

LA DOLCE VITA
UNIVERSITY



*An Unconventional Guide to
Italian Culture from A to Z*

◆ SAMPLE ESSAYS ◆

CARLA GAMBESCIA

WITH MICHAEL STEIN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LANNIE HART

◆ AMARETTI, AMARETTO, AMARONE



They're three very similar words, but they refer to very different and vital parts of the Italian culinary and viticultural heritage, and the differences are the key to relishing a delightful range of Italian desserts and wines.

All share the same root, “amaro,” which means bitter, although none are actually bitter and the first two are sweet. Amaretti and amaretto are both flavored with bitter almonds and use a diminutive ending, suggesting just a little or just a hint. Not so much bitter as sharp, with a bit of an edge.

Amaretti cookies were the original macaroon, predating French-style macaroons by over 150 years. They are thought to have been first created in the mid-17th century by Francesco Moriondo, pastry chef of the Court of Savoy in Northern Italy (their close cookie relative, biscotti, (*biscotto* singular), has been around since ancient Roman times—see “*Vin Santo e Biscotti*”). These delectable little morsels are crisp and crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside; they're ideal as a postprandial dessert and can lend an unexpected sweet note and textural accent when crumbled over pasta dishes such as *Pasta con Zucca e Amaretti*—pasta with pumpkin and amaretti.

Amaretto, the after-dinner liqueur, is made from bitter almonds and the pits of apricots. There has been an unsurprising conflation of amaretto and *amore* (“love”) and natural associations with romance. Perhaps it's just a sentimental legend, but a Renaissance-style “love story” has been promoted by the di Saronno family as to the “origin” of this velvety-rich amber-colored spirit:

In 1525, a church in the town of Saronno (not far from Milan) commissioned a star pupil of Leonardo di Vinci—Bernadino Luini—to paint its frescoes. The church, like so many in Italy, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, requiring Luini to find a model as an inspiration for his Madonna. He chose a lovely

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young widow innkeeper of limited means as his model ... and then lover. As a humble gift, she steeped apricot kernels in brandy and presented her sweet intoxicating creation to Luini.

Amaretto, like Limoncello, is made as an infusion, which means that, like the legendary lovely widow, you can create your own by yourself at home. It also means, as the story shows, that actual almonds need not be used. So if you have a nut allergy you can still feel the love!

As for **Amarone**, that means “big” or “great bitter”—even though it’s paradoxically not bitter at all, and, as often in Italian, there’s an anecdote for that. *Amarone della Valpolicella*, from the Veneto region, is one of Italy’s most distinctive and appreciated robust red wines. Its contradictory name came out of its accidental discovery: the story goes that a winemaker found a forgotten barrel of sweet dessert wine that had not been properly sealed, allowing the yeast to continue to ferment. He tasted the wine, expecting it to be bitter, and cried out enthusiastically “*questo non è amaro, questo è un amarone!*” (this is not bitter, this is a great bitter!).

Today to replicate the winemaker’s happy accident and make Amarone takes a lot of time, labor, and grapes for every bottle. To produce one bottle of wine, a winemaker in any other part of the world will vinify approximately 2 1/4 pounds of grapes. For each bottle of Amarone approximately 23 pounds are required. And those grapes must dehydrate into raisins before vinification truly begins. Amarone is high in alcohol, with intense aromatics and complex flavors that can range from dark fruits like berry, cherry, and plum to licorice, coffee, and chocolate.

You’d think a wine like that would be better known, and it almost was. In his classic crime thriller *Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter spoke to Clarice Starling about savoring “fava beans and a nice Amarone,”—underscoring that it goes quite well with liver, though Lecter’s choice of the liver source would not be anyone else’s. But in the movie Anthony Hopkins turned that, in a brilliant moment of improvisation, into “Chianti,” having devilish fun with the “eee.” And so Amarone was ready for its closeup, and just missed it.

Still this is a glass of rich, figgy tannic red wine (which goes well with fava beans and, yes, liver), and one can definitely follow it with an amaretti

cookie, and amaretto liqueur, an excellent combination for finishing a meal, and so a sequence well worth remembering.

♦ BARBELLS AND BIKINIS

If you thought the bikini was invented by the French after the war (and cleverly named for the Bikini Islands where “explosive” atomic tests were being conducted), think again. There are floor mosaics of athletic women in Sicily, with very well-toned abs, competing in running and weightlifting in what would pass for bikinis on any beach in Europe, and that predate the post-WWII bathing sensation by about seventeen hundred years.

