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Karima Moyer-Nocchi: *Chewing the Fat, an oral history of Italian foodways from Fascism to Dolce Vita*: Medea Publishing, 2015: 428 pp., paperback, £14.00.

*The silver swan, who living had no note,*
*When death approached, unlocked her silent throat;*
*Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,*
*Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:*
*'Farewell, all joys; Oh death, come close mine eyes;*
*More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.*

This madrigal by Orlando Gibbons is the theme of an enchanting collection of interviews with elderly women, talking eloquently in old age about memories of life and food in Italy during the Fascist regime and then beyond into the *Dolce Vita* and the 'economic miracle'. There are indeed more fools than wise men in the field of traditional Italian gastronomy, and this evocative but rigorous book places these interviews in the context of serious food history and a proper appraisal of what is going on in kitchens and supermarkets today. Gently debunking some of the picturesque and much-loved myths about their food that Italians proclaim so often, the author gives us fresh insights into the harrowing facts and muted delights of several generations of Italian cuisine. Today it looks as if a cynical gastronomic nostalgia industry is exploiting our credulity, and these interviews are a much-needed corrective.

This is not mere myth-busting, it is an urgent attempt to examine and describe how most Italians lived, worked and struggled to get enough to eat. When these old ladies are dead and forgotten, and the swans sing no more, their grandchildren will be wallowing in ignorance – behind reassuring legends of the bounteous *cucina della nonna*. They will buy from internationally organized supermarkets industrially produced travesties of 'traditional' or 'local' food, the comforting bland pap of synthetic nostalgia, to bung in the microwave, 'Souvenir food boutiques, that would bottle their grandmother if they could, now sell bags of dried ribollita. Just add water,' says Karima.

Karima Moyer-Nocchi is a good listener, the sometimes grumpy or diffident elderly ladies responded to her warmth and genuine interest, and as the interviews became conversations, Karima threw away her clip-board and lists of questions, and talked freely with these remarkable personalities, women from different regions and social backgrounds. We have eighteen conversations, with recipes and helpful explanatory editorial notes. The book would be of great interest for these alone, but they are part of a broader context, a compelling argument about the state of food studies and gastronomy in Italy today. There are also seventeen short, pungent essays interspersed among the conversations, pin-pointing topics that reinforce the urgent question of how to rescue the realities of Italian cuisine from the deadly hand of commercial and industrial interests. We have all of us fallen from time to time for the legend of those bright-eyed rosy-cheeked grannies in their sprigged aprons, dishing up

generous bowls of hearty peasant stews, the epitome of *cucina povera*, from the bounteous fertile hills and valleys of *la bella Italia*, 'the wholesome goodness of the poor,' as Karima caustically puts it. But her grannies are hollow eyed, sunken cheeked, reminding her over and over again, that for them gastronomy did not exist at starvation level. Renata in Rome, one of three neglected children dragging themselves up in the notoriously poor San Lorenzo district: 'There was no sort of choice to speak of, so I guess what you might say is that there was a range of foods *in arm's reach*, depending on the season, and how long your arm was! You ate what was there. You ate what you could scrape together. You ate what you could steal. You made whatever you could get your hands on into something eatable if at all possible. … The idea of writing a recipe, well it is like something for rich people, and that had nothing to do with us. We were just hand to mouth.'

Things were every bit as bad on the land. Aida, a sharecropper from Gubbio in Umbria, told of how, 'When you's a sharecropper, you live in the house on the padrone's land, but ain't nothin' yours. Everything was his, the house, the land, but the tools we had to pay half … We had to grow everything we needed, and there's a lotta mouths in my family, so near wore us to the bone just getting by. This is a terrible story. It is a terrible story that folks don't know. I want to be the one who finally tells this story. You see with sharecroppin', half your yield went to the padrone, or so they said. Ain't never worked out that way though. We was always on the losin' end of that stick come time to settle up…' She goes on to tell how there was never much to feed the scraggy chicken that a large family might have shred, a few mouthfuls each, maybe once a month.

