FOREWORD

[CAROL FIELD]

How long have Italians been eating pasta? Some report the depiction of pasta-making tools in Etruscan tombs. Others argue that the Roman poet Horace was the first to write about pasta with his mention of *laganum*, a possible ancestor of today's *lasagna*. Scholars long ago exploded the myth that Marco Polo brought pasta to Italy from China, observing that Sicilians were eating homemade pasta long before he was born. They were most likely referring to *busiata*, an early form of *spaghetti* made by rolling dough around a reed or blade of grass that was then swiftly pulled out, leaving a long pasta pierced with a hole down the middle. Later Italians used knitting needles for the same purpose, and members of old Albanian communities in the south still employ metal umbrella spokes.

Fast forward to 2009. It doesn't take an expert to confirm that pasta is Italy's most famous and popular food, the country's preeminent contribution to its culinary culture. But it has taken an extraordinary scholar to break new ground with this encyclopedia on the hundreds of shapes in which pasta is formed.

To track down the components of her astonishing volume, Oretta Zanini De Vita, an impeccable researcher and detective of pasta from its earliest appearances in Italy, has compiled the first thorough compendium of the country's most basic food. Indefatigable and undeterred by the complexity of her task, she traced multiple forms of pasta in their geographical, regional, and historical contexts and noted lexical and gastronomic differences from village to village and region to region.

Her most compelling strategy was the decision to begin by interviewing many of the country's oldest citizens, intent on capturing their memories of an era before the changes wrought by the prosperity of the last fifty years. She listened for local nuances and names and probed for recollections of earlier times when people were poorer, ingredients were fewer, and sauces and stuffings often relied on the imaginative use of whatever grew wild in the fields or was left in the larder.

Pasta can be short or long, handmade or factory made, stuffed or not, floating in broth or tossed with sauce. It can be made of durum wheat or soft-wheat flour with eggs and/or water. Some shapes speak of the poverty of rural areas. *Abbotta pezziende*, “feed the beggar,” probably belongs to the pasta category named as much for wish fulfillment as for form. Some shapes are named for everyday objects, such as *cenci*, “dusting rags,” and *chianche*, the large, flat paving stones popular in Puglia.

Some are flavored with whatever the rural landscape provides. *Cadunsei*, from the alpine Val Camonica in Lombardy, are half-moon *ravioli* filled with a mixture of chopped chicken giblets cooked with onion, carrot, and celery and flavored with peach pits from local trees. Smoky-flavored *orecchiette al grano arso* are made with flour produced from grains collected from the fields after they were harvested and burnt.

Envision the golden *tajarin* of Piedmont, which calls for mixing twenty egg yolks with a kilogram of flour. Hold up a thin sheet of *tagliatelle* dough and look through it. Sheets of hand-rolled *pasta fresca* can speak of privilege and promise in the fineness of its dough and the riches of its sauces, such as those made with sweetbreads, truffles, mixtures of meat, and chicken livers.

Pasta may be the country’s preeminent food, but that doesn’t make it a unifying dish. Indeed, for something that begins with such simple ingredients—flour, water, salt, and sometimes eggs—it is both astonishing and gastronomically thrilling to realize that those few basic elements are formed into a dazzling variety of shapes, some with fillings and some not, and then tossed with a wide range of sauces. Unifying? If anything, the hundreds of divergent pasta shapes accentuate Italy’s regional differences and draw attention to the distinctions that define precise local identities.

We all know some of the names—*fettuccine* and *ravioli*, *tortelli* and *tagliatelle*—but variant doughs and shapes within such well-known categories can swap names as well as ingredients. *Fettuccine* sumptuously sauced with giblets in Rome changes character in nearby towns where the dough is made with whole-wheat flour and bran and the pasta is renamed *lane pelose* (hairy wools), for the coarse texture of the bran in the whole grain. Around Orvieto, *fettuccine* with goose *ragù* was served at the time of the threshing lunch. For Christmas Eve, the same pasta, dressed with honey and walnuts, became *maccheroni*. Multiply all these shapes and name changes by thousands of times, and add the specific festivals for which dishes are served and the religious rituals that include them, and you can see how fractured and complex the world of pasta is.

Still, after occupying Naples in 1860, General Giuseppe Garibaldi said “it will be *maccheroni*, I swear to you, that will unify Italy.” In fact, it is *spaghetti* that more

closely meets that description, but the sauces that dress them still keep their geographical beginnings.

You should not be hungry when you open this book. The smell of slivered leeks sautéed in butter, white truffle shavings over egg-rich *tagliarini*, slow-stewed meats with ribbons of pasta will rise up off the page. You will learn techniques for making and shaping more than thirteen hundred forms of pasta, though this is not a recipe book. You will travel up and down the peninsula, learning about villages and hamlets, cities and towns, all over the country, but this is not a guidebook. And although this is much more than a reference book, you will learn the history and culture of each form and its variations, confirmed by Oretta Zanini De Vita through her many informants, archival documents, inventories, tax registries, and books from the Renaissance forward. As you read, you will encounter flavors and tastes that stir the appetite and evoke memories, and at the same time synthesize immense amounts of information in a way that deepens and enriches your knowledge about Italy's culinary patrimony.

This is a treatise of extraordinary learning and compelling information wrapped inside a great appreciation of the history and meaning of pasta. It is clear that Oretta Zanini De Vita agrees with the writer Giuseppe Prezzolini, who said that "*spaghetti* have the same right or more to belong to Italian civilization that Dante has."

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