

Chestnuts & Other Bits of Tuscan Wisdom

On Thursday 22nd November, Americans and other expats in my part of Tuscany celebrated Thanksgiving with gusto. It did not go unnoticed that this year's Thanksgiving fell on the same day and date as J. F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. And it was also recalled that the rifle used to shoot the President was the Italian-made 6.5 mm Carcano rifle. This snippet of information caused us all to pause and ponder.

Fast on the heels of Thanksgiving, Tuscan winter rain has arrived, which means each pinging, stinging drop is ... icy cold. Comfy bed linen and airy-feather duvet has replaced summer's crisp cotton sheets, now stored with sachets of dried lavender seeds tucked between their folds. The central heating is in good working order and piled high alongside the stove are bags and bags of pellets. I've said goodbye to fresh tomatoes and look forward to seeing them again next year... Meantime, I obsessively count the bottles of homemade tomato sauce I've laid in store, and play mental culinary games for which dish each may be used. The pressure cooker has already put out several hearty soups and one of my all-time favourite meals, *bollito misto con salsa verde* – mixed boiled meats – served along with, as do all Tuscan cooks worth their oats, a chilled bowl of oily green sauce made of parsley, capers, anchovies, green pepper, garlic, olive oil and vinegar. I'm also possessively guarding my 5 liters of precious olive oil. While my taste buds rejoice each time I indulge, I experience a twinge of regret knowing that 5 liters is only likely to last me six months. Go figure ... that's less than a litre per month for one person. But hear this – *I will absolutely not buy 'olive oil' from the supermarket ever again!*

There is a *castagna*, chestnut tree, considered by my hamlet neighbours to be a monster. It stands in the abandoned land adjacent to my land, separated by a deep and steep canal. Several years ago I instructed the gardeners to saw through the ivy's arm-thick vines at the base of the chestnut's trunk. The ivy had ramped up the 30 meter trunk where its upper-most tendrils and leaves fought the chestnut's canopy for light. This fight, I believed, the chestnut was beginning to lose.

But, signora, the gardeners protested, it's not your tree. Nor your land. You'll be trespassing.

Trespassing? And anyway, you wouldn't want those who steal the nuts each year to go without, should the tree die, now would you?

The gardeners looked sheepishly at one another knowing precisely to whom I referred.

Strangulation halted, the chestnut tree resumed life, and will, I hope, continue to live for another century or so.

The deep and steep canal gives the wild boar and deer – what's left of them after the culling season – easy passage and access to the forest behind my tiny house. It is also where the chestnut tree's abundant dropped fruit lies. During the 'fruit dropping' time, the wild boar, who adore chestnuts, snorted and viciously fought each other while hoovering up the bounty.

It is also the place where boars engage in the rut. One late afternoon, while working in the garden, the sounds of a kerfuffle drew me to the edge of the canal. I was privileged to bear witness to the rut between two young males and three older females. Long after I got tired of watching, the fivesome noisily continued deep into the night.

Back to chestnuts. Did you know that the hard outer shell of the chestnut fruit has a pointed end with a small tuft at its tip, called 'flame' in Italian?

Septuagenarian and octogenarian neighbours tell me that when the chestnut tree drops the last of its leaves, winter has truly arrived.



Photo courtesy Pixabay

Chestnut flour is now being produced, which in turn will be incorporated into polenta, bread, cakes, pasta, biscuits and a Tuscan speciality called *necci* – a rolled-up crepe filled with sweetened ricotta and drizzled with honey. My favourite is *castagnaccio*, eaten warm or cold. It is a flat cake, liberally doused in olive oil and baked in a shallow pan sprinkled with pine nuts and rosemary leaves stripped from their stalks. Amongst the many expatriates who live in my corner of Tuscany, the jury is out regarding its texture. And for good reason. It sometimes tends towards being rubbery and it does take an awfully long time to chew before swallowing. It may sit in your belly like a dead weight. But then, if you were starving, better to have something to fill the hole than nothing, right? At www.visittuscany.com and elsewhere on the web, you will find recipes for castagnaccio.

Despite the number of chestnut trees that abound in our Tuscan hills, producing homemade chestnut flour is laborious, and it is expensive to buy. Yet my neighbours say it was considered as basic as common flour when rural Italy was at its poorest. After the chestnuts are dried (takes days in an oven) they are ground into flour by weighty millstones. November is the best month in which to buy freshly milled chestnut flour.

In contrast to the bare and fruit-less chestnut trees, *melograni* (pomegranates,) hang suspended from their trees' naked branches, glowing like giant, ruby-red cough drops. It's a fruit I adore – not least for the look of its exotic jewel-seeds – and for each seed's burst of intense sweetness and crunch. Try sprinkling these seeds over baby-spinach leaves, festooned with dollops of soft goat's cheese, toasted hazelnuts, tossed with warmed olive oil and droplets of balsamic vinegar. Serve with oven-hot bread.

For adult tastes, and if you can lay your hands on 98% proof alcohol, crush and steep the pomegranate seeds adding lemon juice to taste for balance. (If you must add sugar, only use fine white.) Strain, and then you can freeze and serve this as you would *limoncello*.

With all the leafless trees, olive trees excluded, my view of the Tyrrhenian Sea is further expanded. As I write this, heavy clouds are massing above a flat pewter sea, waiting to roll inland and blanket everything in cold, gray vapour. Truth is, though wet, gray, and a little on the too-cool side for my blood, everything in my magical corner of Tuscany is, quite simply, perfect.

– by Jacqueline Falcomer

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