Both before and during Fascism it was in the interests of the ruling class and landowners to keep the workforce underfed (debilitated) and illiterate (powerless), stuck in a spiral of debt, exhaustion and repression. Mussolini's so-called reforms did little to change this, the free elementary education was a sham, most children, especially girls, were taken out of elementary school to become beasts of burden on the land, or low-paid domestic workers in the towns; the ration books were nutritionally illiterate and ineffective, and as Vera from Sinalunga in Tuscany said pithily, what use was a ration book if the items were not available, and we had no money to buy them anyway? 'Who the heck cares if you have a card says you can buy a chunk of meat if you don't have any money? And then, everybody's out there watchin' everybody else to see what they're putting in their mouth! Well, you slap hunger and envy together and it is not a pretty sight. *Capisci?* We was afraid of the fascists, the Germans and the neighbours in that order!'

Betta, a *contessa* from Bologna, well educated and intelligent, had a sheltered youth, cocooned in the comforts of aristocratic life. She remembered the food as being pretty much the same as it still is, a lunch of soup or one of the many rich pasta dishes of Bologna (*tortellini* with their rich stuffing,

*lasagne*, *tagliatelli* in the famous *ragù*) followed by a meat dish, along with a nice vegetable side dish, asparagus or *melanzane alla parmigiana*, ending with fresh fruit, and of course maybe something from the wonderful range of cakes.

This is a book to read from cover to cover, as the carefully crafted structure reveals a much more complex narrative than just a few interviews with old ladies, and chats on past foodways. Karima Moyer-Nocchi is one of a new generation of historians intent on redressing the balance of Italian food history, putting cherished myths in a less rosy perspective. Her short but incisive essays give an often-uncomfortable context to the oral histories she records. The so-called Mediterranean Diet gets an elegant but deadly hatchet job; the iconic status of pizza is shown to be a recent offspring of what was an exclusively Neapolitan *cucina povera*, only quite recently, after WW2, emerging as quintessentially Italian thanks to the expectations of tourists; pasta was not until recently a universal staple food in Italy; the tyranny of the succession of courses in the restaurant menu (*antepasto*, *primo*, *secondo* with a *contorno*, dessert, etc.) is a quite recent adaptation of the meal structure of the rich by those who were for the first time able to aspire to eat like them. Karima guides us in our attempts to avoid tipping out the baby of wholesome Italian food with the murky bathwater of invented traditions.

A brief word on the translation: how on earth does one translate the untranslatable? Apart from a couple of ladies who spoke a standard Italian that can be rendered into standard English, we have a cacophony of local accents, regional dialects and, worse still, languages, with little relationship to Italian as we know it. The hesitating or torrential floods of reminiscence, the ums and ers of conversation, the kind of, innit, sort of, approximations of everyday speech, are difficult to render in any language. Karima opted for an Anglo/American colloquial demotic, acceptable to most readers in the USA, but tough on the rest of us. What are us poor Brits to make of Veronica, born in 1928 in the remote hills of Umbria, who says: 'We lived way the heck out there in the boonies…'? There is no easy solution. Myself, I wouldn't know where to begin. I'm grateful for the consistency of Karima's version (one gets used to it), and the humanity of her interpretation of these reminiscences, catching the tone of voice of her old ladies, their quirky personalities, the truth behind the bare narratives, the unspoken tragedies and triumphs over adversity. This is a book for everyone who enjoys Italian food, and wants to know more about it.

Gillian Riley

C.M. Woolgar: *The Culture of Food in England 1200–1500*: Yale University Press, 2016: 356 pp., hardback, £30.00.

Enthusiasts for food and the Middle Ages will welcome anything from the pen of Chris Woolgar, and for a book such as this, doubly so. Ever since his gripping pair of volumes on household accounts (British Academy, 1992),