The “Bikini Girls” are perhaps the most astonishing, unexpected, and famous mosaic in the Villa Romana del Casale in the town of Piazza Armerina (see “Hall of the Hunt”). When these 4th-century Roman mosaics were made known, to quite a bit of publicity, one hundred years ago, these portraits of stunningly modern-looking young women were originally thought to be a beauty contest. Closer analysis (of what clearly seem to be barbells and a discus) reveals that they most likely depict a kind of montage of female athletes in a competition; in the center is the winner with her trophies of a floral crown and palm scepter.



This interpretation is supported by evidence from the 4th century that it was expected for a wealthy aristocratic Roman woman to participate in sports—these were not Stephen Sondheim’s “ladies who lunch.” The sponsorship of contests of female athletes was clearly an elite pursuit attesting to the elevated status of the owner of the Villa Casale, no doubt one reason for the celebratory mosaic. Also, this sort of garb was for female participation in sport, since Romans swam nude.

Which means that the young women in the mosaic don’t just anticipate the bikinis of the 1950s, but the sports bras and female triathlete gear of the 21st century! Well, Italians have always been “fashion forward.”

♦ DANTE'S COMMEDIA

Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy) stands tall among the masterworks of world literature, a fitting companion to the greatest creations of Shakespeare and Homer, any single one of which it easily surpasses in both its scope and complexity. Inarguably the very finest work—and in some sense, the *charter* work—in all of Italian literature, Dante's epic poem qualifies as a grand adventure, a gothic thriller, a unique travelogue (to the afterlife, for *heaven's* sake!), a morality tale, and a love story all wrapped up in one magnificent package.



Dante was idolized for his crowning literary and humanitarian achievement not just by luminaries like Boccaccio and Michelangelo from centuries ago but also by William Butler Yeats and the great modernists James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot.

The circumstances leading to its creation are well-known. Not only an esteemed poet but also a politically active Florentine, Dante was banished from his city upon penalty of death while away on a diplomatic mission when his White Guelph ruling party was violently toppled by the opposing Black Guelphs. At age 35, Dante was suddenly deprived of not only his political and social standing but also of all his assets and even his family: he was broke and alone. Understandably his spirits were also very nearly broken. Out of the trauma of Dante's exile and consequent spiritual crisis arose phoenix-like his defining work, a genuinely heroic feat of recovery and response. It begins, appropriately enough, with this stanza: *Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark / For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

Dante's masterwork is accomplished in too many ways to render justice to here, but let that not prevent us from noting just a few. As already mentioned, it's a genre-bender: an unprecedented amalgam of adventure, gothic thriller, "travelogue," morality tale, and love story. It's astonishingly "modern" in its treatment of the human psyche: both Dante the pilgrim's, as he evolves during the course of his journey into the afterlife, and those

of the numerous “spirits” he encounters along the way. It’s a miracle of compositional structure, both on the macro basis of the epic’s grand design and on a micro basis with the invention and use of *terza rima*, an interlocking rhyme scheme which creates a phonic daisy chain that propels the narrative, and us, headlong though Dante the pilgrim’s journey while also reinforcing the work’s unity.

Dante’s *Commedia* is also an aural wonder, an exemplar of the *dolce stil nuovo* (sweet new style) that was meant for the ears rather than just the eyes. Dante the poet wanted the experience and lessons of Dante the pilgrim’s journey to be shared with ordinary folks who happened to be illiterate and not just the upper classes, so he deliberately, and audaciously, chose to craft his masterwork in language close to the vernacular of his native Tuscany rather than the classical Latin read only by the elites of his day. The instant popularity of Dante’s *Commedia* as a spoken work not only led in due course to higher rates of literacy but also to the institutionalization of the work’s Tuscan variant as the official Italian language. No other work in the history of world literature could make a comparable claim.

Dante’s *Commedia* remains as fresh and vital today as when it was conceived. It has become a part of the Italian collective consciousness; every Italian can recite at least a few stanzas. As but one testament to its standing as an abiding source of inspiration and pride in its native land, fully sixty percent of Italy’s population tuned in to a recent broadcast reading of the *Commedia* by actor and comedian Roberto Benigni. (For years Benigni has starred in a one-man show called *Tutto Dante*, invariably sold out.) For most Italians Dante is revered as more than a literary giant: he’s a national hero.

Sadly, Dante’s hope of returning from exile never came to pass; after twenty years of wandering exile he died in Ravenna. But the bane of his exile was transformed into a literary boon for generations to follow. James Joyce, in his semi-autobiographic 1916 novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, aspired to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” Arguably Dante got there six hundred years sooner.

