

Broadcasting the Food Nation: Mario Soldati's *Journey in the Po Valley* and the Search for Popular Gastronomy

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“If I had limited my search for genuine foods only to what is artisanal, hand-made, traditional, I would have ended up showing our viewers a gastronomy that most people must relinquish if they are not to starve.”¹ With this disclaimer, Mario Soldati, creator and host of an innovative and popular television travelogue, justified on camera his choice to include visits to processed cheese factories and industrial canning plants in his *Alla Ricerca dei Cibi Genuini: Viaggio nella Valle del Po*, In Search of Genuine Foods: Journey in the Po Valley (RAI 1957-58).² “As soon as I started shooting, I realized that all or most of what we eat these days is an industrial product, food produced on a large scale.”³ This news, shared with some apprehension by a self-defined food connoisseur on national television, sanctioned a material transformation that hit at the core of a country whose culinary identity long predated its political nationhood.⁴ As food historian Massimo Montanari amply demonstrated, gastronomy had identified Italy long before its existence as a unified and independent nation:

When we talk about food, a country called Italy (not by historians, but by its inhabitants) appears before national unification: products, recipes and cuisines have always been locally determined, but circulating from one place to another they created a network of tastes, of techniques, of knowledge that held Italy together gastronomically just as it did art and literature” (Montanari 2017 17).

The marketplace, the exchange of goods and ideas, the vertical and horizontal movement of recipes and techniques described by Montanari defined over time an Italian gastronomy that was recognized and shared by people long before they recognized a nation called Italy. In the context of this dynamic food discourse, Soldati's admission and consequent production choices turned the titular search into a redefinition of genuine foods that was appropriate for Italy's new television audience. While many Italian intellectuals and gastronomes were joining forces to defend the country's culinary heritage from what was perceived as a homogenizing attack, Soldati saw the potential offered by television as a democratic medium, and of gastronomy as shared patrimony, to generate a sense of belonging to the nation.⁵ Gastronomy could be part of RAI's civilizing mission alongside literature, history, opera, and other forms of high culture that public broadcasting made accessible to a wide audience.⁶ Unlike other cultural forms, however, for which viewers were positioned mainly on the receiving end of the educational contract, gastronomic discourse could easily activate common people as sources of knowledge. Not merely consumers, but producers of food and knowledge, ordinary people in *Journey in the Po Valley* participated in genuine exchanges with the intellectual Soldati on the small screen. Consequently, the ostensible search for genuine foods became an exploration of changing food habits and a celebration of gastronomy as genuinely popular culture. The shared and dynamic discourse of Italian cuisine was the basis for shaping a truly democratic Italian identity.⁷

A food-themed travel documentary comparable to Anthony Bourdain's CNN show *Parts Unknown*, *Journey in the Po Valley* aired weekly from December 1957 to March 1958 on Italian national television, RAI.⁸ Traveling along Italy's longest river, from its source in the western Alps to its delta in the Adriatic Sea, Mario Soldati set out to explore local foodways through site visits and interviews. A novelist and film-maker who was already well known to Italian audiences when he joined RAI, Soldati guided viewers in the first of many televised explorations of the country, and entertained them with his quirky persona. The Po valley in 1957 may not sound exotic now, but it might have been unknown to many Italian viewers of the time. And some of the same dynamics that took the CNN host to a fish shack in southeast Asia, or a taco truck in east LA, are visible in Soldati's visit to an *osteria* or an eel festival on the banks of the Po river. Displaying a swagger not unlike Bourdain's, Soldati takes on the role of tour guide, teacher, guest, and host. He confidently shares with the audience his knowledge of Italian cuisine, but he also feigns ignorance as a way to encourage his interviewees to describe their activity to the viewers. He states his likes and dislikes explicitly, and frequently credits RAI for the privilege of travel.

Modern food show viewers who expect a treasure hunt for local ingredients and ancient cooking traditions in off-the-beaten-path villages are not disappointed. Soldati visits fancy restaurants and country inns, family-run shops and charming wineries. He interviews fishermen and cattle traders, farm hands and *ravioli* makers; butchers, wine tasters, rice farmers, innkeepers, cooks, distillers, milkmen, bakers, cheesemakers, and truffle hunters. He showcases the art of fishing in a mountain stream, and that of testing *parmigiano-reggiano* by ear. He waxes lyrical on the fine distinction between the cardoon from Chieri and the cardoon from Nizza, forty miles down the road in Monferrato, Piedmont. He marvels at the ancient practice of hand-turning bottles of *spumante* and checking them by candlelight. These visits portray a region that is rich in food traditions and proud of its products. However, viewers might be surprised to discover that right next to the family-run farm a giant factory applies state-of-the-art technology to preparing and packaging boiled hams and *mortadella*. Similarly, the production of dry pasta and canned tomatoes employs hundreds of young women near Parma, and the show visits those factories instead of traditional *prosciutto* curing facilities a few miles away. Surprising as these choices may seem, they reflect the condition illustrated in this essay's opening statement: alimentary practices were changing in Italy, as were the domestic and public spaces connected to food production and consumption. *JIPV* documented and legitimized these changes for a new television audience who was experiencing them first-hand.

