

Lucija Čok

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Lucija Čok is a Scientific Counsellor in sociolinguistics and language didactics, and a Professor of multilingualism and interculturality. Her prolific research work has been inspired by the laboratory that is the ethnically and culturally diverse region of Slovene Istria. Čok's projects have brought together scholars who have provided the broader European scientific community with insight into the richness of contact areas, proposing them as models for coexistence and shared creation, and highlighting the advantages of multilingualism and interculturality, innovative language teaching methods, and education models in multilingual environments. Her findings and achievements have been published in monographs and numerous scientific articles.

Though her latest work, *Flavours of the Sea: Old Istrian Cuisine*, is the author's first venture into gastronomy, she is hardly a novice in the work's broader subject area. In fact, the unfolding of the various identity dimensions of Istrian cuisine and investigation of the foodways that define the multicultural Istrian region merely expand upon and advance her previous research.

# Flavours of the Sea

## Old Istrian Cuisine

Lucija Čok



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Lucija Čok: **Flavours of the Sea. Old Istrian Cuisine**

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## **Istria – Slovenia's only culinary region in contact with the sea**

In 2006, Slovenia adopted its Gastronomy Strategy, the country's fundamental document guiding the development, education, and marketing of food culture or gastronomy. This strategy laid the foundations for a gastronomy pyramid that represents the diversity of food culture and heritage in Slovenia, with the base encompassing the entire national culinary heritage, followed by the middle with 24 culinary regions, and finally, the top, representing select dishes, foods, and drinks that showcase Slovenia's culinary recognition. This top section highlights the characteristic diversity of Slovenia's gastronomy in its Mediterranean, Alpine, Pannonian, and central macro-regions.

One of these 24 culinary regions not related to geographical or political and administrative divisions is Istria – the only one that is directly connected to the sea. Within our country alone, Istria is understood as the area of four municipalities of the Slovene Littoral region. However, the same term can also be understood as referring to the whole of the Istrian Peninsula, the greater share of which is located within the borders of neighbouring Croatia and of which Slovene Istria only covers its northern and northwestern parts. Compiling the assortment of Istrian dishes that effectively embody the food culture of this region of Slovenia is a considerable challenge, as explained in the book at hand. *Flavours of the Sea*, authored by Lucija Čok, highlights the rich diversity of Istrian cuisine that has resulted from dynamic historical developments and their impacts. In the culinary art of Istria we can assume or even positively ascertain the influences from, in chronological order, the Roman (perhaps least noticeably), Venetian, Viennese or Austrian with Pannonian elements, and lastly Italian, especially Triestine gastronomic traditions. This

conclusion about the multifaceted identity of the Istrian food culture is not based on mere impressions, but on the multitude of written records cited by the author. The diverse and multiple sources of inspiration have also made it quite difficult to put together a selection of dishes (foods and drinks) that would best represent Istria's Gastronomy Strategy and pyramid. It could be argued that, after the end of WWII, this area began to absorb more strongly the influences of culinary traditions from the neighbouring Balkan region (as did, in truth, all of Slovenia). However, the northern and northwestern parts of the Istrian Peninsula, with their Slovene and Mediterranean (predominantly Italian) cuisines, have always served as a link between the Balkans and Central Europe, a sort of *gateway to Central Europe*, as the author puts it, and one – we should note – that throughout the centuries enabled a bilateral route of giving as much as taking.

The topic of Čok's *Flavours of the Sea* is thus the food culture of the Slovene part of the Istrian Peninsula, with a specific focus (as anticipated in the subtitle) on old Istrian cuisine. The book highlights all the principal traits of its evolution and content, particularly the local population's reliance on the sea for sustenance and livelihood. This work is therefore not only an overview of typical local and regional dishes, but also an important monograph on Istria's food culture and culinary heritage, and on everything else recognised internationally as intangible cultural heritage – the knowledge, skills, and abilities employed by our distant and recent ancestors to produce food, cook everyday and festive fare, and prepare individual dishes and entire meals. Eating has always been more than just a 'technological' process; it is one of the most fundamental ways and occasions for socialising, communication, exchange, trade, and collectively establishing rituals, customs, and forms of intellectual creativity. Even the saying goes: "We eat to live, and not live to eat."

The book's subject matter, broadly described as *old Istrian cuisine*, is further specified in terms of time and content. Only such an approach can lead to fully satisfactory conclusions and notions. In today's world, we can no longer rely on temporally vague terms, such as 'old', 'local', etc. While setting a temporal frame from the second half of



the 18th century to the 20th century, or better, up until WWII, Čok also places the cooking in a broader historical context, which allows for an interesting exploration of the very concept of Istrian cuisine, its existence, and, particularly, its identity in a unique geographic area characterised by significant variety, a specific climate, and abundant biodiversity. There was a wide range of staple foods available for Istria's both urban and rural populations to choose from in preparing their everyday and festive meals. Sea (and to some extent freshwater) fishing and salt production were of great importance, especially to coastal communities. The exceptional, centuries-old traditions of oliviculture and viniculture boast several autochthonous varieties. The meat and dairy diets rely heavily on sheep and goats. It is also important to consider the significance of cereals, which formed the foundation of bread culture. The bread-making tradition became so well established in Istria that local women known as *krušarice* (bread-bakers), and only rarely men, began selling their bread in towns, mostly Trieste and, to a smaller extent, other centres, transporting cob loaves and various types of rolls (known in the local dialect as *bišce*, *korneti*, *polentine*, *bige*) on their donkeys. This trade ensured the economic viability and independence of many bakers and their families, and, in Trieste, they could also sell milk, eggs, cheese, and vegetables.

Nowadays, there is a global focus on several key aspects of food culture, including local and regional foods and their heritage, seasonal eating, and environmentally friendly and sustainable thinking and practices. Among these, the first thing to be highlighted is culinary cultural heritage, which in many countries of the world has been treated with similar attention as it is afforded in the present book. The aim is not, of course, to engage in a culinary or gastronomical 'museumology', nor to obsess nostalgically over the original and typical, but rather to establish a strong foundation for building an innovative and creative conceptualisation of this heritage, thereby ensuring its modern culinary reinterpretation. Rather than viewing it as a collection of museum artefacts, culinary heritage should be regarded as an imaginative starting point for the future. Victuals and beverages are part of broader narratives concerning people, families, groups, life

in local and regional environments, the wide range of economic endeavours, social relationships forged through sharing meals, various forms of spiritual or intellectual creativity, and more. These stories go beyond just listing ingredients and providing cooking instructions, but testify to the gradual integration of individual foods and drinks into everyday and festive contexts, explaining their significance and role in people's lives, as well as presenting contemporary methods, contents, and forms. While this book offers many insights from this perspective as well, the two basic principles guiding the selection of recipes for specific dishes were their local authenticity and regional character. This focus aligns the author with other international scholars engaged in similar research.

