'scrape Cheese upon all their Dishes, even of flesh, counting that it gives the meat a good relish.' He is astonished, as were most Brits who travelled to Italy, that Italians ate all kinds of small birds: wrens and magpies, jays and woodpeckers.

Craufurd Tait Ramage, a Scotsman who travelled through the south of Italy in 1828 wearing a merino frock-coat, nankeen trousers, a large-brimmed straw hat, white shoes and an umbrella, concluded that Scottish cuisine – 'even with her oatcakes and porridge' – was superior to that of Italy. He also noted that Italy was behind in the areas of table linen and earthenware. 'Tablecloths had not advanced beyond the very coarsest material,'

he writes, ‘and the plates were of a rude, ungainly appearance.’

Norman Douglas, a writer, natural historian, zoologist and man of letters, picked up where Ramage left off. He travelled extensively in the south of Italy, lived in Naples and Capri, and wrote a handful of books, including the novel *South Wind*, that became required reading for anyone travelling to Italy. Douglas expounded on just about everything.

In *Siren Land* he devotes over two pages to the excoriation of *zuppa di pesce* (fish soup), which he presumably knew well, having lived for over seven years on the Bay of Naples. He evidently didn’t like bones, and describes the *guarracino* as a marine monstrosity, the *scorfano* as looking like a toad only with less meat on it, the *aguglia* as a miserable sea-worm, and the squid as an animated ink-bag of perverse leanings. (The same might have been said of Douglas, who was famously expelled from the foreign service and later forced to flee England after alleged sexual misconduct with young boys.) Douglas concludes that ‘there is hardly a fish in the Mediterranean worth eating,’ and that the famous Neapolitan soup is nothing more than a motley assortment of sea serpents, stale bread, and decaying seashells floating in a broth of rancid garlic and oil.

In *Old Calabria* (1915), he touches on everything from deforestation, flying monks and earthquakes to dragons, saints and stones. At the time, Calabria, the toe of Italy, was not a place many northerners had been. Douglas’s refrain throughout the book is ‘Nobody travels south of Rome.’ He himself made several trips, often with his partner, the Florentine bookseller Guiseppe Orioli. (It was Orioli, incidentally, who published the first edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.) And Orioli’s business partner, Irving Davis, an antiquarian and bookseller, would play an important part in the annals of British food writing.

In 1958, Davis travelled with Patience Gray to Calabria, Basilicata, and Apulia in the steps of Douglas and Orioli. Gray would later publish *Honey From a Weed*, one of the most influential and atypical books on Mediterranean food. She also edited *A Catalan Cookery Book: A Collection of Impossible Recipes*: a book of Catalan recipes which had been collected by Irving in a small, black notebook over the course of summers spent in Vendrell. Many of these recipes are included in *Honey From a Weed*.

Douglas, on the other hand, thought most Italian recipes hardly worth writing down. He is given to hyperbole. He describes the method of preparing food in the south as ‘hopelessly

irrational’, and in *Old Calabria* he writes that what passes for breakfast ‘suffices to turn the thoughts of the sanest man towards themes of suicide and murder – when will southerners learn to eat a proper breakfast at proper hours?’ In Venosa, birthplace of Horace, he notes that ‘the traveller [...] is everlastingly half-starved [...] the food monotonous and insufficient.’ Even the coffee, the damn coffee, which the Italians are not supposed to get wrong, ever, is over-roasted, he tells us, by two minutes. Orioli’s own account, *Moving Along: Just a Diary* (which many suspect was actually written by Douglas), gives the same if not a worse impression of the food, with the exception of the veal in Reggio.

Today, what is perhaps more striking in early travel memoirs than the bad meals – and both Douglas and Lawrence tend to write about the food when it’s bad, not when it’s good – is the relative scarcity: the lack of abundance and general sense of deprivation. Italy has long been a land of illusions. Fruits and vegetables grow easily and there seem to be a lot of them. However, Italy’s apparent wealth and abundance have long been offset by a fundamental poverty and a landscape that is not as forgiving as it appears. Throughout the Middle Ages famine was a serious threat, and

much of Italy’s land is not easy to cultivate. Thus, visitors from the north were often impressed not by the abundance but by the frugality of the Mediterranean diet. For Montaigne, a banquet in Italy was the equivalent of a light meal in France.