♦ FELLINIESQUE

“Life is a combination of magic and pasta.” —Federico Fellini



Conjure up a fantastical world where dreamscapes and human landscapes become one; a world of sensual enjoyment and extravagant vitality that sometimes seems all a pageant or a circus parade; a world of lost boys and playboys and film maestros and their ample-breasted seductresses; and the flamboyant lyricism of that world can only belong to one filmmaker.

Originally a neorealist director, Federico Fellini moved into more poetic territory in *La Strada* and *Nights of Cabiria*, tales of loving and long-suffering women, a circus strongman's wife and a prostitute, played by his wife and muse, Giulietta Masina. Subsequent films featured dreams and surreal fantasies that celebrated life and love or symbolized its most grotesque nightmares; in masterpieces like *La Dolce Vita*, *8 ½*, and *Amarcord*—with operatic brio and passages of visionary cinema—Fellini told stories of romance and spiritual desolation, the struggle to create art, and the vagaries of memory.

Fellini's cinematic and actual home was Rome, and in *Fellini's Roma*, he finally made it his protagonist. Not just a glorified travelogue as some have suggested, this is a portrait of the eternal city as equally carnal and sacred, and in its series of vignettes, sometimes the two seem interchangeable.

The prostitute, a symbol of transient pleasures of the flesh, becomes eternal; and the Church, symbol of the infinite, becomes temporal. In *Roma's* most audacious sequence (preceded by a parade of prostitutes), Fellini presents a “Vatican fashion show,” with roller-skating priests and bishops whose robes are festooned with blinking neon lights. And to the question one onlooker poses—should the world follow the Church or the Church the world?—Fellini's satire suggests the Church, with its pomp and splendor and worship of a “Holy Father” whose word is absolute, entered the world a long time ago; why not also advertise its garments as fashionwear and tart up the holy vestments?

What's the boundary between reality and unreality, the sacred and the profane? Fellini doesn't draw it, and he seems to believe that Rome can't either. For in Felliniesque cinema, as much as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "we are such stuff as dreams are made of."

♦ GELATO, AMBROSIA OF THE BOOT

The experience of gelato in Italy is a revelation. As in so many of their native products, Italians seem to achieve something bordering on magical with this dessert.

The word "gelato" is derived from the Latin for "frozen," but that does not remotely begin to capture its essence. Those who know both gelato and American ice cream tend to equate the two, but it's truly "different in kind" from its American counterpart.

For starters, in warm weather months gelato is ubiquitous throughout the Boot, which is not necessarily good, but in this case, it is. In every village, town, and city you will find dazzling displays of colorful flavors swirled into creamy peaks garnished artistically with fresh fruit and nuts, which create curiosity and wake up your appetite even if you have none (so often eyes tell the stomach what to think). Most gelato cases are filled with a plethora of flavors, usually no less than twenty, some of which you may have never had before or even imagined. Many proprietors, especially in a busy place, are not much for letting you sample, but you can get multiple flavors in a cup, and you can have gelato more than once a day. Still nothing quite prepares you for that first experience on your palate (and being reminded of "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa"... or, in other words "I'll have what she's having").

The differences come down to both texture and flavor. Typical American ice cream is whipped at high speed with air, something it sometimes contains by as much as 60 percent, while gelato contains very little. You'll notice as soon as gelato touches your tongue that it's exceptionally creamy. Fat conscious? Don't fret; creamy richness does *not* equate to fat grams! The intense "true" flavor you experience when you sample well-made gelato is a result of the significantly lower fat content (up to 50 percent). Extra fat serves to coat your tongue and mask your taste buds' ability to more directly experience the true flavors from the finest ingredients. So in the case of gelato less fat means more flavor (for many of us, this is perhaps the most important food fact we will ever learn). And much of the gelato served in

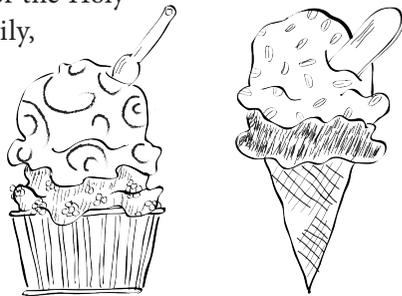
Italy is held at higher temperatures, softening it and further amplifying the flavor.

