

Ligurian peasant cooking in English travel books c. 1840 to c. 1914

Ross Balzaretto*

1. Dickens and Genoese food

Pictures from Italy, a short book which includes a famous account of Genoa, was published by Charles Dickens in May 1846¹. It provides an interesting starting point for an investigation of 19th-century Ligurian food cultures because, like so many travel writers, his eye was drawn to edibles and eaters. The status of his text as reportage is quite complex. Parts of the book originally appeared as «Travelling Letters» in the *Daily News* between 21 January and 11 March 1846, edited by Dickens from the first issues until 9 February². These in turn were

* Department of History, University of Nottingham-UK – ross.balzaretto@nottingham.ac.uk.

¹ C. Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, K. Flint (ed.), Penguin, London 1998, pp. 29-61. For detailed analysis M. Hollington, F. Orestano (eds.), *Dickens and Italy. Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2009. I would like to thank Dr Robert A. Hearn for suggesting this topic to me. It proved a pleasure to research.

² No. III 'Avignon to Genoa' appeared in the *Daily News*, Saturday January 31; no. 4 'A retreat at Albaro', Monday February 9; no. 5 'First Sketch of Genoa, the Streets, Shops and Houses', Monday February 16; no. 6 'In Genoa', Thursday February 26; no. 7 'In Genoa and out of it', Monday March 2.

based on real letters sent home, mostly to his friend and future biographer John Forster³. It has been argued, in part because *Pictures* can be compared with these other sources, that it is «as much a travel book as a work of creative writing»⁴. However, the distinction between ‘travel’ and ‘creative’ writing is not as clear cut as this implies⁵. Dickens himself later sent up the typical British traveller in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) perhaps because as has been surmised «Dickens enjoyed speaking with Italian common people and observing their customs» more than the average traveller⁶. Nevertheless, if the success of Dickens as a travel writer was due in part to his vivid abilities and interests as a novelist this does not of itself invalidate his ‘picture’ of Genoa, as his detailed local on-the-ground knowledge is clearly displayed in his letters and journalism.

This local knowledge was acquired when Dickens, his family and their British servants, including an unnamed cook, lived at the Villa di Bagnerello in the Genoese suburb of Albaro for two months from 16 July 1844 until 23 September when they moved into the grand Palazzo Peschiere on San

For Dickens as editor of the *Daily News* see D. Roberts, *Charles Dickens and the “Daily News”: Editorials and Editorial Writers*, in «Victorian Periodicals Review», 22 (1989), pp. 51-63.

³ M. Slater, *Dickens, Charles John Huffam (1812–1870)*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Sept 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7599> accessed 09 March 2022. M. House, G. Storey (eds.), *Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1974, which covers 1844-1846.

⁴ A. Vescovi, *Themes and Styles in Pictures from Italy*, in L. Conti Camaiora (ed.), *English Travellers and Travelling*, ISU dell’ Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan 2002, pp. 95-106 at p. 95.

⁵ T. Hannigan, *The Travel Writing Tribe. Journeys in Search of a Genre*, Hurst, London 2021, p. 5.

⁶ Vescovi, *Themes and Styles* cit. p. 97.

Bartolomeo hill⁷. While in Genoa the author mixed socially with people like himself, the educated middle class. He dined both with prominent local families notably the Marchese Giovanni Carlo di Negro and other English people, including the merchant Thomas C. Curry and the British Consul. However, he rarely commented on the food eaten on these occasions. There are occasional snippets. On 9 August 1844 Dickens asked Thomas Curry to supply three pounds of black tea and a Ham⁸. The following day his English cook managed to communicate with the locals having

primed herself with the names of all sorts of vegetables, meats, soups, fruits, and kitchen necessities, that she was able to order whatever was needful of the peasantry that were trotting in and out all day, basketed and barefooted⁹.

In contrast, he shows a keen interest throughout *Pictures* in the customs of the 'poorer classes', including their eating habits¹⁰. Down at the port he complained about the uninviting stalls where «the sellers of *macaroni* and polenta» plied their trade and the chaotic fish and vegetable markets so unlike the ordered ones back home and staffed by «lazy» locals, a typically northern European jibe at southerners¹¹. 'Dickens in Genoa' was like any other contemporary tourist drawn to the picturesque. A good example is his casual observation that pig

⁷ *Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4, pp. xxi-xxii. He went back to London in November returning to travel around Italy until April 1845. Back after that in Genoa, he finally left the city in June that year.

⁸ *Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4, p. 172.

⁹ *Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4, p. 175.

¹⁰ A. Warde, *The Practice of Eating*, Polity, Cambridge 2016, p. 61.

¹¹ Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* cit. pp. 42-43. First voiced in the *Daily News*, Monday February 16, 1846.



Fig. 1 Animal skin wine carriers, Museo Contadino di Cassego (SP). Photograph by R. Balzaretti

skins were used to store wine¹², which can be corroborated with other evidence. Mary Wilson, arriving in Genoa on 14 June 1847, noted the practice with distaste¹³, and examples of such wine containers have survived in local museums as those shown in Fig. 1 now preserved in Cassego (SP).

Another extended passage from *Pictures* is more revealing because it marks out Dickens as a more knowledgeable traveller than the norm. He recorded his visit to:

[...] a real Genoese tavern, where the visitor may derive good entertainment from real Genoese dishes, such as Tagliarini; Ravioli; German sausages, strong of garlic, sliced and eaten with fresh green figs;

¹² Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* cit. p. 61.

¹³ J. Simpson (ed.), *A European Journal. Two sisters abroad in 1847*, Bloomsbury, London 1987, p. 110.

cocks' combs and sheep-kidneys, chopped up with mutton chops and liver; small pieces of some unknown part of a calf, twisted into small shreds, fried, and served up in a great dish like whitebait and other curiosities of that kind. They often get wine at these suburban Trattorie, from France and Spain and Portugal, which is brought over by small captains in little trading-vessels¹⁴.

Dickens visited this trattoria on a trip to «Monte Faccio» (Monte Fasce) a famous viewpoint several kilometres north-east of the city. The food he described certainly *seems* local rather than the bland hotel food which travellers by this time were beginning to rely on, although the wine interestingly was not, reflecting the city's deep history as a trading place. At first sight we might not take this account at face value because, as Dickens had brought his own (English) cook with him, who ended up marrying a Genoese man and staying in the city to set up a restaurant¹⁵, we might question both how much Genoese food he and his family actually ate and whether Dickens would have wanted to eat it given what he observed around him. However, once this description of a trattoria meal is compared with *local* evidence, it begins to look more reliable. Emmanuele Rossi's *La vera cuciniera genovese facile ed economica* (1865) – one of the earliest Genoese cookery books – contains recipes for most of what Dickens described: *tagliarini*¹⁶, *ravioli* (*i*

¹⁴ Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* cit. pp. 38-39. Mentioned as «genuine native cookery» by Forster in his biography (*Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4, p. 208). Forster reported that T.C. Curry, the local merchant friend of the Dickens family was at this dinner.

¹⁵ J. Bowen, *Dickens and the Figures of Pictures from Italy*, in C. Hornsby (ed.), *The Impact of Italy: The Grand Tour and Beyond*, British School at Rome, London 2000, p. 199. Reported in a letter to Daniel Maclise, 9 May 1845 (*Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4, p. 306).

¹⁶ E. Rossi, *La vera cuciniera genovese facile ed economica*, Genoa 1865 (reprinted with a preface by Paola Moroni Salvatori, 1992, Arnaldo Forni

raviêu in dialect)¹⁷, *offal*¹⁸, and *schienali*, strips of spinal cord dipped in egg and flour and deep fried¹⁹.

This «account of a real Genoese tavern» was singled out for comment by Dudley Costello in his *Piedmont and Italy from the Alps to the Tiber*, published in 1861²⁰. Costello noted

As far as eating goes, we, for our own parts, have seen the *facchini*²¹, and most of the nondescript race that fill the lower part of the city, devouring *macaroni* in the sun in as great quantities, and with quite as much relish, as their idler brethren, the *lazzaroni*, on the Chiaja, at Naples²².

