

Jefferson's Tuscan Friend by Norma Jean Bishop

Chianti wine and Lucchese oil were introduced to the Virginia colony by the Tuscan Filippo Mazzei. Born in Poggio a Caiano (near Prato) in 1730, Mazzei led a full and long life as a doctor, ambassador, agriculturalist, commercial trader, journalist and political theorist.

On a diplomatic mission as the Grand Duke Leopold's ambassador to London, Mazzei received a request for two Franklin stoves. By chance Benjamin Franklin was at this time in London, so together they arranged to have the stoves faithfully produced and delivered to Leopold. Soon thereafter, in Paris, he again encountered Franklin, who as U.S. emissary was honored by the French *Lumières* (Enlightenment philosophers). Mazzei also came to know the future U.S. presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Their friendship resulted in Jefferson's invitation to Mazzei, to come to Virginia and take up farming alongside Monticello (near Williamsburg and Charlottesville). On the first trip Mazzei brought along some *contadini*: two Lucchese (one with wife and child) to help with the olives, a tailor from the Piedmont region, and a Genovese farmer.

Along with his agricultural activities, Mazzei actively served the Revolution alongside future presidents such as Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison and patriots like Patrick Henry and George Mason, and he was an apologist for the American independence in the



Jacques-Louis David – Portrait of Filippo Mazzei, 1790 ca

European press. In 1776 his communications with Jefferson and his comments in the Virginia newspapers (translated by Jefferson) found echo in the Declaration of Independence. He returned to Europe, where he became ambassador to King Louis XVI, experiencing the French Revolution firsthand as the king and queen fled Versailles. Then he went to Poland, commissioned to King Stanislaw.

Returning to Pisa a few years after the turn of the century (when he was already 70 years old), Mazzei received a letter from Jefferson asking him to find sculptors, perhaps even the esteemed Canova,

to build a Statue of Liberty in white marble and to undertake the construction of the monumental buildings in Washington, D.C. Mazzei approached the task with his usual diligence, travelling to Florence where he found two fine young sculptors, then on to Rome to interview Canova, who was unfortunately fully engaged on a major project some distance from the city. He returned to Florence and hired the sculptors Andrei and Franzoni, arranging for them and their families to undertake this commission on the best of terms.

Reading Mazzei's *Memoirs*, which he began when he was 80 and completed when he was 83, we are struck by his confidence, his openness to friendship and adventure, his staunch belief in liberty and democracy. His childhood recollections include doubts regarding religious faith, but his medical studies sustained his belief in reason and gave him cause to question the value of religion. More than a medical doctor, Mazzei was a man of the Enlightenment, a cross-fertilizer of ideas. Thanks to Mazzei, Tuscans have long been present in Virginia, and have always been esteemed in Washington, D.C.

Mazzei died in Pisa in 1816 at the age of 86.

The Memoirs of Filippo Mazzei were written two hundred years ago, published in two volumes in 1845 (Lugano), then in a shorter, single volume in 1944 (Rome), in 1946 (Florence) and most recently in 1985 (Bologna) by the Associazione Filippo Mazzei.

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