Cool refreshing indulgences similar to gelato have a long history dating back to biblical times. Isaac served Abraham a yummy concoction of snow, honey, and goat's milk: this was referenced as "sherbet." Around 3000 BCE, Chinese emperors began enjoying frozen treats made from snow, fruit, wine, and honey. Later the Chinese introduced their delicacy to Arab traders who then shared their delicious discovery with the Romans and Venetians. Something similar to *sorbetto* was a favorite of Emperor Nero who sent an army of slaves into the Apennines each year to gather snow that could be stored in caves so that he could enjoy his favorite cool fruity indulgence throughout the year.

It was in late Renaissance Florence that the revolutionary idea of using cow's milk was first conceived by one of the personal chefs of Caterina de Medici. When Caterina married Henry II of France, she was accompanied by her chefs, who were included as part of her dowry along with their recipes and many other ingredients of modern cuisine. A century later a Sicilian opened a wildly successful café serving gelato on the Left Bank of Paris that is still in business today—Café Procope, at 330 years of age the oldest restaurant in continuous operation in Paris. Remaining more a delicacy of the noble class, these frozen delights spread to England and then made their way to America, where they evolved (devolved?) into ice cream. Gelato, meanwhile, never waned in its hold on Europe and especially Italy.

You can find outstanding gelati everywhere on the peninsula (however quality does vary and there is more and more mass production; look for "artigianale" and beware of colors that are too bright and peaks that look too uniform). If you are in search of the Holy

Grail of gelato, many suggest Sicily, where most gelateria still make gelato by hand in small batches. In the modest yet dazzling baroque city of Noto on Sicily's southeastern coast, legions of visitors come to Caffè Sicilia on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele in search of its artfully made marmalades, honeys, nougats, pas-



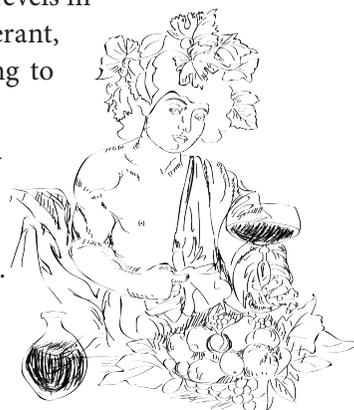
gelato e cone?

tries, and, above all, gelati. Aficionados describe the store's fourth-generation owner and chef as a (mad) genius and an alchemist of flavors. They say his *fragola sorbetto* tastes like the iced cool essence of luscious, sun-ripened strawberries, freshly picked; the chocolate gelato is so dark and rich it is said to be almost a spiritual experience; and that seismic sensations can be brought on by tasting *gelato di fior di spezia* (spice flower) and *gelato di insalata di arance* (blood orange salad) flavors, fusions of tastes woven from centuries of cultural history combined in the heavenly experience of true gelato.

♦ INNER ITALIAN

The “Inner Italian”—a concept that will have resonance for anyone reading this book regardless of inherited ethnicity—is that part of our nature that most easily falls in love, dreams, and revels in the senses. It is our most expressive, exuberant, spontaneous self—there inside just waiting to be set free.

We associate Italians with being convivial and festive. We're used to visiting sunny Italy and encountering a host of garrulous, gregarious, and ebullient people. But it's worth remembering that we also love Italy for its centuries of monumental (especially in Rome) achievements in art, architecture, music, clothing, glassware, not to mention, of course, the cuisine . . . and the list goes on and on.



Still there seems to be a lightness of spirit that's gone along with these centuries of struggle and labor, and a feeling of celebration of life as the embodiment of the Dionysian (Bacchus in Roman mythology) archetype. Demeter, it was said, put Dionysius, the god of wine, on earth to “lift the care of mortals.” And not just with drunkenness. Dionysius is also the god of divine inspiration, releasing the best in us.

For part of his spell is an acute passionate experience of the presence of life in the present moment, being at one's most receptive and responsive. Perhaps that, and not just the tendency to speak more honestly when not

so inhibited, was what Pliny the Elder meant when he so aptly said “*In vino veritas*,”—in wine, truth.

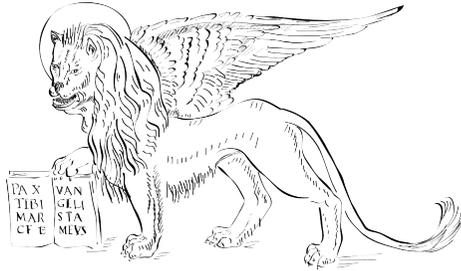
To be truly in the moment, open to life, enraptured by it. . . that was captured by another lesser-known Italian sage, Domenico Modugno, in his very Italian song “Volare.” He sang about flying in an endless “blue painted blue” sky of love and art (Marc Chagall, to be specific) to “the heights of the sun” as a soft music played just for him.