Whatever Douglas thought of Italian cuisine and however reliable his observations, he had a decided influence on one of the 20th century’s great food writers, Elizabeth David. The two met when David was 26 and Douglas 72. They were both stranded in Antibes, southwest of Nice, at the start of World War II. More than anyone else, David is credited with bringing the flavours of the Mediterranean to the British table. Her book *Mediterranean Food* appeared in 1950 and *Italian Food*, published in 1954, was named book of the year by Evelyn Waugh. Like rays of sunshine, they punctured the dreariness of post-war British cuisine. Julian Barnes compares her effect on 50s Britain with Kinsey’s effect on America.

At the time, war rationing was still in effect; most of the recipes would have been impossible to make (you couldn’t find garlic or lemons), and very few Brits had travelled to Italy. Yet such circumstances only made the books more popular. Today, David’s influence is still felt. Jamie Oliver, the David Beckham of

gastronomy, thanks her in *Jamie's Italy*.

Frances Mayes has been compared to MFK Fisher, Elizabeth David's American counterpart. And *Under the Tuscan Sun*, although it is not truly a cookbook, has in some ways done what David's early cookery books did: it brought Italy into the homes of millions of Americans. (The book, which spent two and a half years on the *New York Times* bestseller list, was even made into a film starring Diane Lane.)

Yet Mayes is unimpressed with Lawrence (and she would have found Douglas utterly contemptible). In *Under The Tuscan Sun* she calls him an ass for criticizing the food and complaining about the peasants who do not answer to his every whim (a very unfair criticism given Lawrence's desire to understand the fate of the Italian peasant) and the train schedules, which are not like the ones at Victoria Station.

This is not the Italy that Mayes discovers. For Mayes, a divorcee who purchases a tumbledown villa in the town of Cortona with her new partner Ed, life in Italy is a slice of paradise. Here, digging for potatoes is like hunting Easter Eggs, which, pulled from the ground, are miraculously clean; the tractor follows the same patterns of oxen long ago;

tomatoes are weighed on rusty hand scales; the contractor looks like Caravaggio's Bacchus; lettuce seeds scattered along the edge of a flower bed appear a week later; an overburdened septic system smells like turnips ('some people eat those!'); and when you tire of deciding whether to read metaphysics or cook you can sit in front of the fire like old peasants, grilling bread and sipping a young Chianti.

Such is Italy under the Tuscan sun, a sun that shines on a middle-aged creative writing professor experiencing a rather typical mid-life crisis. For someone who likens Williams-Sonoma to a toy store and whose San Francisco kitchen is equipped with a restaurant size stove, a black and white tile floor, gleaming white counters, a skylight, and, *always*, the music of Vivaldi or Robert Johnson or Villa-Lobos to cook to, Italy is a very simple place where everything seems exactly the way it was hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years ago. Views of heaven, I suppose, are relative.

In *Bella Tuscany*, the good life becomes the sweet life (*la dolce vita*, as Mayes kindly informs us) and all of Italy opens like one of the many roses that line the terrace at Bramasole. (Bramasole, the name of the house, comes from *bramare*, to yearn for, and *sole*, sun.) This time we learn about how great it is to be a tourist (the

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good kind of tourist, what Mayes calls ‘the passionate traveller’) and meet a winemaker who looks like a Raphael self-portrait; we see intensely Italian-looking Italians in Sicily and a waiter whose eyes resemble those of Christ in the mosaic dome of Cappella Palatina; we taste divine *gnocchi*, focaccia made in heaven, and in the end, happiness.