The evolutionary and typological diversity of Istrian cuisine reflects the area's location at the crossroads of several cultures, their interaction and co-existence, as well as influences from beyond the seas. Simple foods that were once associated with privation and poverty are now finding their way back into contemporary cuisine; however, their resurgence is not driven by a longing for a hard life, but rather by a dedication to healthier nutrition and a desire to preserve the distinct character and diversity of the diets of Mediterranean Europe. In this same spirit, *Flavours of the Sea* highlights the value of authenticity and regional identity. In fact, modern interpretations and embellishments of local dishes and beverages are now emerging as the key to gastronomic success (as corroborated by the flourishing tourism and hospitality industry in the Croatian part of the Istrian Peninsula), while, on the other hand, blindly applying global solutions (which, alas, still seems to prevail in Slovene Istria) only distances us from the essence and true nature of our culinary art. Čok suggests that the perception of Istrian cuisine in Slovenia should be changed in a way that recognises its inherently multicultural character. Throughout the centuries, this part of Slovene territory has been home to people coming and going, taking and giving, but with the innovations introduced and embraced always measured against and adapted to the natural conditions, economic potential, social relations, and their roles in spiritual and intellectual creativity. We could

say they lived by the philosophy that if you “tell me what and how you eat, and I’ll learn about your ordinary and special days, your culture and its singularities, the different qualities of your life that can enlighten and enrich mine.” Or, in a loose interpretation of a well-known injunction: “First understand, then copy!”<sup>1</sup>

Janez Bogataj<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the work *Die Natur kapieren und kopieren* by the Austrian naturalist and inventor Viktor Schauberg.

<sup>2</sup> Janez Bogataj holds a doctoral degree in ethnological sciences, a bachelor’s degree in art history, and the honorary title of Professor Emeritus from the University of Ljubljana. His research fields include cuisine and gastronomy, arts and crafts, tourism, cultural heritage and its connections to modern society.



## Why Istrian and why old cuisine

My presentation of the old cuisine of Slovene Istria is, in addition to a collection of select recipes, a journey through the peninsula's history, exploring the culinary influences, customs, and traditions associated with the dishes featured. Is what we call Istrian cuisine truly *Istrian* or something more? As used in describing food culture in this part of the Mediterranean, the term 'Istria' refers to the Adriatic peninsula and, alternatively, to the territory encompassed by the four Slovene coastal municipalities situated thereon. The culinary culture of this geographical area cannot be defined as solely Slovene or Italian intangible heritage, not least due to the many elements introduced by the various peoples who have left their mark on this gateway to Central Europe, which (northern) Istria undoubtedly is. Aside from being affected by the various synchronous influences interacting in the environment and the choices made by individuals or small social and ethnic communities to play an active part in the changing or perpetuating food culture, Istrian cuisine has undergone a diachronous evolution under influences that have moulded its environment through time. It has preserved Mediterranean ingredients (wheat and other cereals, olives, grapes) and the methods of meeting food demands (fishing and agriculture); however, the processing of the foodstuffs, as well as the preparation and consumption of those foods, have changed. I have compiled a selection of the most authentic Istrian dishes, which use local ingredients and cooking techniques, and which are prepared according to long-known recipes in the regional diet. They offer unique flavours that complement the ingredients commonly found in Mediterranean recipes, but, most importantly, they are closely related to the sea, the coastal flora and fauna, and the mild local climate.

One may also wonder about the accuracy of the term *old* Istrian cuisine. The dishes, their descriptions, and related stories have been circumscribed to the period extending from the second half of the 18th century to the 20th century (i.e. from the final stage of Venetian rule over Istria to WWII). There are no records regarding local culinary art from the time preceding La Serenissima's hegemony; sparse references to nutrition from different periods can be found in the objects preserved in ethnological collections, such as furnishings, vessels, and utensils. They are also intuited in simple, everyday fish-based and other fares. Mediaeval sources attest to an expansion of Venetian cuisine across the northern Adriatic – not surprisingly, considering that Istria was under Venetian rule for over five hundred years. These historical circumstances shaped the identity of Istrian cuisine as a blend of multicultural rural and urban diets. The disparities in class, economic status, and way of life between the towns and their hinterlands – the former characterised by prevalently Romance and the latter by mostly Slavic ethnic, cultural, and linguistic traditions – reflected in the diets of the two environments and consequently in their culinary legacies. Despite the expectation that the subsequent Austrian rule would have adulterated the recipes of the classical Venetian cuisine, its Istrian adaptation was preserved, with the Pannonian elements only enhancing it, lending it a broader Central European rather than a narrowly Austrian flavour.

This book does not include recipes that can be found in almost any modern cooking book. After the end of WWII, the general migration from countryside to towns resulted in significant lifestyle and dietary change, as the populace transitioned from peasantry to the working class. While the rural diet did influence certain aspects of the urban one, in other aspects, it either adapted to or fully adopted the ways of the town. By using traditional ingredients, but applying different cooking techniques, Istrian recipes preserved their origin but lost authenticity in terms of typical preparation.

Nevertheless, we are delighted to observe among health-food enthusiasts and seafood restaurants a revival of dishes that are, on the one hand, individual passed-down recollections and, on the other, a