The gastronomic travelogue exploited the new popular medium, television, to explore and reflect on Italians' relationship with food at a particular historical juncture. By including the new alongside the old, the show first of all documented the changing alimentary habits of a country that had only recently overcome chronic hunger through industrialization.⁹ No longer a material preoccupation, food could become an object of leisurely interest for viewers. In response to such economic and cultural changes, and the consequent epistemological shift, information and education were clearly the show's primary goals, as they were for many RAI productions in those years. Second of all, the inclusion of the food industry alongside traditional customs gave the intellectual seal of approval to a modernizing process which RAI was simultaneously supporting, albeit uneasily, through advertising. While commercials promoted industrial foods that could be acquired throughout the peninsula, *JIPV* updated a century-old gastronomic discourse and made it accessible to a variety of viewers. The show's redefinition of genuine foods validated consumption of the "national" products of modernity alongside regional specialties, while also furthering viewers' education about traditional local gastronomy. To this end, it tapped into the shared

patrimony of culinary knowledge, which connected the viewers to the interviewees and the host, and portrayed Italians as producers, not only consumers. *JIPV* exploited food's privileged status in Italian culture to activate a common stock of knowledge and values among its viewers. Thus, while educating and entertaining the public, the show also contributed to RAI television's broader mission: "unifying and homogenizing [...] a culturally, linguistically and socially heterogeneous audience" (Monteleone 279).

The show was produced in a transitional moment for material and cultural life in post-WWII Italy. The economic growth that would be known as the "miracle" overtook the country so fast that many Italians saw their basic needs met at the same time as they experienced new consumer desires (see Crainz 84). Italy's economic integration within Europe, which was ratified in 1957 with the founding of the European Economic Community, generated a substantial increase in international trade, sustained by significant industrial diversification and expansion of consumer demand. New energy sources were developed, and with favorable conditions for capital investment and low labor costs, the economy thrived. In the early 1950s most of the demand had been domestic, but the opening of the EEC free market would double industrial production between 1958-1963. In less than two decades Italy ceased to have a mainly agrarian economy and became one of the most industrialized countries in Europe (see Ginsborg 212-16). As Italy became a new European leader in the manufacture of appliances—primarily refrigerators, washing machines, and television sets, but also cars, motorcycles, and typewriters—many Italians turned into consumers of these products while concurrently achieving, for the first time, food security.

The effects of rapid modernization were particularly visible in the realm of food. Agriculture specialized in exportable goods such as oil, wine, and citrus, while food imports and a growing industrial production of pasta, dairy, sugar, and other alimentary products guaranteed a reduction in food costs and a larger choice for consumers.¹⁰ Although hunger and malnutrition had been endemic among the lower classes for centuries, and wartime rationing had affected large segments of the population, food shortages ended in the 1950s and a culture of abundance and innovation quickly came to characterize alimentary habits, albeit with geographic differences (see Helstosky 138-46). Prosperity and increased urbanization favored the diffusion of modern, "American-style" kitchens, compact in size and equipped with electrical and gas appliances. Processed and packaged foods appeared in supermarkets, the first of which opened in Milan in 1957. By the beginning of the 1960s supermarkets would be established in other regions as well (see Parasecoli 196, and Scarpellini). "After years of hunger, what returned was not only the appetite but the need to forget and the desire to gather various people around the dinner table and nourish them in a new way" (Capatti and Montanari 298). However, as Helstosky and Counihan have shown, although Italians quickly developed a taste for prepared snacks and indulgence foods, such as chocolate or liquors, they did not substantially change their meals (Helstosky 138-46, Counihan 1-33). Their desire to forget hunger and the hardships of wartime did not equal a desire to leave behind centuries of food culture. Despite increased access to a variety of prepared and preserved foods, Italians joined the alimentary miracle on their own terms: mostly by "purchasing familiar foods and maintaining established ways of preparing and presenting meals" (Helstosky 138). While they embraced food novelties and enjoyed the possibility of buying more meat and dairy, Italians generally incorporated the new prosperity into traditional habits. Television contributed to this integration by normalizing consumption of industrial foods while giving new value to food traditions.¹¹

Publicly-owned and controlled by the ruling Christian Democratic party, RAI television, which started national broadcasts in 1954, was both a mirror and an actor of the changes happening in Italian society during the economic boom. In its first decade of existence it reached increasingly wider segments of the population, stimulating the transformation of rural areas and effecting the linguistic unification of a country where Italian had been for centuries a second language at best for most citizens.¹² Its programming choices reflected both the country's rapid but uneven embrace of modernity and the political and cultural elites' uneasiness with American-style consumerism.¹³ Consequently, an "Italianization" of the medium was conducted according to the principles of education, unification, and entertainment. This search for an "Italian way to television," which was firmly based in the humanities and on traditional interpretations of high and low culture, strategically adapted pre-existing cultural forms for the small screen. Thus, programming alternated between theater, opera, and serialized adaptations of classic novels on one hand; game and musical variety shows on the other. Popularization of "high" forms was meant to educate the growing audience while legitimizing the new medium in the eyes of many skeptical intellectuals. Game shows, imported from the United States and adapted to the national standards of erudition, fostered a sense of community and shared experience (see Barron, Bettetini). The popularity of the latter significantly contributed to a rapid increase in television ownership and service subscriptions. Game shows like *Lascia o Raddoppia* (1955-58) nourished the optimism of the era with their transformational impact on common people, to whom they offered the possibility of overnight wealth and fame.¹⁴ Successful in its effort to boost viewer loyalty from the provinces, the show *Campanile Sera* (1959-62) brought century-old *campanilismo* to the small screen: every week it pitched two towns against each other in team games and one-on-one competitions, broadcast live from the studio and the town squares.¹⁵ These and similar programs highlight the crucial role played by direct involvement of ordinary citizens in the success of television. *JIPV* had a similar appeal, involving common people through interviews, and giving value to perhaps the only truly shared stock of knowledge across the Italian peninsula: gastronomy.