Letting yourself go, flying free, as one arranges beautifully words, and art, and life.

We all love and need to travel to Italy, with or without a plane ticket.

♦ LEONE

Lions had disappeared from what is now considered Western Europe by the time of Christ, half a millennium before the first settlement formed near what is now considered Venice. One might wonder, then, why lions seem to pop up on buildings, flags and countless other surfaces throughout the city.



It all began with a heist.

The year was 828. Two Venetian merchants, Buono da Malamocco and Rustico da Torcello, made their way to Alexandria, Egypt on a surreptitious mission, their objective to retrieve the remains of St. Mark the Evangelist who had been martyred in that African city seven and a half centuries earlier.

Although Venice possessed the remains of Theodor of Amasea who it claimed as its patron saint, the Adriatic city was by then well on its way to becoming a commercial and territorial world power, fully deserving of a patron saint of sufficient status to affirm its rightful standing before God as well as man. In a sense, snagging an evangelist’s bones was like securing ecclesiastical plutonium: one instantly became a member of “the nuclear club” (along with, say, Rome, which boasted the primo apostle Peter) in first millennium terms.

The two Venetians had willing accomplices: priests from the church of St. Mark in Alexandria who feared for the saint's remains from the ruling Saracens. Thus the heist was in part an inside job. Employing an ingenious gambit, the merchants were able to smuggle Saint Mark's body past Muslim guards at the port of Alexandria and out of the country by wrapping it in a layer of pork and cabbage; the guards recoiled at the porcine cargo and readily let it pass.

When St. Mark's body (*sans* head, as it happens) arrived in Venice, it immediately supplanted the remains of St. Theodor in the doge's private chapel, and work began almost immediately on sumptuous and grand basilica—also a property of the doge, but open to citizens of the Republic—that would serve as a more suitable setting for such a prize possession. (Back in Alexandria, St. Mark's remains had been replaced by a lesser known martyr, St. Claudia, so something of a slow motion “three-saint monte” had just played out across two continents.)

The ubiquitous lion of Venice is in fact the *winged* lion symbol of St. Mark (established in the Apocalypse of St. John 4:7), the patron saint to which the rising Venetian Republic had traded up.

La Serenissima gained a high octane saint and the ruling caliphate in Alexandria lost a strategic asset, if only for blackmail purposes. Had the Muslim port guards only known of Homer's *Odyssey* they might have been better prepared: *Beware of Venetians importing pork.*

♦ NUTELLA

Italy's most successful modern entrepreneur made his fortune by staying in touch with his inner child and living as a real life Willy Wonka. Michele Ferrero, creator of the global brand Nutella, was a shy, humble man who died never having given a newspaper interview. His estimated net worth was \$26.5 billion and he ranked 22nd on a recent Forbes list of billionaires—his empire built, as the magazine very simply stated, from “chocolates.”



His most delectable invention, Nutella, a creamy chocolate hazelnut spread, has been part of the collective memory of Italian children for the

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past fifty years, as comforting and beloved a mainstay of their world as Oreos and Coca Cola are for American kids. And today this holds true well beyond Italy's borders, as Nutella is an international phenomenon that has truly captivated the world's taste buds; 2014's estimated global sales in 53 countries were 365,000,000 kg. That's 2.2 million pounds a day!

Ferraro's greatest skill was his sense and knowledge of what children want. "Never patronize a child" he is quoted as saying in the 2004 book, *Nutella: An Italian Legend* by Gigi Padovoni.

The story of Nutella begins in the 1940s with Ferrero's father Pietro, a pastry chef from Turin, capital of the hazelnut-rich region of Piedmont and home of the premium chocolate confection *gianduaia* (see "Gianduaia"). He had been observing factory workers eating bread with tomatoes and cheese as a meal and thought they might want something *dolce* to go along with it. His response was a *pastone* (pastry mesh) of chocolate and hazelnuts and cocoa butter shaped into a loaf and wrapped in tinfoil so it could be sliced like a *salumi*. He called it *Pasta Gianduija*. The workers liked it, but its real fans were their children, who ultimately became the target market. And since *Pasta Gianduija* was far less expensive than chocolate this added greatly to its appeal.

Shortly after World War II Piero died and his son Michele took over the factory. On a very hot day in the summer of 1949 a mishap occurred: the loaves at the warehouse melted and they were forced to transfer the now spreadable product into jars. That mishap soon qualified as a divine accident in every sense of the word, a pivotal transformation, as Ferrero began to sell this softer, creamier, more versatile and convenient *Pasta Gianduija* under the new name *Supercrema Gianduija*.