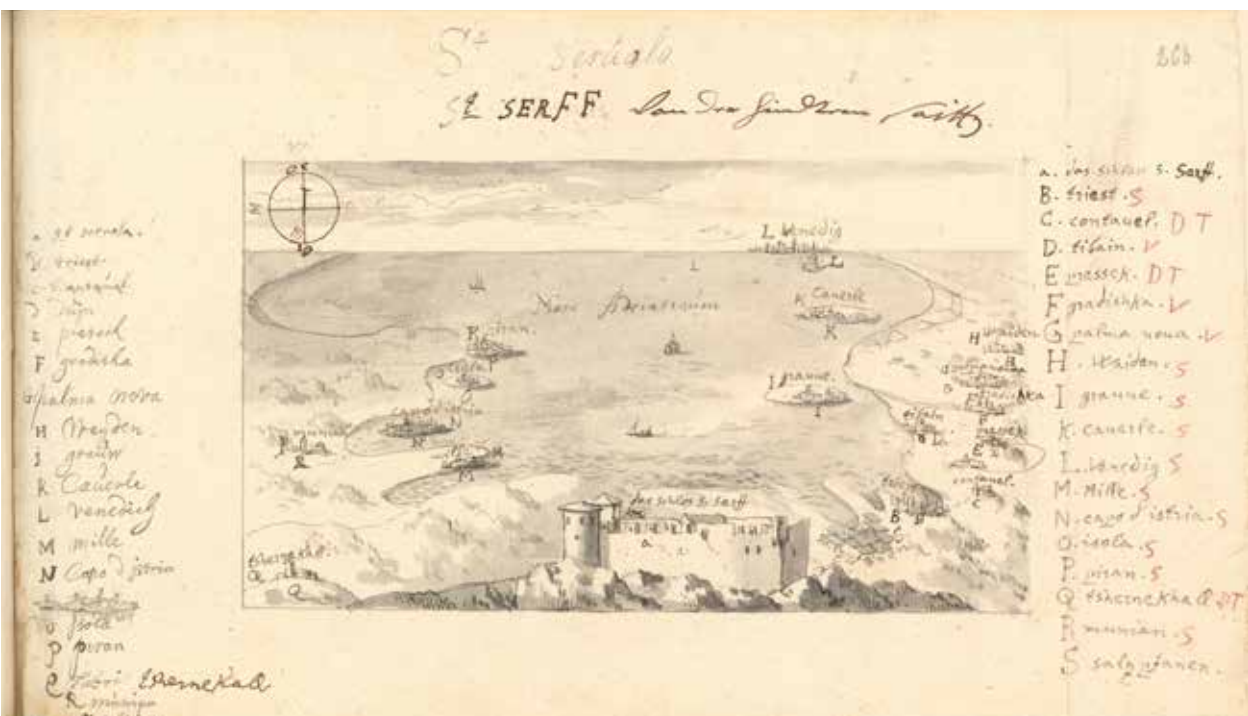
representation of the collective memory and shared intangible food heritage of the Istrian territories of the past. Although the facts can become blurred in this interplay, the nostalgia for specific dishes and the desire to hear their stories and learn about Istrian traditions remain clear. The culinary art thus helps keep Istrian intangible cultural heritage alive in a deliciously evocative way.

Lucija Čok, the author





## More than just a flavour of Istria



St Serff / San Servolo (Socerb from posterior perspective and its view)



## **Istrian differences and commonalities as values**

Just a small portion of the much larger environment of the northern Adriatic, the Istrian Peninsula, entirely encompassed within the borders of Slovenia and Croatia, where languages intertwine and cultures meet, has been shaped by a concatenation of historical, social, and cultural realities similar, if not identical, to those of the region as a whole. As a geostrategic area, Istria is a mesh of experiences and traditions, a multiplicity of values cultivated and preserved over the centuries by its various nationalities (Italian, Slovene, Croatian). To define affiliation to Istria or 'Istrianism' as an identifying attribute is difficult if not impossible; a voyage through the region's history is all it takes to grasp the diversity of the local community. The Istria of today, with the migratory streams that commenced in the latter half of the 20th century still alive, feels like a blend of new and old identities, shaped by the choices, whether imposed or spontaneous, that people made in the process of defining themselves. From the points of view of ethnology and cultural anthropology, it would be difficult to provide a monosemantic definition of Slovene Istria, this geographical portion of the Istrian Peninsula, and only describe it as the native territory of the Istrian people, their culture, and their way of life within the borders of Slovenia.

In the introductory part of this book, in the description of the emergence and contemporary status of food culture, the term 'Istria' is used alternately to refer to the entire peninsula in the Adriatic and to the territory of the four Slovene littoral municipalities also known under the stricter term of Slovene Istria. That this territory was settled long, long ago is evidenced by archaeological sites dating back to as early as prehistoric times (such as the Osp Cave), including the Stone Age, and later the Roman era (Sermin, Koper, Roman villas in Izola), while the name Istria itself is believed to have been derived from the Illyrian

tribe of the Histri. Despite the division between two countries today, it is impossible to view the Slovene and Croatian parts of the Istrian Peninsula as separate regions. This is evident in their shared histories, in the various rules that have shaped the lifestyles of their inhabitants, the omnipresent awareness about the importance and role of native peoples and their languages, as well as of the effects of immigration and the policies of the broader European area, both currently and in the past.

Istria's multifaceted history is also reflected in the various types of dwellings, making it challenging to categorise the local built environment under a single architectural context. The diversity of living spaces is considerable, ranging from coastal towns fashioned in Venetian Gothic style to fishermen's and salt-workers' communities, villages perched on the Istrian hills, and smaller rural settlements scattered across the rolling countryside. There are at least four distinct architectural patterns that constitute the unique and varied heritage of the Istrian landscape. The diversity of urban design is most noticeable in Koper, Izola, and Piran, the three largest towns in the region. They were all established in the most fertile part of the Istrian Peninsula, at the foothills of the hinterland. From the hills of the Muggia Peninsula in the north to the Straža summit in the southeast, low plains alternate with terraced slopes, abounding with vineyards and olive groves. The three towns differ in the type of original location: Koper/Capodistria was founded on an island between the Badaševica (also called the Karlunga or the Korna Lunga) and the Rižana Rivers; Izola/Isola also on an island (as its Italian etymon suggests), but facing the Bay of St. Simon; and Piran/Pirano, the only one to have always been part of the dry land, formed on the cape of one of the smallest peninsulas of the Gulf of Trieste. "If there were ever towns that owed their existence, prosperity, and glory to the land on which they were built, these are undoubtedly Koper, Izola, and Piran" (Bernik 1968 in Brglez 2005, 54).

The houses of the bourgeoisie and noble palaces in the towns, mainly built in the Venetian style, are still preserved, while all that is left of the noble residences in the countryside is typically ruins or vestiges of

walls (e.g. the Carli family summer villa in Cere). The physical dimensions and layouts of farmhouses depended on the size and structure of the families, as well as their economic status. In the area known as the Karst Rim (the southwestern edge of the Slovene Karst region), small families lived in simple houses built in hard limestone, while in inland Istria, where larger families were more common, the homes were typically constructed in grey sandstone. The structures tended to evolve and grow as the families expanded or the farm earnings and side income increased. Tenant farmers (*koloni*) worked the land of large estates, and their dwellings (*kolonije*) were scattered across the landscape. Over time, as the number of resident workers and families increased and their wide kinship networks spread out, the built environment came to form entire villages, structured in the pattern of dispersed settlements (Ravnik 2021, 353).

