

**Veljko Barbieri**

**134 *Little Stories About Food***

**Translated from Croatian by Miljenko Kovačiček**

### **Marco Polo's Pasta**

When Great Kubla-Khan, the beneficiary of the unlucky traveller Marco Polo gathered his court, 12000 knights, 5000 clerks and about 500 members of his family would gather in the palace of Kambaluk, at that time Peking, in a great hall on several floors and arranged by their importance, from Khan himself and his family, vassal kings, princes and dukes, high dignitaries, generals and knights, to the servants at the huge court. Our main concern are not the decisions and commands Kublai-Khan used to issue on such occasions, but the unique dishes of corn, motley and rice from the giant warehouses, from fish, meat, especially poultry and pigs from all the provinces and kingdoms, side dishes of fried vegetables and fruit, all the way to pasta, cut as thin as a woman's hair, which they claim that Marco Polo first brought to Venice, from where it spread all over Italy in the 13th century, the century of travellers. Marco could neither confirm nor deny the truth about its Sicilian and Neapolitan background, as his book about his travels to China in which he hardly mentions Chinese pasta, was not trusted by anyone. But still, while he was still wilting in prison in Genoa, pasta was slowly catching on in Italian communes and later it was somehow handy to claim that it was Marco who brought it from China, although, and allegedly everybody knew that, he had never been there. Little did they care for the almost fantastic descriptions of Khan's hunting with dogs and trained birds of prey, hundreds of thousands of hunted song-birds, at the especially high culinary price in Europe at that time, then a countless multitude of Ungulates, pigs, bears and beasts that used to arrive on his table daily, caught either by the ruler himself, or by the army of his vassals and aides, and then, under the supervision of his wizard cooks, prepared in incredible ways. Even more incredible, thought Polo's contemporaries, than his otherwise incredible book in which, nevertheless, just one story was true. The one about pasta and macaroni!?

### **A Story of Flat Cakes from Vis**

An especially touching story is the one which tells how Greek flat cakes with salted fish came from the poor people's table from Syracuse, to the island of Vis, Dionysus's Issa, and have remained there ever

since. In their older form, quite like Puglian and South Italian fitascetta of red onion, the flat cake of Vis is prepared only from dough and especially fried onion, garlic and parsley with cleaned fillets of salty fish, most frequently pilchards. But when tomato spread from Spain and its colonies, especially to Naples, s the former Neapolis of Dionysus, to the entire European south and the Mediterranean basin, and became dominant in this cuisine, also on Vis, in the Komiža part of the island, to be more precise, they started to add slices of tomato to the ancient old flat cake, so that the dish itself was called the flat cake of Komiža. A close relative of Calabrian flat cakes with tomato † pitta chicculiata and pizza Napolitana, that later conquered the world. There is no place where pizza is not sold, in its most diverse forms, as a replacement for the ancient flat cakes of the Greek poor. It is only in the Mediterranean south that fitascetta, pitta chicculiata and above all *pogača*, the flat cake of Vis, live on as the captured taste and smell of an ever-hungry time of poverty.

### **The Margrave and Malmsey**

In the Istrian place of Sveti Petar u šumi (Saint Peter in the Wood) there lives a belief that an Istrian margrave, buried in their church at the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century, rises from his grave twice a year. First in spring when asparagus springs up, and the second time in autumn when truffles appear. In spring he rides a white horse that picks asparagus for him, in autumn a black one that digs truffles for its margrave with its hoofs, so they enjoy the wonders of the Istrian land together. But, the appearance of Englebert's ghost among the folk caused horror and fear, until a document was discovered about the margrave's tremendous liking of Istrian malmsey. Ever since then, in spring and autumn, all who pick asparagus and truffles leave bottles of malmsey for the margrave in hidden places. And they are no longer afraid of Englebert's shadow because since the discovery of that document, not a single hidden bottle has been left untouched.