But what is it made of? What does it taste like? And why does it seem so unappealing? Dante, in *The Inferno*, gave us a good idea of what hell looks like by detailing every one of its nine circles. Mayes, in her assessment of contemporary Italy, gives us a hollowed-out version of heaven, an expanse of floating clouds that looks the same in all directions. More cartoon than reality. And although she pays lip service to urban blight (speeding past it in Sicily, like fast forwarding a part of a movie you find distasteful, until they get to a luxury hotel) and is alarmed when she sees Nigerian prostitutes on the side of the road in bucolic Tuscany, nothing can disrupt her image of Italy as paradise.

And in her dismissal of Lawrence’s observations (is it really just that he was an ass?) she seems to forget that things *have* changed, and that the sense of timelessness she evokes is largely an illusion. When Mayes writes that

the Arezzo market ‘retains the atmosphere of a mediaeval fair,’ and in the next sentence describes people crowding into bars at 1pm to eat sandwiches and pizza or sausage and asparagus torte at an upscale gastronomia, the image is incongruous. What is mediaeval about that? I’m not sure I understand what the ‘Latin sense of endless time’ is, or whether I can trust Mayes when she writes that the ‘hills pleated with olive terraces haven’t changed since the seasons were depicted in mediaeval psalters.’

There are no contours in Mayes’s Italy, very few blemishes, and a general sense that all time has collapsed. We could be somewhere in the Middle Ages, or before Christ, among the Greeks and Etruscans, or at the end of the 20th century. We can be everywhere and thus nowhere. And if something doesn’t quite fit, it can be pushed aside.

Mayes tells us that they don’t patronize the cheaper supermarket in Camucia, which is of course fine, but wouldn’t it be useful to see what’s inside, to know what they’re selling and to see who’s buying it? How much does an imported Spanish lemon cost compared to a locally grown Italian one? Who’s buying the frozen food, and are the big supermarkets changing the way Italians eat?

What Mayes elides, or fails to notice, is

that in Lawrence's day you couldn't rent a Fiat, or fly non-stop from San Francisco to Rome, or drink a cappuccino at any odd hour of the day or hire Polish labourers to restore your house. You couldn't pick up and go to Sicily at the last minute in pursuit of spring just because in Tuscany it was over and the skies were grey. And, while the house was being cleaned and the bed delivered, you couldn't go to town, most likely, and find cold prosecco, marinated zucchini, roast chicken, and duck breast ravioli to bring back and eat in front of the fire in the manner of peasants. Well, you could act like peasants and sit in front of the fire, but there'd be no prepared food or cold fizz.

Travel writers (and food writers), it seems, used to carp and criticise much more in the past than they do today. They got cross, missed trains, travelled on foot and arrived in villages with nowhere to stay and a tattered Baedeker that often named a hotel no-one had ever heard of. They had bad meals and got mugged (Lawrence, twice) and they wrote about it. Because travelling today is much easier and more comfortable than it was only 70 years ago, it is something we can do without a great deal of thought. Oliver in his introduction to *Jamie's Italy* writes that 'Italy has now become incredibly easy and cheap to get to, and this means many more of us can now go

there.' It is not so much peasant life that serves as the foundation of Mayes's happiness, but rather the half-century of tourism and an economy built around it.

Indeed, when Lawrence first travelled to Italy in 1912, the cinema and automobile were new, refrigerators and gas stoves were unknown, malaria and marauders were not uncommon, and Europe was on the brink of war. Like so many writers, Lawrence's southern journey was conflated with a love affair and a rejection of the moral stuffiness and industry of the Protestant north. Indeed, much of the allure of the south was attributed to its moral character. Six months before settling in to a villa on the shore of Lake Garda, Lawrence broke off his engagement to Louie Burrows, resigned from his teaching post, and met Frieda Weekley, the wife of a Professor of French at University College Nottingham where Lawrence had been a student.

The couple stayed for almost seven months at Lake Garda, and *Twilight in Italy*, Lawrence's first travel book, was published in 1916. It is more wide-eyed and less critical than *Sea and Sardinia*. He says little about the food, although at one point fantasizes about having toast for tea, which he has not had since he left England. He writes frequently about peasant life, of what he calls the old order, and in *San Gaudenzio* tells

of a week spent with Paolo Capelli, his wife Maria, and their children. They were poor, he notes. Paolo worked 12 to 14 hours a day and hardly made a living, but was content.