As already pointed out, Istrian food culture does not lend itself well to univalent definitions – as an integral part of the region's cultural heritage, it is the result of interaction between natural and social factors in a cultural, lived-in landscape. Up until the period immediately following WWII, the inland areas of Slovene Istria were prevalently marked by Slovene traditions, while in the coastal zone, under the influence of old Romanesque culture, a blend of Italian and Slovene elements reflected in certain aspects of the living environment. Since then, the dichotomy of town and country has impressed a layered aesthetics on Istria's cultural countenance, although in rural areas many special features of their varied culture survived unaffected (Ravnik 2021, 346).

The local language and the cultural mosaic of coastal towns have been losing colour and authenticity, slowly disappearing among the persistent attempts at establishing one form of interculturality or another. Instead of promoting shared features and cultural pluralism, there is the increasing practice of highlighting differences and distinctive traits of a particular cultural identity as values. Beliefs, lore, familial and ethnic traditions of a life cycle, observance of holidays, and associated customs and mores are integral aspects of cultural identity, extending beyond a single person to encompass larger communities.

Intangible cultural heritage,<sup>3</sup> comprised of human creativity, beliefs, knowledge, values, and norms, holds a special role in and value for the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Food culture as part of this legacy serves as an indicator of the social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of a given period (Kavrečič 2014, 38). A specific social environment's food traditions are constantly influenced by the social, economic, political, and cultural moments, and lately, with the rapidly evolving information technology, by the media and social networks as well. Also, dietary habits are quite idiosyncratic. Passed-down memories intersect with the realities of a given moment, and the nostalgia for a specific dish arises from what we learn or hear, from a new experience evoking, though not entirely repeating, some past one. Interviews with informants from Slovene and Italian ethnic communities<sup>4</sup> have provided valuable material on culinary heritage and its origins. A systematic analysis and careful examination of these recollections and testimonies have afforded us a view into the lives and mentalities of populations from other times. The cultural script approach helps shed light on numerous aspects of the cultural norms shared by speakers of different languages and ingrained in their vocabularies and conversational routines (Goddard, Wierzbicka 2005). This has proven especially true with original names of certain dishes preserved in the standard language and in the dialect (e.g. *šavor*, *bobiči*, *nakelda*, etc.).

Cookery is an integral part of people's daily lives, and Istrian, as indeed the whole of Slovene cuisine, is a diverse melange of flavours and ingredients – a few locally distinct, some regionally kindred, and other ubiquitously shared – interplaying in recipes that mirror the area's littoral, Mediterranean character – the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the sea, and the savouriness of the seaside flora and fauna. Add to this the lively temperament of the Istrians, and it culminates in an exquisite harmony of land, sea, and authentic, original people.

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3 Dietary customs, practices, knowledge, rules and norms are an integral part of tangible and intangible culture and cultural heritage (UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003). Food has been part of the economic knowledge and skills category in the Slovene Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2006 (coordinated by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum).

4 The list of informants is provided in the end section of the book.

## Istrianism, recognisable in the history of fishery

The diets of coastal peoples are closely linked to the resources of their natural environment, and fishing is one of the activities with the greatest impact on life by the sea. Let us therefore take a brief historical survey of the development of fishery in Slovene Istria.

As a result of wars waged on its own soil as well as neighbouring territories, the Istrian Peninsula experienced multiple waves of migration and the permeation of mixed cultures and traditions leaving lasting traces. During the rule of the Venetian Republic (particularly between the 15th and 17th centuries), the peninsula's early Romance and Slavic settlers witnessed an influx of refugees from Dalmatia and Albania, along with nomadic immigrants from other Balkan regions.<sup>5</sup> All these peoples, but the Romance populace in particular, influenced the lifestyle of Istria's inhabitants, leaving it with a characteristic Mediterranean imprint. The sea and fishing, along with olive- and winegrowing, have been the hallmarks of Istrian economy since the Middle Ages. The first written mention of fishing in Istria (Žitko 1992, 88) is found in the *Placitum of Riziano*, a document recording the proceedings of the public judicial assembly of the year 804, where the representatives of Istrian towns and *kašteli*<sup>6</sup> met with envoys from the Emperor Charlemagne in Rižana/Risano. It contains a reference to the fishing tributes that the Istrians were required to pay to Duke John; later on, the right of fishery was granted only to the coastal population, a right that was subsequently passed down through sev-

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<sup>5</sup> The Aromanians, nomadic Romance-speaking immigrants from the territories of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Morlachs, mostly Slavicized Vlachs, took refuge from the Turks on the Istrian Peninsula in the first half of the 15th century. Among them, there were many Croats, Dalmatians, Montenegrins, and Albanians. The Čiči, also of Vlach descent, settled in today's region of Čičarija in the 16th century (Darovec 2008, 108).

<sup>6</sup> *Kašteli* or *kaštelirji* (Ita. *castellieri*) were fortified hilltop villages.





## VELE CAPODISTRIANE

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a cura di Tullio Vergara Monti

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- 3 Francesco Bacci Scompo ANITA
- 4 Fratelli D'Amico Piro del Mito TRE FRATELLI
- 5 Giovanni Deacono Mito REGINETTA
- 6 Domenico Destrad Mito Scaz BOMPADRE
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*Sails of the fishing families of Koper*



eral generations. In the 15th century, the inland rural population, mostly of Slavic descent, subsisted mainly by cultivating the land. The residents on the outskirts of towns, called *paolani* commuted to the fields they owned in the countryside, working the land during the day and returning to town in the evening. Over time, some of them went into fishing or salt-working (Žitko et al. 1999). The majority of the fishermen in Koper, Izola, and Piran at that time were Italians, whereas Slovene fishermen mainly worked in the northern part of the gulf (around Aurisina/Nabrežina).

For centuries, fishing was the main source of livelihood for the coastal population. In the Middle Ages, the fishing areas, defined by the town statutes, were shared between the noble lords and the church. From 1576 onwards, any fisherman owning a fishing boat was required to first offer his catch to the commune. Larger vessels were owned by the town gentry, who hired fishermen and gave them a share of the catch as wages. The statutes also regulated the sale of fish. For instance, the Statute of Izola from the 14th century specified a fine for fishermen selling fish outside the territory of Izola (Article 28), required all of Izola's fishermen to sell their dried or fresh fish in the town's main square and not from home (Article 29), forbade the sale of rotten fish (Article 30), and established the stall rental fee at 1 *denarič* for each *solid*<sup>7</sup> worth of fish sold (Article 99 of the Statute) (Kos 2006).