Given RAI's mission to Italianize television and create a loyal national viewership, it is surprising that food culture did not play a more prominent role in its early programming. Food discourse could provide a unique link between Italy's agrarian past and its industrial present. The dynamic alimentary models characterizing Italian gastronomy were well suited to help bridge the gap between high and low culture. Since lifestyle changes jeopardized the direct transmission of food knowledge that had characterized Italian gastronomy for centuries, television could document that change and mediate that transmission. Thus, television, a medium that sought to involve common people and unify them through shared experiences, was the ideal vehicle for updating and expanding a century-old gastronomic discourse that had been developed by practitioners of all social and geographic backgrounds.

In 1957, three years after the first national broadcast, food presence on television increased significantly thanks to the introduction of commercials in prime time: coffee and coffeemakers, processed cheese, canned meat, candy bars, orange soda, and other amenities publicized the achieved or achievable *benessere* of a country that only a decade before had struggled with widespread hunger. Wary of the secular market mentality that unrestrained consumerism could spread, RAI balanced the interests of industry and morality through containment. Rather than interrupting programming throughout the day, commercials were all grouped in a carefully produced evening show, *Carosello*.¹⁶ Within this frame, where each commercial was paired with an original film or animated short, the viewers' attention shifted onto the recurring characters and entertaining skits that preceded each product presentation.¹⁷ The rigidly regulated format, aided

by regular contributions from famous directors, actors, and graphic artists, generated a loyal following and “provided a familiar environment which [viewers] could easily recognize and with which [they] could identify” (Gundle 587). Thus, the consumption of mass produced merchandise was Italianized and made acceptable even for a provincial middle- and lower middle-class audience. Instead of explicitly encouraging Italians to adopt consumerist and homogenized food habits, national television favored a mediated modernization.¹⁸

Broadcast at the end of the same year, *JIPV* contributed to the same mission by providing the intellectual sanction to industrial products and promoting a leisure interest in artisanal practices. Through its representation of farmers, artisans, and home cooks alongside factory workers and machines, the show helped viewers transition to a more homogenized foodscape without losing sight of persistent diversity in domestic practices. While *Carosello* characters created brand recognition for standardized foods and drinks, *JIPV* familiarized industrial foods through interviews with the common people in charge of their production, many of whom were women. By giving screen time to young factory workers who oversaw automated pasta manufacture, or sorted fruit for industrial preserves, the show legitimized their contribution to food security and appealed to viewers with similar jobs, and to their families. Alongside interviews with these producers were encounters with farmers and artisans, who testified to the lasting significance of agriculture and traditional practices to alimentary variety. Through this and other broadcasting choices, RAI celebrated the achieved comfort and the ongoing progress, while reassuring Italy that the country was not capitulating to American-style consumerism. Italians were makers of genuine products and connoisseurs of genuine cuisine, the show conveyed.

At the same time, the first televised “search for genuine foods” also recast gastronomy as a suitable pastime for all viewers, now free from hunger. The show, by its very existence and choice of location, testified to the emergence of new interests among well-fed Italians. Besides making no mention of recent hardships or hunger, the documentary conveyed a sense of comfort, exemplified by serene descriptions such as this: “Towns in this part of Emilia – Novellara, Mirandola, Nonantola, Carpi –” Soldati says while strolling on a peaceful street, “are all similar to one another, although each with its own distinctive features. Streets as wide as rivers, lined with porticoes on both sides. These towns stretched out in the sun evoke a sense of wellbeing, of prosperity, of people who work hard, who are well-off, who eat and drink well” (ep.11).¹⁹ This comfort is implicitly attributed to the well-balanced combination of old and new food practices that the show portrayed with effective editing: an extended shot of the super-mechanized production of cheese triangles is followed by a visit to a Parmigiano-Reggiano aging room, which is described in awe as “almost a library.” The lengthy visit to a cold cut plant—where we discover that boiled hams are shaped in rectangular molds “for ease of slicing” and *mortadella* is efficiently stuffed in plastic wrapping instead of the traditional pig’s bladder—is counterpointed by a stop at the ancient Trattoria Rocchi, where one can taste a peculiar specialty: guinea hen baked in local clay. “If I were forced to pick a favorite dish [among the many I have tasted during this journey], this would be it” Soldati concludes. He repeats how simple the preparation is, for those who wish to try it elsewhere, only to concede that, “the clay, well, that’s difficult to find elsewhere...” Clearly, some food experiences are not meant to be replicated outside the specific region, but television can document and share the tradition.

The travelogue embodied television’s mission to educate viewers through virtual voyages in unknown lands, even when these uncharted territories were only a few miles away. The format, with frequently changing locations and interviews in public places as well as private homes and

businesses, used newly available portable cameras and recording devices to explore a country that was almost unknown to many of its inhabitants. Regional gastronomy was displayed via location shots, illustrated through interviews and voiceover commentary, and clarified in studio segments which bound the various location shots together. Throughout the series, food was a catalyst for addressing other natural and cultural specificities. Soldati made the show's educational purpose explicit in the opening episode: "Eating is a basic way of traveling. [...] *Mangiare è conoscere*. Eating is learning, getting to know." The documentary introduced viewers to new places, products, and people. "*Nella cucina c'è tutto*:" through gastronomy we can see "a region's nature, climate, agriculture, shepherding, and hunting." Cooking practices reveal "a people's traditions, history, civilization" (ep. 1). Even before mobility became a reality for many Italians via cars and paid vacations, virtual travel via the television screen allowed them to become familiar with the diversity of Italian landscapes and lifestyles.