Then, in another serendipitous event, a 1962 Italian law forbade brand names with superlatives (e.g., "super," "ultra") so another name had to be chosen. The name that emerged had an English word as its root, "nut," combined with the Italian suffix "ella" and all its affectionate connotations (as in *mozzarella* and *tagliatella*).

In 1964 the renamed Nutella made its commercial debut with a splash of clever television advertising and branding: a little spreadable joy. . . something "special" without it being a Sunday or holiday or birthday. . . a yummy antidote to small sadnesses and disappointments. Bambini were besotted,

and in the '70s Nutella hit big in Europe and then reached the United States in 1983, where its use exploded (witness the street corner crepe stand).

Michele Ferrero didn't stop there. He oversaw a multinational confectionery empire which included other tasty and whimsical creations like minty and fruity TicTac's, Ferrer Rocher candies, Mon Cheri (cherry liquor filled chocolates), and Kinder Eggs and Kinder snack. It seems no accident that that last product name can refer to "kindness" or "children."

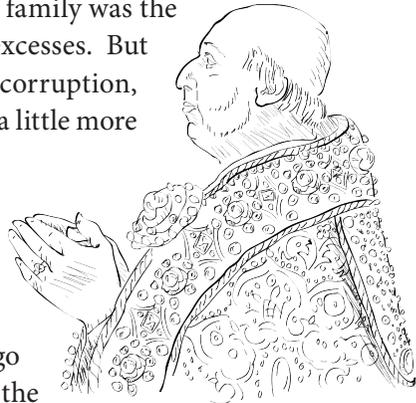
Ferrero was passionate about product quality, and his secret Nutella recipe has the legendary aura of the original Coke formula. And unlike with Coke, Nutella's imitators have all failed miserably, in part because the public imagination has invested the original with so much love and even national pride—on Nutella's 50th anniversary the Italian government issued a commemorative stamp.

Michele Ferrero died a year later, poetically on Valentine's Day, 2015. Posts on Twitter read "world's flag should be at half mast: Nutella owner has died." For this deeply religious man—he made a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Madonna of Lourdes each year—perhaps an appropriate epitaph would be "... and a little child shall lead them" from *Isaiah 11:6*. One likes to imagine a flock of *amorini* and *putti* giving him a happy welcome.

♦ SYMPATHY FOR THE BORGIA

From the great novel *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci* by Dmitry Merezhkovsky to a world-famous television series, the verdict seems to be in that the Borgia family was the nadir of Renaissance cruelty and excesses. But measured against the libertinism, corruption, and violence of the era, the story gets a little more complicated.

For example, by current standards, a pope who fornicated with at least two women we know of and probably bribed his way into the papacy seems . . . pretty bad. But Rodrigo de Borja, who became Alexander VI, the second Borja pope after Alfons de Borja,



Pope Callixtus III, reigned in an age when the Holy See had secular power and wealth rivaling other Italian city-states. Using devious tactics to gain the papacy was not unheard of; nor was charging money for forgiveness of sins, known as simony; nor was it unusual for the Pope to consolidate or expand his power through nepotism and warfare using papal armies, or to have a mistress, as Alexander VI undoubtedly did in the person of Vannozza dei Cattanei.

Caesare Borgia may have been the most infamous of the Renaissance's warring princes; while Alexander was pope, he undertook a northern Italian campaign to create his own kingdom out of the holdings of the petty tyrants of the State of the Church, and left a trail of assassinations in his wake. But again, it wasn't unusual for relatives of popes to embark on such murderous campaigns to add to their land holdings, especially if they came originally from a landless cash-strapped parvenu Spanish family like the Borjas turned Borgias.

And was Caesare's sister, the infamous Lucrezia, an incestuous whore, poisoner, murderer, and witch? Some sources say otherwise, depicting her as a woman respected by the nobility and intelligentsia of her day. Was the Borgias "Banquet of the Chestnuts," long considered one of the Renaissance's ultimate orgies, for real? We have only the accounts of Johann Burchard, an anti-Borgia papal official.

The point may be that the victors get to write history—and blacken the losers' names. The Borgias originated in Valencia, Spain, and thus were loathed by many 15th-century Italians. Pope Alexander in particular, through flagrant practices like living publicly with his mistress and their children, drew such condemnation that he gave traction to the fanatical anti-papal Savonarola in Florence and his bonfires of the vanities—not to mention the beginnings of the Protestant reformation.