To survive on such a limited income from the catches, fishing families also had some land where they grew legumes and other vegetables, or cultivated grapes and olive trees. In keeping with the tenets of the French Revolution, the French introduced and implemented the principle of equality before the law in their occupied territories

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7 *Solid* or *sold* (Ven. *soldo* from the Lat. *solidus*) was a coin from the old Venetian monetary system. In the 13th century, it was worth 12 *denariči* (Ven. *denari* from the Lat. *denarii*).

as well. In 1808, the French authorities<sup>8</sup> passed an act that abolished all feudal restrictions concerning fishing and liberalised maritime activities in the Illyrian Provinces. This French act served as the basis for a later Austrian one, which more precisely defined the strip of coastal sea where the fishermen of coastal towns and villages were entitled to fish. In the mid-19th century, the Austrian authorities, having observed a decline in the local fishery but recognising its importance for the area, began closely monitoring the fishing activities, stimulating their development and introducing special rules. The results were soon visible – the number of fishermen and fishing boats increased, as did their catches. By 1882, there were 60 fishing vessels in Izola with an average crew of five. At the close of the 19th century, Izola's fishermen formed their first cooperative.

WWI halted all fishing activities due to naval conflicts and the underwater mines set throughout the northern Adriatic. During the Fascist rule that followed the war, fishermen from Naples imposed their presence on the Gulf of Trieste, gradually changing the demographics of the fishing population, as well as fishing practices. With the outbreak of WWII, the existence of fishing families was endangered once again, and in the immediate post-war period, Yugoslav authorities put Slovene fishery to a severe test by favouring Croatian fishermen. Fish-processing facilities and fishing cooperatives in Slovene Istria were subjected to multiple changes and reorganisations that would bring Slovene fishing to its knees in just a few decades (Traven.si 2015).

After 1945, fishermen in Slovene Istria continued retail fishing, but chose to sell their catch in Trieste to fetch higher prices. They also began reuniting in fishing cooperatives, organisations that originally emerged in the early 20th century alongside the fish-processing industry. The Sergej Mašera Maritime Museum in Piran, as part of its

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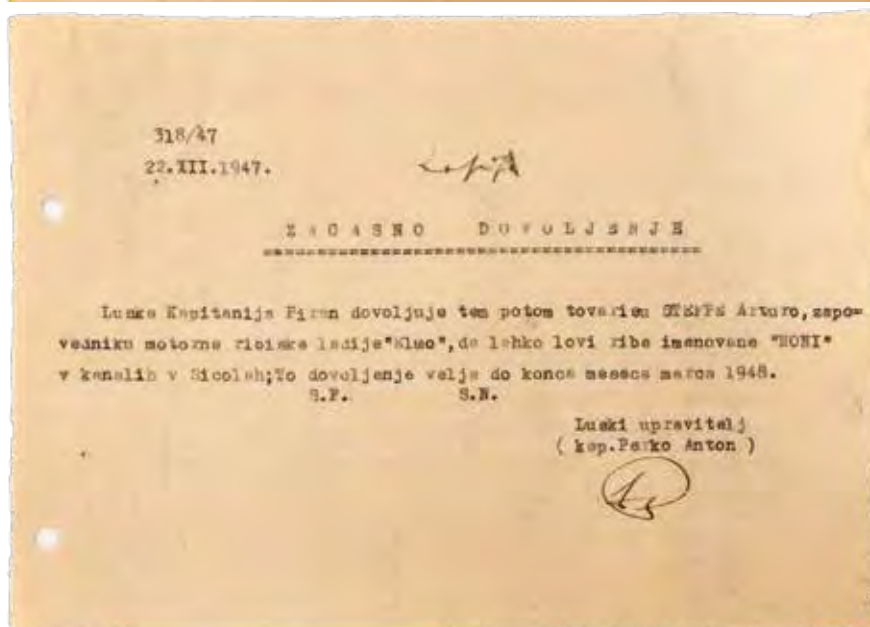
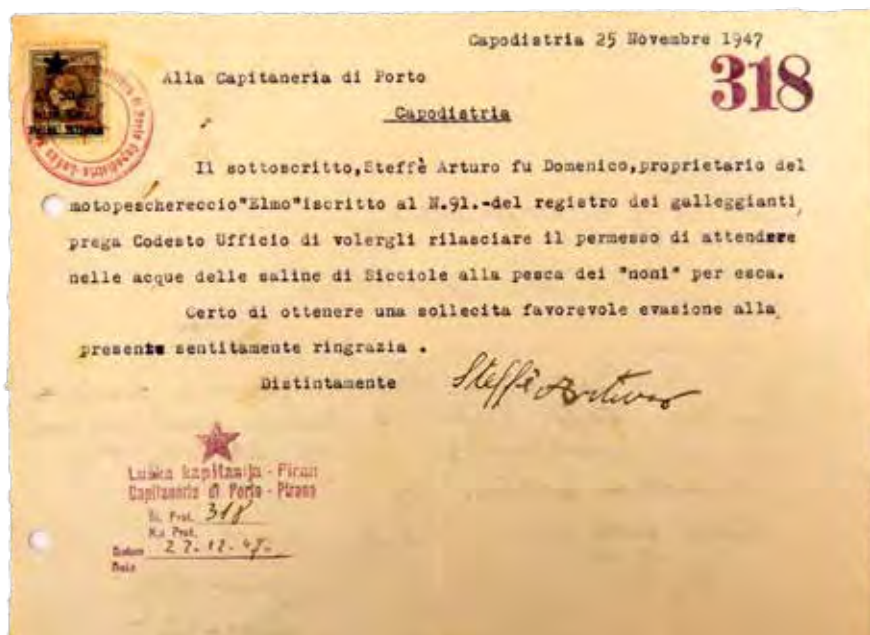
<sup>8</sup> Under the Venetian rule, the administration of Istria, including its legal system, was in the hands of a *providur*. The word, a barbarism of the Venetian term *provedador* (Ita. *provveditore*), is the style of officials appointed by the various councils in which the state government was divided to 'provide' for specific matters or for the government of provinces or regions. During the time of the Illyrian Provinces, the *provedadori* were replaced by prefects (Angelo Calafati, Vincenzo Dandolo, and A. F. Marmont).

permanent collection of traditional fishing, houses a restored banner of the former fishing cooperative, dating from 1925. Its manufacture is ascribed to the Benedictine nuns of Piran, who probably also sewed the banner of the Piran Consortium for Maritime Transport from 1919 (Juri 2019). Before WWII, the cooperative united over 300 fishermen in Piran alone, whereas after the war and due to the emigration of a large part of the coastal towns' population, the first post-war cooperative only consisted of some 90 members.

It is interesting to see from the documents preserved how, in the first years after WWII, the coastal areas of Slovene Istria were already asserting their mixed ethnic and cultural composition. It was perfectly acceptable, for example, for a person to write to the authorities in Italian and receive a reply in Slovene. In 1947, the fisherman Arturo Steffè, son of Domenico Steffè, applied in Italian with the Piran Harbour Office for temporary permission to fish for south European toothcarp for bait from his fishing boat, named the *Elmo*. The Harbour Office issued him a permit in Slovene.