As he traveled, virtually accompanied by television viewers, the host never failed to credit RAI and its technical equipment. State-of-the-art technology allowed him to share his expertise and discoveries with viewers throughout Italy. Interspersed shots of RAI trucks driving along mountain and country roads, or of cameramen setting up a shoot served as visual reminders. Occasionally, Soldati mentioned pre-production issues, but as a rule each visit was designed to look un-staged, the interview as spontaneous as a conversation with an occasional passer-by. Despite the documentary intent, Soldati eschewed all claims to objectivity by acknowledging the arbitrary nature of some location choices, which were largely based on personal tastes: his passion for wine and his indifference to desserts, to name only a few. As a Turin native living in Rome, he repeatedly foregrounded the partiality of his point of view, "at home" both in the Po Valley and in the capital, where the show was produced. He made his changing perspective on "genuine foods" equally explicit, admitting the need to recognize the ways in which technology and rationalization transformed foodways. While voicing his concern for the survival of century-old practices, he also acknowledged the importance of industrial production for food security, a position that moved him closer to viewers. Consequently, the documentary content adapted from his personal preference to the changing foodscape and presented technological innovations alongside century-old traditions. Thus, the titular search became a redefinition of genuine foods that was appropriate for its time.

An illuminating reflection on industry's role considered cheese making within the broader ecological change. "It's not that big industry does not produce genuine food," comments the manager of an enormous dairy plant visited in episode 7. "It produces food according to the environmental conditions that have come to exist nowadays in milk production. Milk is no longer what it used to be."²⁰ Soldati must concur that the conditions have significantly changed: the pressure to meet growing demand led to the rationalization of agriculture and, in turn, to large-scale processing in plants that resemble "submarines, warships, spaceships." As the camera frames large steel vats, pipes, and gauges, the host tries to come to terms with the reality of contemporary milk processing: pasteurization, condensation, evaporation and other operations are necessary to guarantee widespread availability in urban settings. While the mechanization of milk processing seems part of an irreversible course that we must accept, cheese making maintains a significant human element that can comfort us. Camera work and sound editing correspondingly lighten the mood in the following segment. Two rows of workers of varying ages face each other on either side of the frame, stirring curds with poles in wooden cauldrons. The synchronized musical score turns their cadenced movements into a minuet-like dance. While we watch laborers hand-stretching curds out of steaming vats, we learn how internal migration has affected this semi-artisanal production. Provolone, a traditional southern cheese, is now produced mostly in

Lombardy, where a greater availability of milk makes the business more profitable. Southern cheesemakers brought the technique here decades ago, and now provolone is considered a local product of the Po valley. The art of stretching and hand shaping the cheese is then showcased with extreme close-ups of the working hands and the same musical score synchronized to each movement. Outside, walking around neat stacks of firewood used for smoking the cheese, Soldati requests further explanations on this ancient skill before concluding: “it’s genuine, then!”. The side by side co-existence of the latest technology in milk processing and successfully relocated artisanal cheesemaking reminds us that food culture is inherently adaptable. The “genuine” label, attached both to industrial and artisanal foods, equals a seal of recognition for the dynamic network of exchanges that constitutes Italian cuisine.²¹ The creative montage offsets the arguably cynical deduction with heartening images of lasting practices to offer a balanced view of a region where tradition and innovation fruitfully coexist.

While it acknowledged the importance of modernization, however, this travelogue also inaugurated what Montanari defined as “the return of the countryside as a value:” “the birth – significant above and beyond any ambiguity—of a new form of respect for a culture that for centuries had been looked down upon” (“And at last” 23). This change in public perception that gradually replaced century-old contempt for peasants with a positive, if often idealized, image of country life took place mostly in the cities, where images of the country came via television. *JIPV*, like subsequent television documentaries focusing on the countryside, salvaged the forms of knowledge that were endangered by the mass urbanization. Documenting the everyday life of farmers, however, Soldati highlighted their exemplary simplicity and wholesomeness, thus launching the idealization that would prevail in following decades. In the first episode, for instance, we meet Monsù Oreste, a cardoon farmer in the hills southeast of Turin. Portrayed at work in the fields, digging out cardoons from their earth mounds with a shovel, and then in frontal close-ups that accentuate his toothless grin and sun-beaten face, Monsù Oreste shows the peculiarities of this crop. He answers Soldati’s questions in a mix of Italian and dialect, which the host promptly translates for the audience. They walk side by side along the furrows of the field, their steps punctuated by a lyrical musical score. The conversation moves from Monsù Oreste’s work (the crop calendar, different cardoon varieties) to his eating habits and daily schedule. The most important lesson from this visit, Soldati tells the viewers, is the farmer’s respect for regular meal times. Every day at 12 o’clock Oreste stops working and goes home for lunch. “This beautiful tradition, I believe, is the first principle of genuine gastronomy,” states the host. It is a tradition that modern, urban life is threatening, but that we should strive to maintain. Through this and several similar conversations, Soldati reminds viewers of the value of the countryside and of its traditions, shared by all Italians, albeit with regional differences. If television in the 1950s generally supported “the universalistic aspiration of the American model” over the “old, particularistic cultures” as Gundle maintains, documentaries like this played a significant role in promoting a popular culture rooted in local traditions and appealing to viewers of different social classes (561-62).