His dismissive, even racist, attitude to the local poor was in some contrast to that adopted by Dickens even though Costello, a journalist, knew and worked with Dickens in the 1840s and 50s, having been in 1846 foreign correspondent of the *Daily News* when Dickens was also writing for that newspaper²³.

Editorie, Sala Bolognese, pp. 69-70). This book was an expansion of G.B. and G. Ratto, *La cuciniera genovese*, Pagano, Genoa 1863.

¹⁷ Rossi, *La vera cuciniera* cit. pp. 43-48 quoting dialect verses on the subject. *Ravioli* were noted, alongside *polenta* and *polpetta*, as «the three favourite dishes of Genoa» by Lady Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*, London 1839, vol. 2, p. 13.

¹⁸ Rossi, *La vera cuciniera* cit. pp. 164-165.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 127. P. Lingua, *La cucina dei genovesi. Storia e ricette*, Lit Edizioni, Rome 2013 is a good guide to modern Genoese cooking (pp. 146-151 for *ravioli*).

²⁰ D. Costello, *Piedmont and Italy from the Alps to the Tiber: illustrated in a series of views taken on the spot, with a description and historical narrative*, 2 vols, James S. Virtue, London 1861, vol. 1, pp. 85-88.

²¹ E. Grendi, *Un mestiere di città alle soglie dell'età industriale. Il facchinaggio Genovese tra il 1815 e il 1850*, in «ASLi», n.s. 4(2) (1964), pp. 325-416.

²² Costello, *Piedmont and Italy* cit. p. 87.

²³ G.C. Boase, *Costello, Dudley (1803–1865)*, rev. M. Clare Loughlin-Chow, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Dickens' actual experience of eating authentic Genoese food at a local trattoria was no doubt mediated by his previous consumption both of the 'typical' British foods (roast meats, chops, pies, puddings) he was used to back home, what he ate *en route* via France, and the fare in his Genoese temporary home. At the time he was writing 'Italian' food had little public profile in London, although that soon changed²⁴. 'Food nationalism' is now a well-established topic in British historical writing, which has extended to the meaning of food for travellers²⁵, and 'national' foods can be seen as part of the nation building which was so characteristic of the mid-19th century in Britain (and Italy) in which Dickens' own work very much participated²⁶. Travellers' encounters with 'foreign' food often resulted in what could be termed performative nationalism in their writing which resulted in a greater under-

2004; online edn, April 2016 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6379> accessed 09 March 2022.

²⁴ There was an Italian community in central London in the 1870s with its own food shops as detailed in C. Carter Brown, *Italian Produce*, in «The Food Journal», Jan. 1(1874), pp. 447-449. L. Sponza, *Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Realities and Images*, Leicester University Press, Leicester 1988, pp. 94-108 documents ice cream sellers and commercial food vendors at the end of the century.

²⁵ B. Rogers, *Beef and liberty: roast beef, John Bull and the English nation*, Chatto & Windus, London 2004, pp. 167-183 and R. Mullen, J. Munson, *The Smell of the Continent. The British Discover Europe*, Pan Books, London 2009, pp. 256-273.

²⁶ R. Grew, *Culture and society, 1796-1896*, in J.A. Davis (ed.), *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 227-228; C. Helstosky, *Recipe for the Nation: Reading Italian History through La Scienza in cucina and La cucina futurista*, in «Food and Foodways», 11(2010), pp. 13-140; F. Parasecoli, *Al Dente: A History of Food in Italy*, Reaktion Books, London 2014, pp. 158-159; M. Montanari, *Italian Identity in the Kitchen, or Food and the Nation*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, pp. 47-51.

standing of the food of ‘home’ by authors and readers²⁷. As a traveller, the expectations of Dickens were also conditioned by his reading of the numerous earlier books, articles and images of Genoa which he certainly consumed, and his various personal contacts with other travellers, including Lady Blessington, author of *The Idler in Italy* (1839) a book he certainly knew²⁸. *The Idler* contained many references to food, including a group «devouring macaroni in a similar manner to that in which an Indian juggler swallows steel» (at an inn in Noli) and «half a dozen persons partaking the contents of a large earthen bowl, the savoury steams of which proclaimed that garlic was one of its principal ingredients», anecdotes written up in what has since become ‘Dickensian’ language. Like most of his contemporaries, Dickens’ work reveals strong anti-Catholic sentiment, and he was no doubt imbued with the attitudes of superiority towards foreigners typically displayed by his class and by British people in general, although he was also rather more sympathetic than most to the Italians he got to know personally in the months he lived in Genoa.

Besides his personal attitudes, the travel writing of the ‘outsider’ Dickens also raises questions about the history of food in Genoa itself in the mid-19th century (a city of around 200,000 residents – London was ten times as large) as seen from inside. For example, in the case of the trattoria at Monte Fasce, we might wonder where and from whom did that establishment, and others like it, get fresh ingredients? At a time well before significant industrialisation of food production a like-

²⁷ G. Ecker, *Zuppa Inglese and Eating Up Italy: Intercultural Feasts and Fantasies*, in M. Pfister, R. Hertel (eds.), *Performing National Identity. Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 307-322.

²⁸ Blessington *The Idler*, vol. 1, p. 387. Blessington also noted the delicious vegetables and green peas, especially at Nervi, which she attributed to their growing near the sea (*The Idler*, vol. 2, p. 70).

ly answer is from local producers²⁹, including peasants, who sold the products of their toil at local markets³⁰, as Dickens himself noticed portside in Genoa. If in terms of production it can be presumed that most food in Genoa at this period was peasant food, we need to go outside of the metropolis into the countryside to find the local food peasants themselves ate. Other travel books which describe sites in central and eastern Liguria from the 1840s until the onset of the First World War, allow comparison with the evidence of Dickens and help to develop the case already made for the value of travel writing as a source for food history.

2. Italian peasants as ethnographic subjects

In the last fifty years there has been a considerable amount of study of the lives of Italian peasants, including those from Liguria. Historical ecologists have intensively researched historic land management and that has often included the daily practices of peasants, sometimes recovered through oral testimony³¹. Specific ‘activation practices’ resulted

²⁹ E. Scarpellini, *Food and Foodways in Italy from 1861 to the Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016, pp. 27-51 (peasants), 53-79 (industrialisation dated to 1901-1914).

³⁰ The supply of meat was very complex well before the 19th century as demonstrated by E. Grendi, *Meat provisioning in Ancien Régime Genoa*, in R. Balzaretti, M. Pearce, C. Watkins (eds.), *Ligurian Landscapes. Studies in Archaeology, Geography and History*, Accordia Research Institute, London 2004, pp. 105-112.

³¹ D. Moreno, *Dal documento al terreno. Storia e archeologia dei sistemi agro-silvo-pastorali*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990 (II edition 2019 Genova University Press, Genoa); M. Quaini (ed.), *Paesaggi agrari. Irrrinunciabile eredità scientifica di Emilio Sereni*, Milan 2011; M. Agnoletti (ed.), *Italian Historical Rural Landscapes. Cultural Values for the Environment and Rural Development*, Springer, Dordrecht 2013.

in distinctive local food cultures, most notably the famous ‘chestnut culture’ based on the tree which provided villagers with their staple food for centuries. Activation practices can be uncovered by considering the «local and social contextualization (*i.e.* topography) of the practices and forms of knowledge underlying the activation of environmental resources»³², or put another way locally distinctive practices can be revealed by observation of the ways in which people have exploited (‘activated’) their environment at specific points in time. Museums of ‘peasant life’ were founded across Italy in the 1960s and these often contain many artefacts relating to food production and cooking, often of 19th-century date. An excellent example is the Museo Contadino di Cassego, a village near Varese Ligure in the Upper Vara Valley, which has hundreds of objects once owned and used by local families including implements used to prepare meals³³. These collections make clear the intimate connection between cultivation, management and sustenance. This work and these objects therefore provide an essential context for understanding travel writing on this topic.