Even more interesting is the 1948 contract of sale between fishermen, where both Italian (the text of the contract between the seller Arturo Steffè and buyers Nazario and Michele Vascon) and Slovene (the annotation of the Harbour Office on the transfer of property) appear in the same document. The seals of the Harbour Office and Harbour Representation are also bilingual. The buyer paid 11,000 (yugo)lire for the fishing boat. The yugolire banknotes bore trilingual inscriptions, including the legal notice, the name of the issuer, and the denomination (e.g. Serbo-Cro. *100 lira*, Slo. *100 lir*, Ita. *100 lire*). Only on the '1 lira' note was the name of the currency written in a single form, valid and the same in all three languages. Before the Second London Agreement in 1954, which regulated minority rights more thoroughly, the creation of bilingual, even trilingual administrative documentation proceeded without any special protocol.

According to the fishermen themselves, the strategy for fishing adopted by the independent Republic of Slovenia has not proven successful either, and the fishing policy following the country's ac-



*Application of Arturo Steffè, son of the late Domenico Steffè and owner of a trawler named the Elmo, for a licence to fish for south European toothcarp for bait in the waters of the Sečovlje/ Sicciole salt pans, dated 25 November 1947 (top). Temporary licence issued to Arturo Steffè by the Piran Harbour Office, granting him permission to fish for south European toothcarp in the saltpan canals, dated 22 December 1947 (above).*

177  
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Alla Capitaneria di Porto  
Capodistria

CONTRATTO DI COMPRAVENDITA  
in virtù del quale

il signor Steffè Arturo fu Domenico, abitante a  
Capodistria Fianziale St'Andrea N.507, facendo per sé  
ed eredi e disponendo di cosa propria vende e in as-  
soluta proprietà trasferisce ai signori Vascon Mi-  
chele fu Nazario e Vascon Nazario di Michele, abitan-  
ti a Capodistria, Calle S. Pilosena N.480, una barca da  
pesca denominata " Alfredo " iscritta al Comparti-  
mento marittimo di Trieste, Ufficio di Porto di Capo-  
distria col N.232 del registro dei galleggianti del  
Circondario Marittimo di Capodistria, stanzata il  
giorno 1 Febbraio 1944 avente le seguenti caratte-  
ristiche:

Lunghezza	metri	6,50
Larghezza	"	2,50
Altezza	"	0,70
Stazza di registro	tonnellate	0,80

Il prezzo della presente compravendita vie-  
ne dalle parti fissato e stabilito nell'ammontare  
complessivo di Lire 11.000.- dicono Lire undicimila

Totale pagato Lit. 660.-  
Tassa di bollo Lit. 50.-  
Imposta di registro Lit. 543h  
Foglio di bollato Lit. 140.-

33h  
26 IV 48

Firma del firmatario  
Firma del notaio  
Firma del rappresentante  
Capodistria

*A contract of sale dated 26 April 1948, with which Arturo Steffè sold his boat named the Alfredo and transferred its full ownership to Michele and Nazario Vascon, for 11,000 lire (above). Transfer of property confirmed and registered by the Koper Harbour Representation and Koper Harbour Office on 26 April 1948 (next page).*



che il venditore dichiara di aver incassato dagli acquirenti, per cui rilascia loro con la firma qui in calce quitanza di pieno pagamento e saldo.

Il venditore assicura essere la barca da pesca libera da aggravi per pegno o prestito e autorizza i compratori a chiedere l'iscrizione del loro diritto di proprietà.

Si prega pertanto Codesto Ufficio di voler registrare il passaggio in proprietà di Vascon Michele fu Nazario e Vascon Nazario di Michele.

Il venditore

*Stefano Kolarico*

I compratori

*Vascon Michele  
Vascon Nazario*

Capodistria

  
Luđko Zastepivo - Keper  
Espositura di Fiume - Capodistria

Da Fiume  
No. 44  
Data 24/4. 41

*Peto, jupani ole jporay  
marcume con oggvara.*



cession to the European Union has been even less effective due to the fishing quota agreements between member states. Today, the Slovene sea does not exceed six nautical miles from the coast, and yet it includes three nature reserves where fishing is restricted or entirely prohibited. The fishing zone has shrunk, with the issue concerning the demarcation of the border between Slovenia and Croatia more than halving the traditional fishing area for Piran netters, for example. That fishing is an important industry and an identifier of the development of Slovene Istria is a claim we can no longer make.





## **A few thoughts about the authenticity of the Istrian cuisine**

There is no available information on the local culinary practices from the times when the Romans, Franks, Slavs, and refugees from the Balkan countries settled in Istria, but it is reasonable to assume the remnants of Roman cuisine to have been preserved and built upon by the next conqueror of the Istrian Peninsula, and that same process of culinary development repeated with each new wave of migration. References to nutrition from various historical periods can be found in the objects preserved in ethnological collections, such as kitchen furnishings, cookware, dishware, and utensils. They are also intuited in simple, everyday fish-based and other fares. Mediaeval sources attest to an expansion of Venetian cuisine over to the northern Adriatic – not surprisingly, considering that Istria was under Venetian rule for over five hundred years. The old Istrian statutes contain no information that would indicate the existence of cookbooks related to cooking typical of Koper, Izola, or Piran (Krnel-Umek et al. 1988, 72–73); however, the 14th-century manuscript by Anonimo Veneziano does mention dishes also known and prepared at that time in the towns of Istria. The direct influences of Venetian social life and living style, reflected in several other areas as well, defined the dietary habits, rituals associated with food, and the flavours of the most common dishes even in Istrian towns. The economic prosperity and trade links that made exotic ingredients and spices accessible to the Venetians spread the appeal of their culinary art beyond the territorial borders of La Serenissima.

Alongside land-based food (vegetables, game, goats and sheep, etc.), fish was the most readily available and important food source for the urban populations. The Koper commune, for example, fished in the

waters extending from the town's immediate vicinity as far as the Cape Debeli Rtič. Any catch was intended for the local market only, and forbidden from being sold elsewhere. In this way, the town was ensured sufficient quantities of fish, especially on Fridays and during Lent. Sales at the fishmonger's or at the pier were not mediated. The Istrian statutes stipulated a limited number of species that were allowed to be fished (mulletts and some other types of the so-called lean or white fish) (Darovec 2004).