Delighting in the diversity of Italian cuisine, Soldati takes viewers on a micro-exploration that highlights this trait. “What is truly beautiful about our country,” he observes, “is that within 50-60 km, the distance we traveled today, [...] foodways change, houses change, the dialect is almost the same and yet the character is different” (ep. 11).²² Historically a dynamic network of exchanges between different social groups, gastronomy appears through this journey as a mediation of high and popular culture that easily involves Italians of all backgrounds. Through this virtual voyage, viewers learn how numerous local dishes are prepared: *bagna cauda* in

Piedmont, *culatello* in the Parma province, *salama da sugo* near Ferrara. They visit wineries and distilleries, learning about sparkling wines, vermouths, *Lambrusco*, and grappa. They watch cooking demonstrations held in restaurants and private homes. Occasionally an expert is brought into the studio to supplement the instruction, but more often Soldati himself offers practical advice on topics ranging from how to choose wine glasses to roasting of meat in a modern gas stove. He answers letters from viewers, mostly regarding questions of etiquette: should fruit be eaten with a fork? Is it uncouth to tuck a napkin into one's collar during a meal? These questions allude to the viewers' social mobility at a time of economic opportunity. With his popularization and education efforts, Soldati seems to be taking on the role that Artusi had held for many middle-class households since the end of the nineteenth century: that of democratizing food discourse and legitimizing the participation of all citizens in its construction.²³

Gastronomy offers the space to integrate elite and popular culture on screen. Historical and literary fun facts season the journey in the host's native Piedmont: Prime Minister Cavour's favorite restaurant, the locations of Cesare Pavese's novels, the story of King Victor Emmanuel II's mistress and later wife. If in these references Soldati shows his witty erudition, at other times he privileges material culture, and the knowledge connected to food practices. This interest, and his recognition of women's work, is well exemplified in his visit to Pavia. After filming a traditional settlement along the banks of the Ticino river, the RAI convoy drives into the center of town and stops at Trattoria Ferrari. Smoking a cigar among bocce players in the courtyard behind the restaurant, popular journalist Gianni Brera, a proud native, stands ready to share his erudition. Soldati, however, draws the camera's attention to a young woman holding a large bowl. Inside, a few dozen frogs jump up the sides. "*Iii ràn!*" loudly repeats Soldati mimicking the word for frogs in the local dialect. After timidly explaining what needs to be done before cooking the frogs, the woman takes leave. Brera has free rein to lecture about his city's history, its university, and the unexpected similarity between the ancient civilizations of Pavia and China. Soldati interrupts him, suggesting they go into the kitchen and watch the preparation of the frogs. Three generations of women are present for this procedure: mother, daughter, and granddaughter. Scissors in hand, the mother quickly cuts and skins the frogs, with the confidence that comes from habit. She cleans lots of them, she explains, since frog soups and stews are local specialties. Soldati asks questions about procurement, and practices connected to this tradition. The woman answers while working, in tentative Italian at first, clearly conscious of being on television. However, when encouraged to speak dialect, she speaks more freely, sharing her expertise in the language in which she acquired it. The camera takes in both her verbal and manual explanations, focusing on her hands working swiftly in the bowl. Her baby granddaughter, who looks no older than one, watches on, living proof that local children grow up around this practice. Brera interjects with more historical facts, but Soldati once again interrupts him, drawing the viewers' attention back to the women. The interview ends with a close-up of little Maria Rosa's cherub face, dressed in her Sunday best, looking earnestly into the camera. The show's musical theme emotionally punctuates her introduction and concludes the conversation. The scientific explanation provided in the anti-climactic coda—a voiceover disquisition on the calcium content in frog bones—adds little to a powerful segment that underscores women's work and knowledge.

In the course of his journey, Soldati interviewed many women, soliciting their knowledge about food: a mother recited the special menu she had prepared for a wedding in Vezzola, near Reggio Emilia; a shop owner and her workers in Milan's oldest bakery discussed the ingredients for *panettone*; cooks rolled out fresh pasta in several restaurants; young workers sorted fruits and vegetables in a *mostarda* factory in Cremona. Their words and screen presence reminded viewers

to what extent domestic, artisanal, and industrial food production was handled by women. Soldati sought out their contribution, encouraged them to share their knowledge with viewers directly, and highlighted the importance of that transmission, particularly in a moment of change. Through these interviews, which broadcast the gestures and voices of practitioners, television documented new and old foodways. This focus on makers, and emphasis on the knowledge developed and transmitted by women, balanced the emphasis on women as consumers in commercials.²⁴ By showing these aspects of Italian alimentary culture on television, *JIPV* broadcast a gastronomic discourse that was created by a wide range of people.

Through these interviews, *JIPV* involved common people of various backgrounds in the making of television, and legitimized material knowledge about food shared with and by viewers. In so doing it conveyed the notion that, unlike other cultural forms broadcast by television, gastronomic knowledge did not only flow in one direction – from the television producers to the audience – but was a shared patrimony among all Italians, on and off-screen. Food culture on public television provided education, entertainment, and a sense of belonging to a national audience. Soldati talked to men and women, young and old, in urban and rural settings, but mostly in small towns and villages, displaying a provincial life that was far removed from the central location of RAI studios in Rome. Moving back and forth between the studio and the provinces, food discourse provided a powerful connection between the center and the periphery. The televised exploration showed that a pride in local food did not conflict with a sense of belonging to a nation, but rather that food could spark a conversation about local and national identities as complementary. Gastronomy could be the basis for a recognition of diversity as a key element of Italian identity.

The conversational interchanges between the program's makers and viewers emphasize the shared identity. Given the show's hybrid format, shot part in the studio and part on location, Soldati has a double role: presenter and interviewer. As a host, he speaks in the first person and addresses the viewers collectively, using the formula "*cari telespettatori*, dear viewers," and individually, when he responds to letters. In interviews, he acts as a stand-in for the audience and often as interpreter. From the very first stop in the journey, interviewing a trout fisherman near the Po source, the audience is taken up close to the interviewee, with camera angles and synchronized sound recording creating a sense of proximity that was absent from much early television. The fisherman is perched on a rock, Soldati stands right below him, his back to the camera, shouting questions at Mr Mattio, who answers in dialect, his voice half drowned by the sound of rushing water. Soldati encourages Mr Mattio to speak louder, and translates his words into Italian. The orders he directs to the crew ("bring the mic closer!") and the apparent technical challenges convey a sense of immediacy to the scene, which brings the audience closer to the program's ambit. "We have come to the very source of the river that we will later see flow into the sea." The "we" includes both the television crew and the viewers, all participating in this voyage. A close-up shot on Mr. Mattio lets us see his facial reaction when asked if this intrusion hinders his activity. "Yes," he replies after a brief hesitation, "actually, I already felt one pull." "You should leave," he adds with a half-smile. Soldati agrees to step away and only leaves one cameraman behind to try and capture a catch. As the camera pulls back we are offered a wide shot of the crew and equipment right next to Mr Mattio. After a few close-ups of the fishing line bobbing in the bubbling stream, the movement punctuated by lively extradiegetic music, the sequence ends, predictably, with a successful catch. As he goofily struggles to hold the live trout in front of the camera, Soldati concludes the interview by stating "*Our* trip, *our* journey in search of genuine foods begins with fish, the first food eaten by man." The viewers' vicarious fishing trip is rewardingly complete, and