Caesare Borgia's conquests ended after Julius II, the "warrior pope" from the more successful and long-established della Rovere family, came to power. The Borgias didn't even leave much art behind, though Alexander had the master Pinturicchio paint lush frescoes in his Borgia Apartments downstairs from the Vatican's Raphael Rooms, which include (they were completed in 1494) perhaps the first picture of a Native American in European history.

These apartments were closed off in black crepe by Pope Julius II, who spurned his predecessor, and not reopened until 1889, which symbolizes the job history did on the Borgias. All in all, it's not as if the Borgias didn't earn their bad reputation—but by the standards of the Italian Renaissance, they were overpaid.

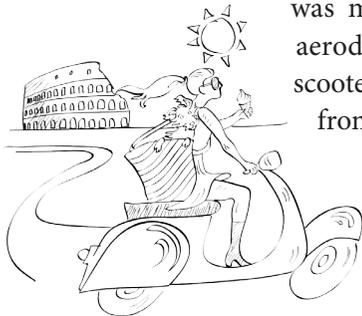
♦ THE VESPA

Introduced over seventy years ago, the Vespa, both sexy and practical, has become synonymous with stylish spontaneity, freedom, and *la dolce vita*. And it can be parked almost anywhere—in the narrow cobblestone alleyways of little hill towns or in a triple-park traffic nightmare in Rome.

Following World War II an inexpensive alternative to the automobile suitable for maneuvering around the bomb-damaged cities was needed and only in Italy could a homely mini-military vehicle inspire the invention of a cultural icon.

Industrialist Enrico Piaggio was determined to get his factories working again, and began building prototype scooters resembling the U.S.'s olive-colored Cushman Airborn motorcycles that had been parachuted into the northern industrial regions of Italy and used by the troops against the Germans. The early prototype was a funny shaped ugly duckling nicknamed "Paperino" (after Donald Duck). Piaggio didn't like it and assigned aeronautics engineer Corradino D'Ascanio to redesign it. D'Ascanio preferred aircraft to motorcycles, seeing them as cumbersome and dirty. With a mind for the practical and an eye for the sleek, he created the prototype which stands as a marvel of modern design engineering.

Blending aircraft features with those of a motorized scooter, D'Ascanio abided by the ethos of "form follows function." For easy access, the gearshift



was moved onto the handlebar and, thinking aerodynamically, he altered the shape of the scooter's body and designed it to protect the driver

from rain, mud, and road dirt. Another game-changer was a seat which made the vehicle both safer and more comfortable to ride,

with the greasy inner working of the motor concealed behind the seat panels to keep a rider's clothes in *la bella figura*

condition. And the practical step-through frame meant it was also perfectly suited for skirt-wearing *signoras* and *signorinas* to zip around in. The story goes (and one only hopes it's true, because truth here is indeed beauty) that when Piaggio saw the prototype, because of its narrow chassis and buzzing sound, he instantly named it la Vespa, meaning "the wasp."

Vespa sales skyrocketed in 1953 when Gregory Peck took Audrey Hepburn for a spin around the eternal city in the film classic *Roman Holiday*, and its popularity has never waned. Today over 16,000,000 Vespas buzz through Italian streets, and it's the vehicle of choice of businessmen, nuns, teenagers, and grandmothers.

♦ THE WOLF WHISPERER

Among the many roles played by St. Francis of Assisi in his brief but storied life, perhaps none was more startling than that of "wolf whisperer."

For a time in the early 13th century the neighboring Umbrian town of Gubbio was terrorized by the threat of a vicious and stealthy wolf. When Francis learned of this local crisis he immediately set out for Gubbio and then, ignoring pleas of the townsfolk, he ventured into the woods beyond. Sure enough, the wolf charged towards Francis, but he stood resolutely in place invoking a higher power. Rather than attack, the wolf then lay down at Francis's feet and listened to his terms of peace. Francis recognized that "Brother Wolf" was just another one of God's creatures who was only acting badly on account of his extreme hunger. So Francis proposed that the townsfolk would feed the wolf if, in turn, the wolf threatened no further harm. The deal was sealed hand in paw and the wolf and townsfolk of Gubbio lived together amicably after that day.

When Brother Wolf died of natural causes a couple of years later, he was mourned and accorded burial in a chapel dedicated to Francis, one of the great peacemakers of his or any other time.

Is the wolf of Gubbio story apocryphal? What's indisputable is that in 1871 workmen found the skeleton of a wolf near Gubbio's church; it was subsequently buried inside.