Piran salt-workers took a different approach to ensuring their own supply of fish. In April, they would board their boats and move with their families to the salters' houses in the Sečovlje/Siccirole saltpans, where they stayed from St. George's Day (23 April) to St. Bartholomew's Day (24 August). Nearby farmers came to help with the work in the saltpans in the mornings and returned to their homesteads in the evening. They also brought fresh vegetables and eggs from their farms and exchanged them for the fish that sometimes strayed into the saltpans from the neighbouring fish and shellfish



*Roasting tin for crab and fish, 19th century*

hatcheries. The salters' inventiveness in catching them and procuring seafood in general was limitless. They fished with various types of nets, harpoons, and even bare hands. At the end of the salt-making season, when by the full moon they opened the sluice gates in the inlet channels, they intercepted a bounty of finned creatures. They picked them from the nets at low tide, put them to salt, or sold them, as they harvested many more than they could eat or preserve (Bartole 2021, 10). Curing fish with salt to preserve them for personal use or the market is, in fact, a long-standing practice. Before pasteurisation and canning, salted fish was hermetically sealed in glass jars. In the inland parts of Istria, such as the Šavřini Hills, when women brought salted and pickled fish from their daily trips to Trieste, it was a real treat for the whole of their families.

The period of Austrian domination brought about changes in Istrians' daily lives and a touch of imperial cooking to their diets. Its impact was most evident in the realm of *sweet culinary vices*, as Nicolò Madonizza<sup>9</sup> would call desserts. In his notebook entitled *Nota di pietanze di me* (Rogoznica 2021, 70) alone he provides instructions for no fewer than 19 sweet dishes. We might expect that second Austrian rule would have adulterated all the recipes of classical Venetian cuisine, yet it preserved the Triestine or Venetian style in other dishes virtually unchanged, merely enhancing them with a hint of not just Viennese tradition, but also of the broader Central European flavour that graced the Danubian cuisine. Madonizza's recipes for creams, sweet puddings, egg custards (*zavaion*), Easter sweet bread, gateaux, cakes and biscuits (*buzolai*), and other typical dessert foods stand to support this.

Foreign capital and the local tradition of curing fish brought about the emergence of the fish-processing industry in the small towns of Slovene Istria soon after it had gained momentum in broader Europe (e.g. in Nantes in 1822, in Izola in 1879). By the end of the

9 Nicolò Pietro Giovanni Madonizza (1811–1894), a Koper nobleman and, for a period (1850–1860), the town's mayor. The archival fond of the family (Madonizza 1829, SI PAK 302, t. e. 12) includes a notebook in which Nicolò, along with Marietta Madonizza and Luigia Madonizza, recorded recipes for various 'sweet culinary vices'.

19th century, the Istrian towns had become the hub of the northern Adriatic fishing industry, with factories like Ampelea, De Langlade, and Arrigoni providing employment for thousands of women. As a result, the working class, particularly the female workforce, significantly increased in this region, too.

Girls from fishing families in urban areas, and particularly young female workers from nearby and distant hinterland villages, would walk to the factories daily. They often started working at the age of fourteen, but typically stopped when they got married. Within the factories, they were assigned various drudging tasks and were responsible for preparing fish and other food items for canning. They were allowed to take home the leftover scraps from cleaning and gutting the fish, which they preserved using traditional salt curing. Subsequently, they would then store the preserved products for their families or sell them in Trieste or other Istrian towns.<sup>10</sup>

Istrian cuisine has always rested on the basic Mediterranean trinity of wheat (and other grains), olives, and grapes. The quality of Istrian olive oil was praised even by authors of antiquity. The olive tree is believed to have been introduced by the Phoenicians to the Greek isles in the 16th century BC and some 200 years later to the Greek mainland, where its cultivation expanded and became of paramount importance. From the 6th century BC onwards, the olive spread throughout the Mediterranean, including our region. For the Romans, taxes from the production of olive oil were already an excellent source of income. A report dating from the 6th century AD by the Roman scholar Cassiodorus mentions that at that time, Istria was covered in olive trees and recorded copious crop yields.<sup>11</sup> Until WWI, however, Istria's culinary character was most decisively influenced by the region's division between the Venetian and Austro-Hungarian

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<sup>10</sup> According to informants' accounts (Pušpan, Radojković), the friendly supervisors allowed the workers in the fish-processing plant to take away the waste from cleaning the fish, as well as fish that were too small to process. At home, they would put them to salt in glass jars.

<sup>11</sup> International Olive Council (<https://www.internationaloliveoil.org/olive-world/olive-tree/>); Fontes Istrie Mediaevalis ([https://fontesistrie.eu/537\\_CV1](https://fontesistrie.eu/537_CV1))



*Workers salting fish at the Ampelea factory.*

traditions. This specific duality shaped the identity of Istrian cuisine as a multicultural combination of urban and rural diets, with the food culture additionally nuanced by the differences in the lifestyles between inland and coastal areas. The latter favoured seafood dishes and was linked to the occupations of the majority population, who were mostly engaged in fishing, salt-making, various crafts, and wine- and olive growing. On the other hand, up to the end of the 19th century, the population of inland Istria was mostly rural: they cultivated the land, worked as peddlers (selling bread, milk, eggs, veg-

etables), or carried out ancillary domestic tasks (like washing laundry). While the diet of poorer peasant families was unvarying and modest, reflecting seasonal shortages owed to poor harvests, and the wealthier farmers could afford more nutritious and abundant meals, thus claiming a higher status for their households, both strata of the farming population distinguished between everyday and festive fare (Novak Pucer 2021a, 99).

Traditionally, family and church celebrations were connected to food, which reflected the heritage and, consequently, identity of the environment. Festive food was also an expression of the seasons: winter feasts in the countryside featured pork and poultry, home-made meat products, and, during Advent, fish (creamed stockfish, prepared plain or with tomato, or freshwater fish), whereas Easter-time staples were ham, meat jelly, hard-boiled eggs, and Easter sweet bread (*pinca*). The holiday fare was usually prepared by older women, who observed the traditions of rituals and recipes most reverently. There were also many festive dishes specific to individual village celebrations (*šagra*<sup>12</sup>).

After the end of WWII, the general exodus from the countryside to towns resulted in significant lifestyle and dietary change, as the populace transitioned from peasantry to the working class. While the rural diet did influence certain aspects of the urban one, in other aspects, it either adapted to or fully adopted the ways of the town. By using traditional ingredients, but applying different cooking techniques, Istrian recipes preserved their origin but lost authenticity in terms of typical preparation. Nevertheless, as the post-war authorities sought to eradicate regional characteristics and abolished religious holidays and festivals, as well as the culinary specialties associated with them, the Istrians started returning to their roots, rekindling slightly forgotten dishes and preparing specific foods, especially those associated with major religious holidays, such as Christmas or Easter, somewhat in secret (Novak Pucer 2021a, 106). The growth of tourism expanded and the hospitality sector diversified to the detri-

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12 *Šagra* (from the Ita. *sagra*) is an Istrian festival held in celebration of the village's patron saint. Also known as a parish's patronal feast or *opasilo*.

ment of the Istrian cuisine, replacing it with culinary fads or a search for originality in foreign recipes.