a common identity has been established between the audience, the interviewer, and the interviewee, all participants in the same experience.

The common identity is developed throughout the series, through the use of plural pronouns and other strategies that bring the viewers at home into the show's domain, be it in the studio or on location. Possessives establish a common ground: besides the already mentioned "our journey," which emphasizes the vicarious participation of the audience in the exploration, recurrent references to "our country" (the host's and the viewers') are used to situate the microcosm of the Po Valley within the macrocosm of Italy, the region's food diversity only a sample of the diversity to be found everywhere. Accordingly, in declaring that no French cheese equals "our Parmigiano," Soldati implicitly states that a local product of the Po valley is also a national treasure. The subject pronoun "we" interchangeably refers to the RAI television crew and "we-the-Italians," whether to acknowledge the intrusion into someone's home, or to discuss changing alimentary habits. Occasionally Soldati casts himself as part of a smaller subset of that national "we," such as in the playful discussion of the northern-southern diatribe that concludes the first episode. He introduces a segment on traditional food festivals dedicated to *polenta* held in Piedmont and Lombardy, by acknowledging the mocking epithet that Southern Italians use for Northerners: '*polentoni*.' To do this, the host addresses Southerners directly and embraces the nickname, explaining that it does not offend people in the Po valley, for whom *polenta* constitutes a staple food. Quite the contrary, he states, "*we* are proud of *polenta*, the food that unites the Po valley." Simplistic as this statement appears in retrospect, especially considering the changing fortunes of *polenta* in Italian cuisine and culture, it aptly introduces the exemplary benevolence celebrated in the featured festival.²⁵ The documentary presents a contemporary re-enactment of a 17th-century encounter in Ponti, a village in the Monferrato region, between a group of tinsmiths from Calabria and the local lord. The magnanimous Marquis Del Carretto allegedly gave the tradesmen a huge pot to repair, promising to fill it with flour as a reward for their work. The yearly festival kicks off with locals in costume re-enacting the historical exchange, and subsequently celebrating the successful repair by cooking a giant pot of polenta (the *polentone*, as it were) and serving it with cod stew in the village square. After a brief introduction, no voiceover explanation is deemed necessary for folkloric practices that were likely familiar to all viewers: costume dances, a marching band, a choir, and carnival rides, involving residents of all ages. The images of the festival roll, featuring a soundtrack of intra-diegetic music and a song in local dialect about the pleasure of eating polenta every day. "Let the carousel go around and around, dear viewers, and until the next episode, goodbye" concludes Soldati philosophically over images of general merriment. In other words, *polentoni* or not, we all share similar experiences when it comes to food and the cultural practices connected to its preparation and consumption. The subject of food is crucial in establishing points of identification with viewers and creating a collective discourse.

Within this collective project, which recast genuine foods as the country's national heritage, the host featured alternatively as the expert and the common man. While in the studio he lectured liberally about wine and food, in interviews Soldati dropped the know-it-all persona, making himself more approachable and emboldening interviewees. This approach, combined with the novelty, subject matter, and the elements of identification it offered to viewers residing in peripheral areas, contributed to the show's success beyond what might be expected of a documentary. A measure of the show's popularity was its ability to generate transmedial presence, in the press and on television. Reviews and commentaries, both serious and facetious, appeared in popular magazines, as did letters from viewers, both praising the documentary and rectifying perceived inaccuracies. Soldati sang as a celebrity guest, in a star-studded lineup that included

sports champions and Hollywood actors, on *Il Musicchiere*, the Italian version of NBC's musical quiz show *Name That Tune*. *JIPV* was also the object of parodies, which both signaled and aided its recognition. Popular comics Raimondo Vianello and Ugo Tognazzi spoofed Soldati's interview with the trout fisherman in a sketch on the primetime variety show *Un due tre*. Writer Achille Campanile authored a mock-review, titled "Searching for spoiled chickens in tropical regions," published in his satirical column in the popular weekly *L'Espresso*. Besides suggesting considerable familiarity with the target on the part of the public, parodies offer insights into the audience's engagement with the original. The show's premise is appreciated ("A beautiful program!"), but the location evidently surprised the viewer: instead of using "a gourmet's nose and a writer's finesse" to present rare specialties discovered in remote villages, the show "Alas! Took us to a pasta factory!" The destinations come under further scrutiny as Campanile points out the apparent uselessness of another television representation of industrial food production: "Pasta factories, just like orange soda or *panettoni* or candy manufacturers, we see dozens of them these days in commercials." Adding a darkly humorous twist to the show's off-the-beaten-track exploration, Campanile reports an alleged food poisoning incident involving Soldati, who purportedly needed medical attention after eating a rare specimen of "eel chicken" purchased in Milan. This "eel chicken," claims the journalist, was the only original product revealed by Soldati's gastronomic tour. The rest of the show was old news (8-9). Besides the featured products, Campanile interestingly pokes fun at Soldati's interview style, and particularly at his habit of simulating ignorance with interviewees: "Visiting a pasta factory, the visitor-interviewer was looking with a mix of curiosity and disbelief at those string-shaped products called spaghetti, as if he was seeing them for the first time: 'And these? Spaghetti... Maltagliati...' 'Ah... maltagliati...' 'Penne...' 'Penne?' 'Penne' [...] The interview continued with thoughtful pauses: 'Do you eat pasta yourself?' 'Yes' 'How many times a week?' 'Every day' [...] 'And where are you from?' 'From Parma.' 'So, you are from Parma... And you eat pasta every day...' (9). Soldati's repetitions and seemingly rhetorical questions, which inspired Campanile's humor, evidently differed from most television hosts concerned primarily with not wasting air time. By contrast, he made a conscious effort to slow down, explain the images when necessary, and elicit different voices at the microphone, even if it drew the ridicule of his fellow intellectuals.