In the 19th century itself there was, alongside literary work to which we will return shortly, some central government investigation of Italian peasant cultures, although ‘peasants’ were not romanticised by Italian politicians as they were elsewhere in nineteenth-century Europe³⁴. The *Inchiesta Jacini* (a government report published 1881-1886) surveyed peasant life throughout Italy, including Liguria, largely from an eco-

³² D. Moreno, *Activation practices, history of environmental resources, and conservation*, in G. Sanga, G. Ortalli (eds.), *Nature Knowledge. Ethnoscience, Cognition, and Utility*, Berghahn Books, New York 2004, pp. 386-390 at p. 387.

³³ The collection was founded by Don Sandro Lagomarsini in the 1960s and is still directed by him. S. Lagomarsini, *Vita quotidiana nelle campagne*, in L. Borzani, G. Pistarino, F. Ragazzi (eds), *Storia illustrata di Genova*, Elio Sellino Editore, Genoa 1994, vol. 4, pp. 881-896 gives a full account of rural life.

³⁴ Grew, *Culture and society* cit. p. 224 and M. Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1995*, 2nd edn, Longman, London and New York 1996, pp. 12-21.

conomic perspective³⁵. Jacini's inquiry discovered that many peasants including those from Liguria had desperate lives which explained their mass emigration worldwide, although it was often the wealthier Ligurian farmers who left to improve their fortunes in Argentina³⁶. Perhaps this poverty came as no surprise to the politicians as food historians have suggested that prior to the 19th century Italian authors routinely equated peasants with 'coarse' food³⁷, whereas the bourgeois cuisine of the time was much richer. Given very low levels of literacy, it is not surprising that direct testimony from peasants themselves about the food they ate is hard to come by³⁸. We need therefore to find other sources of information.

Much as Dickens did, some Italian writers of fiction expressed clear sympathies with peasants. Giovanni Ruffini, an enthusiastic reader of Dickens³⁹, was the prime example and his novel *Doctor Antonio*, written in English and published in 1855, was very popular with British

³⁵ G. Paoloni, S. Ricci, *L'archivio della Giunta per l'Inchiesta agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola in Italia (Inchiesta Jacini)-1877-1885. Inventario*, Ministero Beni Att. Culturali, Rome 1998, pp. 3-10. The work for Circostrizione VIII resulted in monographs about agriculture around Albenga and Sanremo. A. Campanini, *De l'hymne au territoire à l'apologie des terroirs. Une brève histoire des inventaires culinaires italiens depuis l'Unification (1861)*, in «Food & History», 9 (2011), 155-156 sets the Jacini inquiry in the context of other 'culinary inventories' (cookbooks, guidebooks).

³⁶ In 1870, 23000 Italians had arrived in Argentina: D.R. Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, UCL Press, London 2000, p. 43.

³⁷ A. Capatti, M. Montanari, *Italian cuisine: a cultural history*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, pp. 282-284; Scarpellini, *Food and Foodways* cit. pp. 31-37.

³⁸ A rare, published example is C. Vaccarezza (ed.), *Il diario di Andrea Gagliardo tra la Merica e la Fontanabuona (1888-1899)*, Oltre edizioni, La Spezia 2020.

³⁹ A.C. Christensen, *Giovanni Ruffini and Doctor Antonio: Italian and English Contributions to a Myth of Exile*, Browning Institute Studies, 12 (1984), p. 139.

travellers⁴⁰. Set on the Italian Riviera especially around Bordighera and Sanremo, Ruffini tapped into a long-standing British curiosity about rural life. In the opening scene when the daughter of Sir John Davenne is hurt in a carriage accident while travelling near Bordighera the Italian Doctor Antonio who treats her is assisted by four local peasant women «olive-skinned passionate children of Italy». The same evening at the *osteria* which has taken them in Sir John ate a hearty local meal «not to be despised by even the palate of the most fastidious connoisseur», no doubt cooked by one of the peasant women. However, when travellers reported actual encounters, they were far from romantic and mid-19th-century commentators were negative to say the least. Quite typical is Mary Wilson who wrote on June 13 1847 that

We passed very few villages but all so wretched & dirty, & the people such nasty looking wretches, one old woman I was amused with, a dirty old pig without any stockings but carrying her fan in her hand, fans being very much more used in Milan & the neighbourhood than parasols⁴¹.

A couple of decades later peasants became a fashionable theme in English language accounts of Italy⁴², still in romanticised form but now treated positively, and Italian painters began to paint scenes of peasant life with some regularity⁴³.

⁴⁰ T. Pagano, *The Making and Unmaking of Mediterranean Landscape in Italian Literature. The Case of Liguria*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2015, pp. 25-42; P. Piana, C. Watkins, R. Balzaretti, *Rediscovering Lost Landscapes. Topographical Art in North-West Italy, 1800-1920*, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge 2021, pp. 239-241.

⁴¹ J. Simpson, 1984 – *A European Journal*, p. 109.

⁴² C.B. Brettell, *Nineteenth-century travellers' accounts of the Mediterranean peasant*, in «Ethnohistory», 33 (1986), pp. 159-173.

⁴³ For example, Giovanni Fattori (1825-1908) who painted many rural scenes around his hometown of Livorno: E. Tonelli, K. Hart (eds.), *The Macchiaioli. Painters of Italian Life 1850-1900*, University of California, Los Angeles

Tuscan peasants came in for special journalistic consideration in Britain⁴⁴, as sharecropping in that region was a subject of serious public debate both in Italy and Britain after Italian Unification and the Jacini inquiry⁴⁵. During the 1870s and 80s and roughly contemporary with this political interest in peasant livelihoods⁴⁶, several well-to-do British women living in the Tuscan countryside wrote about peasants from a cultural perspective for largely female audiences back home. They were part of a sizable ex-patriot community of upper middle-class «Anglo-Florentines»⁴⁷, some of whom had considerable contemporary reputations in Britain as serious writers of fiction such as Ouida (pseudonym of Marie Louise Ramé) and Vernon Lee (Violet Paget). Janet Ross and Leader Scott (Lucy Baxter) were another two figures of literary note who popularised the art and architecture of Florence for an educated English-speaking readership. They also

1986, pp. 116-120, notably n. 59 (at pp. 87 and 116) *Contadina nel Bosco* of 1861 (private collection).

⁴⁴ H. Zimmern, *Italy of the Italians*, Pitman & Sons, London 1929, pp. 231-259 (orig. 1906), «Agricultural Italy», gives a typical assessment of the period. Zimmern was an influential journalist who kept Italian themes very much in the public eye in late 19th-century Britain: C.A. Creffield, 1984 – Zimmern, Helen (1846–1934), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/55284>

⁴⁵ D. Gill, *Tuscan sharecropping in United Italy: The myth of class collaboration destroyed*, in «Journal of Peasant Studies», 10 (1983), pp. 146-169. The *Atti della giunta per la inchiesta agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola*, vol. III, Fasc. 1, *La toscana Agricola*, published in Rome in 1881, set the tone.

⁴⁶ C. Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil. Food and Politics in Italy*, Berg, Oxford and New York 2004, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁷ G. Artom Treves, *The Golden Ring. The Anglo-Florentines 1847-1862*, Longmans, Green & Co., London 1956, superseded by D. Webb, T. Webb, *The Anglo-Florentines. The British in Tuscany 1814-1860*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019.

wrote about local customs, which included peasants and their food⁴⁸. In 1887 Janet stated that

Some will think my pictures of the Tuscan peasants flattered and highly coloured. I can only say that I have lived among them for eighteen years, and that nowhere does the golden rule “Do as you would be done by,” hold good so much as in Italy⁴⁹.