One of the great Italian filmmakers, Roberto Rossellini, depicted nine episodes from St. Francis' life in *The Flowers of St. Francis*. The original Italian version of the movie used "chapter markers" to separate each of

those episodes, reflecting the text upon which the film had been based. (The very same device was used forty-five years later in the international blockbuster *Babe*—produced and co-written by George Miller and directed by Chris Noonan—about a saintly, Francis-like pig who could also communicate with other animals, bringing love, hope, and peace to his rural realm). In a country that venerates a host of saints, St. Francis, with his doctrines of poverty, humility, and devotion; his generous and forgiving deeds; his caring for the poor; and his love of animals holds a very special place people’s hearts, and naturally, *arte*.



♦ AND Z IS FOR THE ZANNI

He is the most primitive of clowns, earth spirit, creator, trickster, troublemaker. Not as light and clever and playful as *Arlecchino*, he can be a little darker, more primal, the embodiment of impulses of the “id” that come from below. But he is also all about levity, levity, levity, gravity defied, the momentary suspension of seriousness, the piercing of pretense (regardless of who’s pierced, for none of us are immune to his silly slapstick gags, none of us can evade the laughter).

He is also very much part of a group, the *zanni*, the collective of servant characters, who displayed acrobatic and clown-like antics, of *Commedia dell’Arte*. *Arlecchino* can be graceful, but the *zanni* are just on the edge (or quite over the edge) of chaos, and that’s why our word “zany” comes from them. The *zanni* invite us to joyfully engage in nonsense for no purpose other than the joy of being silly.

Arlecchino (who has *zanni* roots) is universally recognizable as an aspect of artful enjoyment, cast as a type in an artistic framework. The *zanni* are more universal. Their close cousins can be found everywhere: Benny Hill, the Marx Brothers, the Italian Tonto, Roberto Benigni, the Three Stooges. They’re pure outlandish, incongruous, extravagantly comical fun.

The best Commedia performances meant the best *zanni* and *zanni* were at their best when they were most in the moment. That was their job, to keep the stock stories interesting, fast-paced, and fresh with their gags and physical comedy. Their stock routines were the *lazzi*, which had no purpose other than laughter, gags that were their catechism of crazy, the “how to” for enacting nonsense. Acrobatic *lazzi*, like leaping back and forth from or running around the stage and the balconies (Harpo Marx); rough-and-tumble *lazzi* as when two clowns, kept from fighting each other, then pummel the intercessor (The Three Stooges); foreign language *lazzi*, as when a clown pretends to know a foreign nobleman’s language and renders it to someone else as gibberish (Sid Caesar).

Federico Fellini’s *The Clowns* begins with a sequence in which a little boy sees a circus tent rise from the night and, as the clowns spill out, he’s terrified, showing how (especially to a child) there is something frightening about their *zanni* energy. But the movie ends with a clown funeral, which, though it starts with the proper rituals, goes crazily wrong, from the assemblage of a coffin that just won’t assemble, to a refractory “mule” that refuses to tow the hearse and turns its back to the clown master and expresses his defiance in no uncertain and very liquid terms. Ultimately the hearse does move on, but only to careen out of control in a wild musical celebration, until it breaks apart to reveal a champagne bottle and the ceremony becomes a confetti-laden uproarious dance and parade in the face of grief.

Fellini knows his *zanni*, and his sequence suggests that the clowns, the stooges, the *zanni* tell us life can purely (and maybe at its best) be silliness, as in the old Disney tune “Put ‘em together and what have you got? Bibbity-bobbity-boo.” It’s not as if the Fairy Godmother isn’t working hard to put it all together for Cinderella—to make a coach out of a pumpkin is no mean feat of fabrication. But ultimately, as the *zanni* tell us with their bodies and language, it may all just come down to something nonsensical, bibbity-bobbity-boo, that’s fun to roll off the tongue and babble and be silly with, full of childlike nonjudgmental joy.

Roberto Benigni, after turning his Oscar acceptance into a *zanni* bit by walking on the seats of the audience on his way to the stage, quoted William Blake’s “He who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in eternity’s sunrise.” If, as that other (honorary) Italian Shakespeare said, “what fools these mortals be” and “We are such stuff as dreams are made of,” the *zanni* put themselves

right in the moment to invite us to kiss the joy, savor the foolishness, and embrace the dream.

And maybe, just maybe, their nonsense is one route toward the vision of Dante that Benigni also quoted: *L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*, “the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