Soldati contributed to a growing interest in gastronomy among intellectuals in the 1950s, but did so on different terms from other gourmets. For the most part, intellectuals were claiming gastronomy's place in high culture. Publishers and academics were recognizing the value of seminal cookbooks and gastronomic texts through new editions and literary awards. Institutions like the new *Accademia Italiana della Cucina* advocated the safeguard of endangered culinary traditions.²⁶ While these intellectual endeavors raised the profile of gastronomic discourse, so did its inclusion among legitimate subjects of expertise for contestants on *Lascia o Raddoppia* (see Barron 103). However, if television played its part in extending gastronomy's right of citizenship to more than a few practitioners, it did so more significantly through *JIPV*. Gastronomy in this documentary went beyond the expertise of one "knowledgeable amateur" displayed for a cash prize. Speaking from their homes, farms, workshops, and factories, interviewees shared a form of genuine knowledge, developed through work and experience. Rather than simply defending endangered traditions and elevating the status of gastronomy, *JIPV* popularized it and recognized that much of this valuable knowledge came from ordinary people.

The show validated the coexistence of standardized alimentary habits and enduring local traditions. The nationwide homogenization created by the availability of packaged and preserved foods, the show suggested, would not completely erase traditional practices and the values they

embodied. Instead, these practices could coexist in the new Italy. Using television to establish connections, *JIPV* documented the diversity in local foodways and sustained the transmission of knowledge. The side-by-side presentation of industrial and artisanal food production, paired with direct interpellation of common people via the interview, activated among viewers a form of identification with an aspect of Italian culture that pre-existed political unification. The shared patrimony of gastronomy, localized but based on widely recognizable experiences, connected the viewers with the interviewees and with one another. By showcasing food production, culinary practices and eating habits of a variety of people, *JIPV* activated a sense of belonging to a collective body that was extremely diverse yet somehow familiar, a gastronomic and cultural entity that we know as Italy.

¹ “Se io avessi dovuto limitare la mia ricerca del genuino soltanto a ciò che è artigianale, a ciò che è manuale, a ciò che è tradizionale, io avrei finito per mostrare ai nostri telespettatori una gastronomia alla quale la grande maggioranza, in quasi tutti i casi, deve rinunciare, a meno che volesse morir di fame” (Episode 7). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are mine.

² This work was supported by the Jane Rosenthal Heimerdinger Fund and the Lucy Maynard Salmon Research Fund through the Vassar College Research Committee. I also thank RAI *Teche* for granting me access to the documentary.

³ “La prima esperienza che ho avuto, appena ho cominciato a girare è stata questa: che tutto oggi è industriale. Tutto, o quasi tutto, la grande maggioranza di quello di cui noi ci nutriamo è industrializzato, è sulla grande scala” (Episode 7).

⁴ Massimo Montanari has written extensively on this subject. See M. Montanari, *Italian Identity in the Kitchen*, and Alberto Capatti and M. Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*.

⁵ As Courtney Ritter cogently argued regarding the documentary series *Chi legge? Viaggio lungo il Tirreno* created by Soldati and Cesare Zavattini in 1960, in these interview-based documentary series early Italian television allowed Italians to participate in the writing of new Italian culture according to a Gramscian national-popular ideal. While the focus on reading in *Chi legge?* combined high and low culture by intertwining the host’s literary discourse with the oral history provided by interviewees, *Viaggio nella valle del Po* activated a discourse that was already simultaneously elite and popular: gastronomy.

⁶ On the pedagogical mission of early Italian television see Barron, Gundle, Monteleone, Grasso.

⁷ In the first decades of its existence RAI produced numerous *inchieste*, multi-episode documentaries that exploited the portability of television cameras and microphones to explore different geographical areas, social groups, or specific aspects of contemporary life. With series like *Viaggio nel Sud* (Virgilio Sabel, 1958), *La donna che lavora* (Ugo Zatterin e Giovanni Salvi: 1959), *Chi legge? Viaggio lungo le rive del Tirreno* (Mario Soldati e Cesare Zavattini, 1960), *Noi come siamo. Dialoghi con gli italiani* (Virgilio Sabel, 1960, 7 puntate), *Giovani d’oggi* (Carlo Alberto Chiesa, 1960), *Noi e l’automobile* (Luciano Emmer, 1962), *Viaggio nell’Italia che cambia* (Ugo Zatterin, 1963) RAI took on the documentary impulse that had characterized some post-war Italian film and extended its application to include larger segments of the population.

These interview-based documentary series situated themselves at the crucial juncture between RAI’s pedagogical mission and its involvement of the provinces in the creation of a national television audience.

⁸ Henceforth *JIPV*.

⁹ See Vera Zamagni’s calculations on food consumption reported in Helstosky 139.