Virginia Woolf, writing in 1909, took a different view: Ross was «an Englishwoman who dictates to peasants» and «apt to become domineering»⁵⁰. Later Mrs Ross produced a cookery book *Leaves from Our Tuscan Kitchen*, published in 1899⁵¹, which became popular in Britain, reaching its eleventh edition in 1936⁵². It was one of the first in English to specialise in ‘Italian’ foods⁵³. The book centres on vegetable cookery,

⁴⁸ J. Ross, *Italian Sketches*, J.M. Dent & Co., London 1887, J. Ross, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, J.M. Dent & Co., London 1904, which reprinted journal essays on wine and oil making first published in 1875, and L. Scott, *A Nook in the Apennines: Or a Summer beneath the Chestnuts*, C. Kegan, Paul & Co., London 1879, and especially L. Scott, *Tuscan Studies and Sketches*, T. Fisher Unwin, London 1888, with chapters on wine, mushrooms and a Florentine market.

⁴⁹ Ross, *Italian Sketches*, Preface. There are two biographies: S. Benjamin, *A Castle in Tuscany. The remarkable life of Janet Ross*, Murdoch Books, Miller’s Point NSW 2006, and B. Dowling, *Queen Bee of Tuscany. The Redoubtable Janet Ross*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc., New York 2013.

⁵⁰ J. Morris (ed.), *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, The Hogarth Press, London 1993, p. 180.

⁵¹ One of 21 new cookery books published in Britain that year: E. Driver, *A Bibliography of Cookery Books*, Prospect Books, London & New York 1989, p. 718.

⁵² Driver, *A Bibliography of Cookery Books* cit. pp. 525-527 and Benjamin, *A Castle in Tuscany* cit. pp. 132-145.

⁵³ Maria Gironci, from Corfu of Italian descent and living in Surrey, published *Recipes of Italian Cookery* in 1900 and *Italian Recipes for Food Reformers* in

something Italians could be said to specialise in, in marked contrast to contemporary British customs, focused firmly on meat, cheese and puddings, although vegetarianism did not take off in Italy until the end of the century, a little later than in Britain⁵⁴. Ross relied on her Italian cook Giuseppe Volpi for recipes which are authentic enough if not particularly local or regional, as the title perhaps promised⁵⁵.

Janet's niece Lina Duff Gordon who lived in a castle above Brunella, not far from Pontremoli in the far north of Tuscany, also wrote travel books a couple of decades later, including *Home Life in Italy*⁵⁶, and like her aunt, in that book Lina included recipes⁵⁷. Her chapter explicitly compares the cooking of her cook Mariannina with the way things are done in England. She notes the difficulty of obtaining quality Italian

1905. Antonia Isola (pseudonym of Mabel Earl McGinnis), *Simple Italian Cookery* (London, 1912), proved popular in the USA.

⁵⁴ A. Capatti, *La nascita delle associazioni vegetariane in Italia*, «Food & History», 2 (2004), pp. 167-190.

⁵⁵ A drawing of Volpi in his kitchen made by A.H. Hallam Murray in 1895 is reproduced as the frontispiece in M. Waterfield (ed.), *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen*, Atheneum, London 1974. It shows him cooking at what appears to be a substantial range which has been inserted into a large fireplace still with an open fire, surrounded by an array of pots (earthenware) and pans (perhaps copper?). An undated photograph of this kitchen with a later cook (Agostino) shows it largely unchanged and to have been on a considerable scale (Benjamin, *A Castle in Tuscany*, opposite p. 137).

⁵⁶ Published by Methuen in 1908. The archives of both women are to be found in the Waterfield collection held at the British Institute in Florence: A. Price, *Florence in the Nineteenth Century. A Guide to Original Sources in Florentine Archives and Libraries for Researchers into the English-Speaking Community*, British Institute in Florence, Florence 2011, p. 53.

⁵⁷ L. Duff Gordon, *Home Life in Italy. Letters from the Apennines*, Methuen, London 1908, pp. 65-88. See also K. Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*, Penguin, London 1993, written by Lina's daughter, with reflections on both her mother's and her great aunt's lives in Italy.

produce in England, and it is fascinating to observe how Lina becomes a source of information for Mariannina about English culinary practices. The latter was not impressed by those. *Home Life in Italy* proves to be an excellent example of the conceptualisation of ‘national’ cuisines manifest through direct personal encounters at the local level. The evidence about peasant food culture contained within these ostensibly lightweight travel books is worth more serious attention by food historians given that peasants are often regarded by them and others as repositories of ‘local’, ‘traditional’ and ‘slow’ food⁵⁸. As there is more to food history than the «issue of regional versus national», it is important to understand local practices even at the level of a single kitchen⁵⁹.

3. Peasant food around Savignone in 1878

Liguria was not really within the purview of the Anglo-Florentine ‘set’ despite being an adjoining region. That region had its own British communities, based in Genoa and especially at selected locations on the coast, notably Sanremo⁶⁰. A literature about the region developed in

⁵⁸ The ‘Slow Food’ movement was described by its founder as concerned with tradition, simplicity, friendliness, moderate prices and territory (*terroir*): C. Petrini, *Slow Food. The Case for Taste*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001, p. 7. ‘Slow’ refers to the opposite of ‘fast’, mass-produced food, and, although peasant cultures could also be said to produce and consume food slowly, ‘Slow Food’ is not a peasant movement. It emerged in the 1970s from the Italian middle-class political left, specifically in the Piedmontese town of Bra: <https://www.slowfood.it/chi-siamo/storia/> (accessed 25 January 2022).

⁵⁹ Ecker, ‘Zuppa Inglese’, p. 312. A.K. Smith, *National cuisines*, in J.M. Pilcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, pp. 444-460.

⁶⁰ A. Zanini, *Un secolo di turismo in Liguria. Dinamiche, percorsi, attori*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2021, pp. 87-97.

English in the last decades of the 19th century⁶¹, and it was directed at travellers, especially those in search of health although, curiously to our eyes, little was said about healthy food in any of these books⁶². Specialist guidebooks appeared alongside more established series such as Murray's, Cook's and Baedeker's guides⁶³. Popular ones included Hare's *The Rivi-eras* (1897), Black's *The Riviera* (1898), and Beeby and Reynolds-Ball's *The Levantine Riviera* (1908). Augustus Hare did not deal with food but the other two did. Black was typically brief and focussed exclusively on dinner in what were essentially international tourist hotels by this period⁶⁴. Beeby was more sympathetic to the local and dealt with both food and peasants in a chapter devoted to 'folklore'⁶⁵.

Much more interesting than these and the other short mass market guides which proliferated at this time is *North Italian Folk. Sketches of Town and Country Life* published by Alice Comyns Carr in 1878, for it is particularly insightful on Ligurian local food. Born Alice Vanssittart Strettell (1850-1927) in Genoa, she spent much of her early life there, with some time

⁶¹ R. Balzaretti, *Victorian Travellers, Apennine Landscapes and the Development of Cultural Heritage in Eastern Liguria, c. 1875-1914*, in «History», 96 (2011), pp. 436-458.

⁶² Notably, J.H. Bennet, *Winter and Spring on the Shores of the Mediterranean*, 5th edition, John Murray, London 1875, pp. 8-233 for the Rivi-eras. His focus is on climate, geology, and plants. There is little on food. See Piana, Watkins and Balzaretti, *Rediscovering Lost Landscapes* cit. pp. 238-242.

⁶³ K. Baedeker, *Italy. Handbook for Travellers. Northern Italy*, 5th edition, Karl Baedeker, Leipzig 1879, is typical (pp. 77-114 on Liguria). Generic remarks on restaurants, cafés and *osterie* can be found at pp. xix-xx.

⁶⁴ C.B. Black, *The Riviera*, 10th edition, A. & C. Black, London 1898, e.g. p. 118 on Genoa.

⁶⁵ W.T. Beeby, E. Reynolds-Ball, *Levantine Riviera. A Practical Guide to all the Winter Resorts from Genoa to Pisa*, Reynolds Balls Guides, London 1908, pp. 202-203.