His happiness unsettles Lawrence. It seems out of place. Maria, by contrast, had grown tired of the drudgery and poverty, of 'polenta at midday and vegetable soup in the evening.' It was a way of life that had disappeared in England, swept away by the Industrial Revolution, and in Italy Lawrence was witnessing the very same process. 'The household no longer receives its food, oil and wine and maize, from out of the earth in the motion of fate. The earth is annulled, and money takes its place. The landowner, who is the lieutenant of God and of Fate, like Abraham, he, too, is annulled... It is passing away from Italy as it has passed from England. The peasant is passing away, the workman is taking his place...the new order means sorrow for the Italian more ever than it has meant for us.'

The Italian peasant, it seems, has always been about to disappear.

And when he goes he'll be taking the good things with him. The homemade pasta, the cured hams, the recipe for *ragu* that's never been written down, the *nocino*, and good

cheap table wine, the produce – the tomatoes, fennel and zucchini cultivated over so many years without poison – and the knowledge that has been passed down from one grandmother to the next.

Yet the peasant hangs on somehow, like a bloodied boxer up against the ropes. And unlike the Russian or Chinese peasant, we celebrate the Italian peasant, because he symbolises something that we have lost, a connection to the soil and a cuisine that, without that connection, would not exist.

Douglas in *Old Calabria* wrote that 'It is useless to lament the inevitable – this modern obsession of 'industrialism' which has infected a country purely agricultural... Whoever wishes to see these beautiful stretches of woodland ere their disappearance from earth – let him hasten!' (In fact, the leveling of Italy's forests began well before Douglas arrived.) And Bill Buford, nearly 100 years later, writes that 'Food made by hand is an act of defiance and runs contrary to everything in our modernity. Find it, eat it, it will go. It has been around for millennia. Now it is evanescent, like a season.'

They are in essence saying the same thing, because once the connection to the soil is lost and the lemons come from Spain instead of

Sicily (half the cost but devoid of taste), the leafy greens are produced by a multinational agricultural giant and the pigs and cows are raised on feedlots, the Italian peasant will be a thing of the past and food made by hand will be something we read about in museums. Because what's the point of making your own *mortadella*, your own *prosciutto*, your own *lardo*, if you don't know what the pig has eaten or where it was raised?

So is Buford just crying wolf, or have we reached the endpoint of a peasant culture and an agricultural economy that has sustained one of the world's great cuisines?

Italy *is* different from the rest of Europe, and has been more successful protecting its culinary traditions. Agriculture there has not yet been killed by agribusiness. Most produce is still grown on small and medium sized farms. 85% of Italy's 1.27 million farmers are independent. They do not hire others to do the farming and, since 2005, every crate of Italian produce must contain a label indicating the name and address of the grower. The food has a source and people can find out where it comes from, something that is becoming increasingly difficult in much of the industrialised world. Soon, even an organic label will have little or nothing to tell us about where the food was

grown. It might be China, or India, or Iowa. Who knows?

But even if Italy has been able to stave off the corroding forces of industrialisation and agribusiness, it may not be able to fight the weather. In a recent report, the European Commission reached the conclusion that due to the effects of global climate change, the North Sea coast could become the new Riviera. In the south, there will be shortages of water and of tourists, who annually distribute \$130 billion throughout the Mediterranean. Rising temperatures could by 2071 take as many as 87,000 deaths a year. The north will become the new south and your *Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet* will be nothing more than a few hundred leaves of stiff toilet paper. The then-controversial theory posited by Fernand Braudel in 1947 – that variations in climate, a force he described as 'external to man,' shape our everyday reality – has become irrefutable.

Indeed, climate change has become our century's historical wild card. And nowhere perhaps more profoundly than along the shores of the Mediterranean, that mythical land that has been for centuries as Shelley, who drowned in its very waters, once called it: 'a paradise of exiles.' **F&K**