¹⁰ “The consumption of corn – the hallmark of poverty – decreased from an average of 22 kg per year in 1951-55 to only 7.7 kg by 1965-69. The consumption of tomatoes, citrus fruits, beef, veal, and poultry doubled and the consumption of coffee and sugar tripled over the course of the 1950s” (Helstosky 138).

¹¹ The profound socio-economic transformation set in motion by the introduction of supermarkets would become more evident by the 1970s. Comedian Renato Pozzetto’s famous monologue “Supermarket” (1972) spoofed the lure of modernization as a smokescreen for the gradual buyout of mom-and-pop stores.

¹² On the *questione della lingua*, the debate surrounding the Italian national language, see Richardson.

¹³ “For many people television and exposure to consumerism were one and the same. TV revealed a new world, by offering to viewers many images, models and ideas that implied a break with their everyday experience. At the same time, it couldn’t avoid highlighting the disparity that still existed between available goods and the real financial possibilities of vast social strata and areas of the country” (Gundle 584).

¹⁴ On *Lascia o Raddoppia*'s successful mediation of local identities and global factors see Ferrari.

¹⁵ “*Campanile Sera* had such unexpectedly wide appeal because it proved, for the first time, television’s ability to attract interest in a country as polycentric and centrifugal as ours [...]; to inspire affection for small towns, which turned out to be [...] the unexpected custodians of a sense of unity, of a lost philosophy of life [...] which had disintegrated in the big cities (Gian Luigi Beccaria, quoted in Bettetini and Grasso 149).

¹⁶ See Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow* for an analysis of how the ruling Christian Democrats (DC), with the support of the Church and the United States, harnessed nascent popular culture in the 1950s to maintain a conservative Catholic cultural hegemony over Italy as a bulwark against Communism. Television proved particularly effective in depoliticizing cultural consumption and presenting a conventional, conciliatory view of contemporary society. However, despite the DC’s efforts to control the message, “visual broadcasting inescapably reflected and contributed to the emergence of a consumer society whose values and behavioral models were in the long run to prove very difficult to reconcile with the Catholic social model” (79).

¹⁷ Broadcast between the evening news and the prime-time show, *Carosello* included four or five ads per day. Each spot could only mention the product in the 30-second *coda*, which followed a 1’45” original sketch or animated story, and it could only be broadcast once. Under such strict rules, creativity flourished and the show achieved an enormous popularity in its own right, particularly among children. See Ginsborg 327; Gundle 77-81; Monteleone 318-19; Piazzoni 57-58.

¹⁸ A thorough analysis of the use of high culture and mass-culture in *Carosello* and in other early RAI programming can be found in Barron 215-37.

¹⁹ “Novellara è una piccola città come ce ne sono tante in questa zona dell’Emilia – ne ricordo delle altre anche più grandi, Mirandola, Nonantola, Carpi – e si assomigliano, benché ciascuna abbia qualche cosa di diverso, naturalmente: le strade grandi come fiumi, i portici da una parte e dall’altra. Città distese sotto il sole, che danno l’idea del benessere, della prosperità, di gente che lavora, che sta bene, che è allegra, che mangia, che beve. Questa è l’impressione che si ha.”

²⁰ “La grande industria, non è che non produca genuino. Produce secondo le condizioni d’ambiente, storiche, che si sono verificate mano a mano che nel susseguirsi, nell’evoluzione, nel nostro caso, dell’agricoltura e della produzione del latte... il latte non è più quello di prima.”

²¹ As Montanari states, “Identity—alimentary as well as every other kind—is not inscribed in the genes of a people or in the ancient history of their origins, but is constructed historically through the day-to-day dynamic of exchanges between individuals, experiences, and different cultures.” *Italian Identity*, 75.

²² “Quello che è molto bello del nostro paese è che a distanza di 50-60 km, come siamo venuti oggi, veniamo dal parmense: cambia il modo di mangiare, cambiano le case, il dialetto è quasi uguale ma il carattere è diverso.”

²³ First published in 1891, Pellegrino Artusi’s *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* has gained recognition as the first book to define a national culture through gastronomy for the middle class. Both Piero Camporesi and Luigi Ballerini provide extensive introductions to the Italian and English edition, respectively. For a concise discussion of Italian food culture after national unification see Parasecoli, 149-63.

²⁴ On the use of advertising to create, in particular, female consumers in post-war Italy see Garvin, and Valoroso.

²⁵ After being for centuries a common grain preparation throughout the peninsula, *polenta* became associated with Northern Italy particularly after the introduction of maize. Traditionally a staple for the poor, *polenta* found its way to the tables of the upper classes through ennobling additions and pairings. However, when maize *polenta* became a symbol of peasant subsistence and malnourishment in the eighteenth century, the stigma of poverty remained attached to the dish until the late twentieth century. Partially revalued in modern healthy dietary trends, it was adopted as a political symbol in the 1990s, when the Northern League used it to defend a regional “*padan* (Po valley)” identity against alleged foreign infiltrations. See Capatti and Montanari 44-51, Parasecoli 237-39.

²⁶ Writer and journalist Orio Vergani announced the “revival of gastronomy” in an article published prominently in the *Radiocorriere* a few weeks after the launch of *JIVP*: new publications, art exhibits, and other scholarly endeavors pointed to the emergence of a “gastronomical conscience:” “the spirit and the stomach, the brains and the palate ... are in cahoots now.” Besides *Accademia*, founded by Vergani himself in 1953 to “protect the traditions of Italian cuisine,” in 1956 food and wine connoisseur Luigi Veronelli started publishing the journal *Il Gastronomo* (The Gastronomer). Its stated goal was “to help gastronomes and cooks take Italian cuisine back to the splendor of the past.”

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