Fig. 2 Late 19th-century villa at Savignone (GE). Photograph by R. Balzaretti

away in England at a school near Brighton. Alice straddled both cultures with apparent ease. She took summer holidays with her family – her father Alfred was consular chaplain of the English church in Genoa – in the inland valleys not far from the city⁶⁶, notably in Savignone (Scrivia valley), at that point just becoming a popular site for *villeggiatura* among the Genoese middle classes⁶⁷. Bourgeois Genoese families started to mimic aristocrats by holidaying inland at select summer sites at this time and in some places substantial summer villas were constructed as holiday homes, many of

⁶⁶ Alfred Strettell held «primitive picnics» above Portofino, as recalled by the well-known artist Lady Elizabeth Butler in later life: E. Butler, *Autobiography*, London 1922, p.6. Lady Butler also remembered tea at home in Nervi when the Italian maid put a whole pound of green tea in the pot, rendering it undrinkable: E. Butler, *From Sketch Book and Diary*, A. & C. Black, London 1909, p. 129.

⁶⁷ She wrote about this in A. Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk. Sketches in Town and Country Life*, Spottiswoode & Co., London 1878, pp. 263-272. Many fine holiday villas of this period still survive in Savignone: Piana, Watkins and Balzaretti, *Rediscovering Lost Landscapes*, pp. 185-188.

which still stand to this day, including at Savignone without a direct rail link but in fact reachable by train from Genoa to Busalla, a short carriage ride away (a typical example in Fig. 2).

Alfred Strettell was no doubt used to entertaining visitors in Genoa. For example, on 9 February 1873 he gave dinner to honeymooners Emily and Dearman Birchall and the Bishop of Ohio who also happened to be passing through the city⁶⁸. The food on that occasion was not described in Emily's lively diary but the following day the couple had lunch at Sestri Levante, at the railway station:

Our hearts soon died within us, however, on the apparition of *du rosbif* (as some nasty grey little bits of dog were by courtesy termed) and some very greasy potatoes, with sour wine, bread of the consistency of leather, and of a very singular flavour, and butter made of lard, garlic, and oil, I should think⁶⁹.

«Luscious *viands*», as she ironically commented, but also typical tourist food the product of a rapidly commercialising travel experience.

In December that year Alfred Strettell conducted the marriage of Alice to Joseph Comyns Carr in Dresden and they honeymooned sometime after in Liguria⁷⁰. Five years later Alice published *North Italian Folk* a series of essays gathered into two sections («On the Riviera» and «In the Apennines») which clearly drew heavily on her own personal encounters as a young woman in this region⁷¹. Unlike many travel writers of this period

⁶⁸ D. Verey (ed.), *Wedding Tour: January-June 1873 and Visit to the Vienna Exhibition*, Sutton, Gloucester 1985, p. 16.

⁶⁹ Verey, *Wedding Tour* cit. p. 17.

⁷⁰ A. Comyns Carr, *J. Comyns Carr. Stray Memories*, Macmillan & Co., London 1920, p. 20.

⁷¹ Covered also in *Stray Memories* and her A. Comyns Carr, *Reminiscences*, Hutchinson & Co., London 1926.

Mrs Comyns Carr was precise in the location of her tales, set in actual villages and hamlets which included Busalla, Savignone, Ponte di Savignone, Valle Calda and Casella all in the middle of the Scrivia valley, and others in the neighbouring Polcevera valley. She also wrote about Genoa itself and many villages along the coast including Nervi, Portofino and Sestri Levante. She, like all of the British authors mentioned so far, shared the prejudices many Victorian travellers had towards Italians, notably the latter's «rustic simplicity», grace and «quaint enthusiasms» which contrasted with the «worldly wise prudence» presumed of her British readers⁷².

Food figured a lot among the 'light' things she wrote about, to such an extent that the volume gives a clear and consistent impression of this region's food cultures at this period from the perspective of an insider who experienced this food first-hand. It is also a rose-tinted view, given the well-documented poverty of the contemporary Italian peasantry at this time⁷³. Comyns Carr constructed her persona as a respectable British woman by being attentive to class differences in her writing, meaning that in literary terms the people she wrote about had to eat what she felt was appropriate to their status⁷⁴. Nevertheless, her enthusiasm for the local peasants, while condescending in overall tone, comes through strongly in her writing which means that historians can gain some insight into what is likely to have been the traditional food of these places in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Comyns Carr records details of the local cultivation which provided the basic produce for peasant meals. She describes peasant plots in Valle

⁷² Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. vi.

⁷³ Clark, *Modern Italy* cit. p. 19. In fairness to Comyns Carr, Ligurian peasants do seem to have been better off than those of Lombardy or the far South.

⁷⁴ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. 187, «Both the women are plain and ill-favoured specimens of their class» (i.e., peasants).



Fig. 3 Alfred Sells, *In the Garden of Villa Santa Catarina*, Levanto, 1900. In author's possession

Calda in June with gourds, tomatoes⁷⁵, fruit (of many kinds)⁷⁶, walnuts⁷⁷, as well as the collection of wild bitter cherries (*amarene*)⁷⁸. In the Polcevera valley (at San Matteo), also in June were plots «where each man grows his own corn and beans and potato-crops, gathers his own maize, and trains his own vines»⁷⁹. In Valle Calda the priest had his own

⁷⁵ Cf. D. Gentilcore, *Pomodoro! A History of the Tomato in Italy*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010, pp. 82-88.

⁷⁶ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. 252, in August, large purple plums, larger yellow plums, little blue plums, peaches, apricots, figs and large pears.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 166.

⁷⁸ By August these were «drying in flat baskets» (p. 258).

⁷⁹ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. 176. Compare W. Scott, *Rock Villages of the Riviera*, A. & C. Black, London 1898, p. 24.

plot where he blew sulphur on his wines «to save them from the fell disease»⁸⁰, surely a sign of the commercialisation of some peasant farming practices at this time. Interesting comparisons can be made with amateur pictorial representations of Ligurian country landscapes made in a similar period, for example those of the Rev. Alfred Sells, painting in Levanto in 1900⁸¹, and also with local professional artists such as Ernesto Rayper (1840-1873) and Giuseppe Sacheri (1863-1950), both of whom painted fields with identifiable crops in⁸². In Fig. 3 grape vines trained high on pergolas are clearly represented by Sells alongside the giant reed and another less identifiable crop in the foreground.

These same people ate simple food. Soup (*minestra*), *polenta* (sometimes eaten cold in the fields), chestnuts (roasted fresh at the harvest in November; dried the rest of the year), mushrooms⁸³, beans and cabbage, beans and oil, washed down sometimes with ‘sour Monferrato’ wine⁸⁴.

⁸⁰ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. 182. A «mysterious vine disease» was also noted in the vineyards around Aosta by S.W. King, *The Italian Valleys of the Pennine Alps*, John Murray, London 1858, p. 109. From these generalised descriptions it is not entirely clear what these diseases were.

⁸¹ Landscapes made by Sells have been used to study Case Lovara (SP): N. Gabellieri, V. Ruzzin, *Fonti testuali, cartografiche e iconografiche*, in N. Gabellieri, V. Pescini (eds.), *Biografia di un paesaggio rurale. Storia, geografia e Archeologia per la riqualificazione di Case Lovara (promontorio del Mesco – La Spezia)*, Oltre edizioni, Genoa 2015, pp. 49-95 at pp. 61-65, Figs. 9 and 10.

⁸² For example, Rayper’s *Contadina fra il granoturco*, painted 1870-1872 (Genoa, private collection), probably in western Liguria reproduced in P. Rum (ed.), *Alberto Issel. Il paesaggio nell’Ottocento tra Liguria e Piemonte*, Skira, Milan 2006, p. 74 and Sacheri’s *Orti a San Fruttuoso*, Genova (1895), reproduced in A. Enrico, S. Seitun (eds.), *Natura, realtà e modernità. Pittura in Liguria tra ’800 e ’900*, Antiga edizioni, Milan 2015, Fig. 36, p. 95.

⁸³ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., p. 179.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 183. The wine of Monferrato is mentioned several times: as «good wine» (p. 207) but more commonly as «sour» (pp. 53, 238). It is also noted by F. Power Cobbe, *Italics. Brief notes on politics, people and places in Italy*,

Rosemary and marjoram were used as flavourings⁸⁵. There is very little reference to eating meat⁸⁶, and some reference to eggs⁸⁷. Alice was also attentive to the dishes themselves. She must have watched *minestra* being made on many occasions, with beans, potatoes, sliced gourd, mushrooms, tomatoes, sweet herbs, and «the unfailing garlic», with the result that «the kitchen is filled with a fragrant odour»⁸⁸. This had pasta added to it, freshly made rather than dried. Polenta was often served with fresh beans⁸⁹. Pan-fried mushrooms were served as a separate dish⁹⁰. She also saw *how* the peasants ate their food: «off wooden platters, while they lounge in the cool upon steps and balconies made of stone»⁹¹. When visitors came, for example the Archbishop of Genoa who carried out confirmations locally, different food was eaten and at tables indoors: mush-

in 1864, Trübner & Co., London 1864, p. 494 who had it for breakfast while staying at Nervi. S. Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe. Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London 2004, pp. 136-137.

⁸⁵ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit. p. 166.

⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 192, «Neither he (the priest) nor old Ninetta (his housekeeper) taste meat more than once a week»; p. 215 priest criticised for eating soup made with meat broth on Saturdays. Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi*, p. 181 «La dieta carnea non è certamente preminente nella tradizionale gastronomia genovese».

⁸⁷ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk*, p. 264.

⁸⁸ Ivi, pp. 185, 197. See Duff Gordon. Genoese minestrone is made by adding all the ingredients to boiling water at the same time rather than sautéing each first as in other parts of Italy: Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi* cit., pp. 158-159.

⁸⁹ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., p. 225. Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi*, p. 120 states that in Liguria polenta has always been a 'curiosity'. never been really part of the cuisine. This may be true of Genoa but not of the mountainous interior.

⁹⁰ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., pp. 179, 243.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 228.

rooms, risotto, *polpette* and «real holiday ravioli»⁹². In July holidaying middle-class Genoese, who came here to economise and escape the city heat, replaced their normal ravioli with bean soup⁹³. They found peas, beans, gourds and lettuce growing in their gardens, although who was growing these crops is not explained. Interestingly these peasant cooks used potatoes and tomatoes⁹⁴, both relatively recent additions to their repertoire. In general, peasants grew what they ate, certainly in summer, and in the winter months they survived principally on chestnuts, preserved by drying⁹⁵.

Turning to the cuisine of the city and coast, there are similarities with that just discussed but also notable differences. Clearly the social classes described are more Comyns Carr's own, and their food is richer than that of the peasants in the country villages. In Genoa produce was not home-produced but rather bought in markets, notably at Piazza San Domenico near the Opera (now Piazza De Ferrari), with fish purchased near the port, even on Easter Day⁹⁶. The meal for that celebra-

⁹² Ivi, p. 261. Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi* cit., pp. 171-172 points out that meat *polpettone* is very similar throughout Italy but that a vegetable version is much more typical of Genoa.

⁹³ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., p. 272.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 201, on 24 June, «the potato harvest is at hand», and the priest was involved in it. The Swiss ethnographer Frederic Lillin de Chateaufvieux travelling in the Apennines above the Magra valley in 1812 commented that potatoes should be grown here: «The curate has, indeed, heard them mentioned, and I exhorted him to make trial of them» (*Travels in Italy, Descriptive of the Rural Manners and Economy of that Country* [London, 1820], p. 20. By the 1870s they seem normalised. Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi* cit., p. 12.

⁹⁵ Balzaretti, *Victorian travellers* cit. p. 453.

⁹⁶ A sizable vegetable and fruit market was also held daily in Piazza dell'Annunziata as documented by a late nineteenth-century photograph in L. Frassati, *Genova come era 1870-1915*, privately printed, Genoa 1960, p. 163.

tory day had many ingredients: peas, marjoram, bay, fresh fish, «lean, solid» beef, brains and sweetbreads⁹⁷. It could include ravioli, stewed beef and truffles, Monferrato wine and hard sugar-plums, even for the extended family of a ladies' maid⁹⁸. A birthday lunch for her employer comprised capons, beans, rice, lettuce, pasta, *minestra*, with *tagliarini* as a second course⁹⁹.

Outside town there were market gardens at Albaro, where Dickens first resided. Nervi had many fishermen who caught tuna, anchovies, sardines and *bianchette* («a kind of whitebait»)¹⁰⁰. The fish were sold at Bogliasco and then taken to Genoa to be sold on there. One fisherman had cold polenta, brown bread and chestnuts for his lunch after a fishing trip. Ruta was known as the «valley of fruit»¹⁰¹. There Alice wrote about a local peasant tenant farmer (a *manente*) who grew on his own plot maize, peas, fine asparagus, cherries, pears, plums, peaches and almonds, olives, wheat, figs (green ones), grapes, tender-leaved lettuce, red tomatoes, melons. He did not have many chestnuts¹⁰². When he was on his way to sell green herbs and melons at Rapallo he met an old women with eggs to sell, a good example of local exchange at local markets. An elderly marquis in Portofino was given sardines for dinner, and a fine herb omelette for breakfast with a flask of white wine¹⁰³. The following day he had mushrooms and «an unfinished tumbler of Monferrato». Another meal was sardines, half a boiled fowl, two potatoes

⁹⁷ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., p. 43.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 53.

⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ Ivi, pp. 81-84. Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi* cit., pp. 157 (*bianchetti*), 173-175 (anchovies/sardines).

¹⁰¹ Comyns Carr, *North Italian Folk* cit., p. 107.

¹⁰² Ivi, pp. 108-109.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 122.

and a filled tomato «with a fry to finish»¹⁰⁴.

If Comyns Carr's volume is the most detailed English account of local food in this area, it is certainly not the only one. Henry Alford, Dean of Canterbury, recalled lunch in late August 1868 at an *osteria* at Noli: «cold whiting, and refreshing native wine, and delicious country bread, with its hard smooth crust and purest white beneath – and the never-failing Parmesan, accompanying a no less picturesque than welcome group of pears, and figs, and grapes»¹⁰⁵. He watched the cooking on this occasion and the meal took two hours altogether. S. Reynolds Hole (famous rose-grower and another cleric) observed at Bordighera «a *marchand de viandes* [who] has cooked a savoury dish over a brazier, and is just putting the finishing touch by pouring two or three drops of oil upon his snails» before serving it to a small boy¹⁰⁶.

In complete contrast a group of three well-to-do foreign men lunched outdoors at the Concordia restaurant in Genoa in March 1893 «a charming Arcadia» where «our gastronomist had full play» and his friends were «ever admirers of his researches into the mysteries of the culinary art». At dinner they ate «Ariosto» (presumably *arrosto*), which they only discovered was «Irish Stew» (not in fact *arrosto*) when it appeared on the table¹⁰⁷. The *Concordia*, in the Strada Nuova, was well-known to travellers. As early as 1861 Costello commented that it had «a large raised garden, planted with orange trees» and sold ices of fruit and «jasmine, geranium, thyme, and other sweet-smelling flowers and herbs»¹⁰⁸. On 23 April 1870

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 123.

¹⁰⁵ H. Alford, *The Riviera: Pen and Pencil Sketches from Cannes to Genoa*, Bell & Daldy, London 1870, p. 108. Parmesan was not a local product of course.

¹⁰⁶ S. Reynolds Hole, *Nice and her Neighbours*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London 1881, p. 180.

¹⁰⁷ J.K. [John Kendall], *Fugitive Impressions of Italy*, W. Burrows, Nottingham 1893, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁸ Costello, *Piedmont and Italy* cit. p. 93.

M. Elizabeth Sandbach and her parents «dined at Caffé Concordia» but on what she did not say. In 1897 Augustus Hare noted it was «the really beautiful and thoroughly Italian café», good for lunch or for ices¹⁰⁹. Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, an American visitor, regarded the Concordia as «that most delightful garden café» and recalled eating saffron risotto, spaghetti, «and other Italian dishes» with «bread in small sticks, crisp and brown»¹¹⁰. These travellers were wholly reliant on the hotel trade for their meals presumably cooked by professional cooks. Contemporary guidebooks reinforce this impression of standardised international hotel cuisine in Genoa as elsewhere from the 1860s.

However, some turn-of-the-century authors were interested in food beyond the hotel dining room. W. T. Beeby and Eustace Reynolds-Ball in their guide to *The Levantine Riviera* (1908), while recommending the usual lists of hotels, included a short section on local peasant customs. The foods ascribed to them match closely with Alice Comyns Carr's observations: polenta, fresh vegetables (peas, beans, cabbage, broccoli, spinach, lettuce, asparagus and potatoes), *minestra*, eggs and a little meat. The local wine, «red and white, fairly harmless and inexpensive» was produced by the «more well-to-do peasants» who proudly offered it to visitors¹¹¹. A near-contemporary traveller, Frederic Lees,

¹⁰⁹ M/D/SAND/8/13596, Llandrindod Wells Record Office; A. Hare, *The Riviera*, London 1897, p. 142. In this guide Hare occasionally mentioned other worthy restaurants, but never comments on the food in any detail. A much more complete guide to this region is C.B. Black, *The Riviera*. This provided guidance on restaurant food in France («Carte du Jour», pp. viii-ix, with more detail at p. 3). At Ventimiglia «The wine of this neighbourhood is drunk in the first year, when it is dark coloured but palatable» (p. 103). Readers were clearly expected to dine in their hotels, and there is no mention at any point of local foods.

¹¹⁰ A. Hollingsworth, *Italian Days and Ways*, J.P. Lippincott, Philadelphia 1906, p. 25.

¹¹¹ Beeby & Reynolds-Ball, *Levantine Riviera* cit. p. 202.

also occasionally noted the local food culture as he walked the entirety of the Rivas in 1910-11¹¹². Beginning in the west, he noticed at Dolceacqua that some of the bed of the River Nervia «has been reclaimed by industrious peasant proprietors, who have planted there some of the vineyards from which the noted red wine of Dolceacqua, *il rossese*, is made»¹¹³. In the old town

A red-sealed diploma on the walls of a *trattoria*, declaring that its holder, the proprietor, had been granted a gold medal for ten years' faithful service in the household of a German baron, held forth promise of good fare.

Their lunch was a «Spartan meal, if you like (it consisted of olives, a tomato omelette, fresh figs and peaches), but perfect in every detail». On arriving at San Remo, Lees spurned the life of the «foreign colony» of English, Germans and Russians with its sports, gaming-tables, cafes and restaurants, in favour of «the old town and the life of its people»¹¹⁴. He was impressed by «small provision shops overflowing with vividly-coloured fruits and vegetables». In Taggia, plates heaped with fruit and tomatoes were placed outside houses for people to take after paying a negligible sum¹¹⁵. In contrast at Genoa, where he lived for four months,

¹¹² F. Lees, *Wanderings on the Italian Riviera*, Pitman & Sons, London 1912. Discussed further by Balzaretti, 'Victorian travellers', pp. 450, 455-457 and R. Balzaretti, *Frederic Lees in Varese Ligure, 1911*, in G. Foster, D. Robinson, (eds.), *Travel Writing in an Age of Global Quarantine*, Anthem, New York 2021, pp. 21-37.

¹¹³ Lees, *Wanderings*, p. 16. G. Home, *Along the Rivas of France and Italy*, J. M. Dent & Co., London 1908, p. 137, noted that the wine was «considered wonderfully good» and that a good meal («very savoury» macaroni, an excellent omelette and good coffee, and sometimes cutlets and a clear soup) can be found «in the most unpretentious and often hopeless-looking village inns».

¹¹⁴ Lees, *Wanderings*, p. 55.

¹¹⁵ Ivi, p. 81.

he noticed Cappuchin friars begging «from restaurant to restaurant» but recorded nothing about anything he ate during that time¹¹⁶.

4. Memories of local foods in Varese Ligure

Lees also paid a brief visit to Varese Ligure, in the far east of the region, and recorded a few thoughts in his book. These make a useful comparison with Alice Comyns Carr's understandings of peasant food in the villages around Savignone, although they are understandably much less full than her's. In Varese, Lees was much taken with the dried mushrooms (*porcini*) and almond sweetmeats (*sciulette*, the local name not noted by Lees) produced by the town's nuns¹¹⁷, who also sold the produce of their «beautiful and extensive garden»¹¹⁸. These *sciulette* are no longer made but some examples have survived in the Albergo Amici in Varese and the Museo Contadino in Cassego (Fig. 4).

Shaped into fruits (and flowers and *porcini*) of various types, one can see how they might have appealed to Lees, whose father was a botanist¹¹⁹. These sweets were far from being a product of peasant culture, which literally had little time for such luxuries. About dried mushrooms there is more contemporary information¹²⁰, and the gathering and consump-

¹¹⁶ Ivi, p. 239. Anne Hollingsworth Wharton bought fresh dates 'worth whatever price we paid' and the 'most delicious looking candied fruits' in Genoa (*Italian Days and Ways*, pp. 14, 16).

¹¹⁷ Lees, *Wanderings* cit. p. 296.

¹¹⁸ The Augustinian nuns left Varese in 2012. Prior to that the monastery garden flourished. I visited it in March 1998 with colleagues from the University of Nottingham when the ground had already been dug for the new season, and fruit trees and vines were coming into bloom.

¹¹⁹ Lees, *Wanderings* cit. p. 319.

¹²⁰ L. Scott, *The Mushroom Merchants in the Appennines*, in *Tuscan Studies and Sketches*, London, pp. 235-243. The money which peasants could make by selling their mushrooms was (and remains) considerable.



Fig. 4 *Sciurette* at the Museo Contadino di Cassego

tion of mushrooms certainly was and still is an important part of peasant life¹²¹. Lees is unlikely to have known that Clemente Rossi, a pharmacist in Varese, had published a detailed guide to edible fungi in 1888, with cooking and preserving advice¹²². Rossi included a whole section on the dried mushrooms of Varese¹²³. He explained that the women of the town dried the mushrooms, even higher-class women, and that this fact was not understood by foreigners (evidently including Lees) and ill-informed historians who regarded them as a speciality of the Augustinian nuns (who sold but did not dry them themselves)¹²⁴. Rossi was friendly with Don Vincenzo Giannone, priest at Comuneglia a parish within Varese comune,

¹²¹ See *e.g.* the Buto Online website: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/55284> (accessed 02.11.21). Buto is a *frazione* in Varese comune.

¹²² C. Rossi, *Gastromicologia ossia nozioni popolari sopra una gran parte delle migliori specie di funghi mangerecci sul modo di cucinarli e conservarli*, Società agraria di Lombardia, Milan 1888, pp. 78-79 (*porcini*). I am very grateful to Don Sandro Lagomarsini for drawing this to my attention and for much other information about Clemente Rossi.

¹²³ *Ivi*, pp. 85-90.

¹²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 87.

who was by necessity in close contact with and fascinated by local peasant life¹²⁵. Giannone wrote about «popular errors» among his parishioners, including mistaken beliefs about mushrooms¹²⁶. Some peasants, according to Giannone, believed that the presence of vipers caused mushrooms to become poisonous¹²⁷. Here we have nearly direct access to peasant knowledge about food (for that is why they gathered mushrooms) from the late 19th century¹²⁸. How these peasants may have cooked their fungi is not recorded by Giannone but surviving recipes in the locality give a good idea: mostly stewed or fried (when fresh)¹²⁹.

Varese's cuisine was codified in a cookery book published in 1975 more than a century after Rossi's Genoese equivalent¹³⁰. Rinaldo

¹²⁵ S. Lagomarsini, *Don Vincenzo Giannone, prete e maestro. Lettere scelte (1856-1871)*, Museo contadino di Cassego, Commungelia 1987, and M. Porcella, *Clero e società rurale*, in A. Gibelli, P. Rugafiore (eds), *La Liguria*, Einaudi, Turin 1994, pp. 572-574.

¹²⁶ V. Giannone, *Errori popolari di Comuneglia*, unpublished manuscript (129 pages) in the possession of Don Sandro Lagomarsini. It was dedicated to Clemente Rossi and probably written in the 1870s. Other manuscripts of Giannone's are held by Don Sandro in the collection of the Museo Contadino di Cassego.

¹²⁷ Giannone, *Errori popolari di Comuneglia*, pp. 103-104.

¹²⁸ This can be compared with fieldwork interviews with local mushroom pickers conducted by University of Nottingham students in 2010.

¹²⁹ C. De Vincenzi, *Le antiche ricette del Monte Gottero*, ButoCultur@, Buto 2011, pp. 100-104. The more bourgeois cuisine to be found in Rossi, *La vera cuciniera Genovese* contained a wider range of rather richer recipes for fungi, e.g. pp. 34 (sauce), 97 (fresh stewed), 113 (with herbs), 142 (fried), 200 (stuffed), 227 (in salad), 240 (*frittata*).

¹³⁰ R. Gramondo, *Brevi cenni di gastronomia riservati a piatti tipici di Varese Ligure*, Editrice Zappa, Sarzana 1975. More recently, V. Delucchi, *Varese Ligure. La cucina tradizionale e divagazioni sul tema*, Associazione Culturale A. Cesena, Varese Ligure 2019. For eastern Liguria as a whole, S. Marchese, *La cucina ligure di Levante*, Tarka, Mulazzo (MS) 2017.

Gramondo listed his informants as Enrico Marcone (proprietor of the Albergo Amici)¹³¹, Vanna De Lucchi, Maria Cattaneo, Elena Figone (presumably local domestic cooks) and Renzo Campanacci (secretary of the local trade association, Pro Loco Varesina). There are some distinctive dishes. Pastas include *croxetti* (discs of fresh pasta made by hand with a special implement which stamps a pattern into the paste)¹³²; *tagliatelle alla ruta*, with a sauce of rue (*Ruta graveolens*) and also with leeks; *tomaselle*, a stuffed meat roll (rather like the English beef olive)¹³³; *pane Martino* (bread made from wheat and chestnut flour with walnuts); eel soup and baked eels; mushrooms, baked, with potatoes or cooked under a *testo*; *baciocca* (a sort of potato pie)¹³⁴; «a fainà», a sort of chestnut polenta; «i testaò» (both local dialect terms), pasta cooked in small *testi*¹³⁵; *tagliatelle* made with chestnut flour; chestnut bread cooked under the *testo*; *puccia*, a dish of savoy cabbage mixed with polenta. Two desserts were included, *sciurette* and *la fecola*, but no recipes given as these would be purchased from the nuns or professional bakers. This is a certainly a list of local foods, some refined, some less so. Some can still be eaten in Varese today but others – the eels and the pasta with rue – seem (perhaps mercifully) to have disappeared. Most of these dishes, especially those based on chestnuts, clearly come into the category

¹³¹ A much-decorated cook whom I knew in the mid-1990s when he still ran the kitchen at the Amici, a hotel which the Marcone family has owned and run since 1760. His son Marco is now in charge and traditional dishes are still on the menu alongside some more recent additions.

¹³² Known as *corzetti* in Genoa: Lingua, *Cucina dei genovesi*, p. 146 who points out that they are recorded before the 19th century.

¹³³ Ivi, p. 185.

¹³⁴ De Vincenzi, *Le antiche ricette* cit. p. 136. There are significant variations locally in how *baciocca* is prepared.

¹³⁵ Gramondo, *Brevi cenni* cit. pp. 35-36.

of peasant food, if by that we mean hearty, filling food, made using locally grown ingredients; classic *cucina povera*. Local archives reveal even more clearly the food stuffs grown and consumed locally in the period covered by this chapter. For example, the archive of the De Paoli family based in Porciorasco includes many books and papers relating to their agricultural activities. Account books record production from several of the family's estates throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, including specific books devoted to the annual amounts of cheese and grapes produced¹³⁶.

5. Conclusions

The aim in this chapter has been to show how travel writing is a useful source for culinary history in Liguria (and more generally). Eyewitness ethnographic accounts can reveal cultures of local food which are now lost despite the problems posed by the genre, and the local detail which can be extracted from them adds something new to food history which goes beyond the overly simplistic national/regional dichotomy often presented in the literature. Travellers' tales can, with care, speak clearly alongside other types of evidence and approach to help us better understand the meanings of food within human culture¹³⁷. I would argue

¹³⁶ Archivio De Paoli Porciorasco (Varese Ligure). Inventario provvisorio materiale recuperato il 17-7-'82, nos. 9 (*1829 Libro del formaggio*) and 13 (*Libro delle Uve dall'1798*). The original material is held by the Museo Contadino (Cassego) and I am very grateful to its director Don Sandro Lagomarsini and Prof. Diego Moreno for access to the originals. See further R. Bruzzone, *Dalla foglia al folio. Un erbario figurato del XVI secolo e il suo contesto*, Sagep, Genoa 2015, pp. 13-14, 22-23.

¹³⁷ For example, the historical-ecological approach taken by R. Cevasco, *Memoria verde. Nuovi spazi per la Geografia*, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2007, pp. 54-57 to cheese making in Val d'Aveto. Similar – but probably not identical – practices lie behind Comyns Carr's simple references to 'cheese'.

that the observations and opinions of the writers examined here are of most value when they can be precisely localised, as in the case of Dickens and his Genoese tavern, Mrs Comyns Carr and her beloved villages which she evidently knew well or Lees and Gramondo who respectively noted and codified the culinary traditions of Varese Ligure (for which there are parallels in similar size settlements elsewhere in the region).

Can wider questions be addressed by these apparently anecdotal records? The genre 'travel writing' in some respects gets in the way of the 'realistic' readings of the material presented here because writers, who were anyway prone to hyperbole and inaccuracy, were also readers and certainly copied material from others often without acknowledgement. Nevertheless, some broader trends are evidenced by this genre. First, although not all British travellers were critical of 'foreign food' they all recognised when food was 'foreign'¹³⁸. Dickens enthused over a 'real' Genoese tavern, and Comyns Carr smelt 'unfailing garlic' everywhere. Such visceral encounters with local food allowed regional and national identities to be played out for both visitors and visited. Second, because the local and the traditional in food were deemed important by some travellers even though they did not express it in quite that way, a 'slow' and 'traditional' past food culture mostly vegetable and fruit based and in some aspects self-sufficient can indeed be observed especially in the inland valleys. Chestnuts were the staple in these places alongside polenta and potatoes, which seem to have gained in popularity since their introduction in the early 19th century. These developments were associated with peasant cultivators and cooks. The cuisine of Genoa and the coast was markedly different with, unsurprisingly, more fish, but a greater difference still was Genoa's relative greater access to imports, especially wine from France and the Monferrato, and wheat from Sicily, and a market which had also long facilitated exports of local produce beyond the region. By the latter decades of the century the burgeoning number of

¹³⁸ Warde, *The Practice of Eating* cit. pp. 138-142.

coastal hotels had further differentiated local food culture by meeting the demands of an international clientele with dishes familiar to them. The 'international' cooking still found in such places today had come into being and, by and large, the mid-century charm of 'slow' peasant cooking could not be expected to survive such rapid touristic development. Travellers, who mostly had a superficial grasp of local food culture, by their demands for recognisable food encouraged traditional food cultures to interact with outside influences. This meant that while food in this period may well have been 'slow' in contrast with our own 'modern', 'fast' food cultures it was not static in the countryside, and peasant cooks adopted potatoes and tomatoes, once suspect alien foods, as routine ingredients. We may conclude that 19th-century travel writing can, in the absence of direct testimony from 19th-century peasants themselves about their food cultures and when read in the context of other types of evidence and modes of research, provide valuable insights into some of their local practices.