Besides the written sources and various forms of presentation, the greatest treasure of Istrian cuisine is the oral tradition, recipes passed from generation to generation together with knowledge, cultural and social values, and collective memory. Oral sources can provide a basis for further study, but only if the authenticity of the collected data is verified through critical analysis. The wealth of Istrian cooking lies in the richness of its ingredients (foodstuffs, flavours) and methods of preparation, which despite the encroachment from modern dietary trends keep the old Istrian dishes alive. Another factor contributing to that is the oral expressions/appellations in two languages (Slovene and Italian) and in their two respective dialectal variants (Istrian and Istro-Venetian), as well as other local idioms. The vocabulary frequently includes words or other linguistic elements borrowed from Croatian. The lexical origin of words is often difficult to identify. There can be even some Greek or Albanian elements present as traces of Istria's historical past. Discontinuation of dietary customs and habits, the unlearning of related designations, the disappearance of certain fish-based and other Istrian dishes, and more all lead to the unavoidable loss of a piece of culture and of a certain quality of life around the northern Adriatic.

It is true that the differences between the rural/inland and urban/coastal Istrian cooking are growing increasingly blurred, but it would be difficult to argue that there is such a thing as a uniform Istrian cuisine (Celestina and Todorovič 2021, 15). The homogeneity is disrupted by certain chefs who often vitiate original Istrian recipes by adding exotic spices and other ingredients of foreign origin and embracing food trends that push contemporary Istrian food culture away from the simplicity of Istrian dishes. Whether this is a case of inadequate hospitality training, meaning not understanding the local and the regional, or just the imagination of the chefs themselves, it is hard to say. There are several 'creative' Istrian dishes to be found on the Internet, including those by a restaurateur who recommends improving the traditional recipes with new components – preparing polenta with additions of all sorts, or giving a *modern* twist to legume



and grain soups with shrimp, turkey meat, soy sauce, and curry or chili powder.

Over the last decade, various associations and ethnologically inspired groups have tried to revive Istrian customs and food organising large and well-attended public events, such as the *Festival Malvazije* (Malvasia Festival), *Teden pedočev* (Week of the Mediterranean Mussel), *Praznik olja in bledeža* (Oil and Spinach Beet Celebration), *Praznik oljk, vina in rib* (Olive, Wine, and Fish Festival), *Ribiški praznik* (Fishermen's Day Celebration), *Festival tartufov* (Truffle Festival), and others. They are held annually from March to November, some of them also attracting the public with their inventive names: *Sladka Istra* (Sweet Istria), *Altroke Istra* (Istria, and Then Some), *Šparga Fest* (Asparagus Fest), *Od vinarja do oljkarja* (From the Winemaker to the Olive Grower). However, it often happens that alongside Istrian dishes, which often themselves include new flavours and ingredients, such events promote foods that are anything but originally Istrian.



## **The authenticity of recipes for Istrian dishes**



*Fuži from Belvedur*



## The authenticity of recipes for Istrian dishes

Finding an original enough description of the old cuisine of Slovene Istria and placing it in the appropriate context of time and space (between the Karst Rim and the sea, specifically between Cape Savudrija and Cape Debeli Rtič) is quite challenging. The dietary practices on the Istrian Peninsula, tied as much to its geographical variety, mild climate, and biodiversity, as they were to the historical realities, migration patterns, and economic fluctuations, have guided the local production and procurement of food (through fishing and agriculture), its processing (fish preservation, olive-oil and wine production), and consumption. As the 18th century marked in Europe the beginning of proper culinary research and, particularly, culinary writing – the celebrated French chef Marie-Antoine Carême (1784–1833), for example, codified the pastry and other dishes of the French court and nobility – the time following the Congress of Vienna (1815) can be seen as the birth of modern culinary art.<sup>13</sup> Our region kept in step with European trends. In fact, well before that, the Slovene nobleman, polymath, and historian Janez Vajkard Valvasor<sup>14</sup> described the Istrian practice of bread-baking and the wedding cake custom<sup>15</sup> (Valvasor 1689, 327ff; 2017, 139ff) in his seminal work, *Die Ehre deß Herzogthums Crain* (*The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola*). Indeed, the production of bread by the Istrian *krušarice* and its supply to the urban population of Slovene Istria spanned several centuries, reaching

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<sup>13</sup> The French diplomat Talleyrand encouraged Carême in his efforts to create a new, elegant style of cooking that made ample use of fresh herbs and vegetables, as well as simplified sauces made with few ingredients. Talleyrand's 'high table' achieved international renown during the Congress of Vienna, which not only redrew the map of Europe, but also transformed the culinary preferences of the ruling classes.

<sup>14</sup> Internationally known as Johann Weikhard Freiherr von Valvasor (1641–1693).

<sup>15</sup> See page 114.

its peak in the second half of the 19th century and starting to decline with the emergence of the first commercial bakeries in the early 20th century (Titl 1988, 80).

A focused study of food based on a historical and ethnological analysis of cultural spaces is a more appropriate method for our study of Slovene Istria than the structuralist approach (Novak 2021, 91).<sup>16</sup> The primary object of observation is the meal, that is, the basic foods and dishes that make it up. This evocation of the past (or reincarnation of a cuisine) always encompasses the present. The fundamental principle underlying modern research on food heritage is not some sort of gastronomic ‘museology’; rather, it is the study of various models of culinary legacy and, thence, the development of new, creative solutions that nevertheless preserve and honour the recognisability, identity, and flavours of local culinary craft. The changes in food preparation in our immediate and broader environments (in terms of ingredients, quantities, and modes of preparation) are prompted by trends, which are always part of the present moment. In this perspective, it is impossible to completely disavow the structuralist approach to studying culinary art, as every dish does indeed also serve as a vehicle for broader meanings and local identity.

No past food experience can ever be fully replicated and relived, primarily because our perception of a particular cuisine is greatly influenced by global trends, beliefs, and convictions. Take, for example, the mantra of healthy nutrition and how it impacts our views about the use of fats. In the past, lard and goose grease were highly esteemed types of fat, before being banished from modern kitchens due to worries about types and quantities of lipids; today, research has reconfirmed the health benefits of genuine lard. On the other hand, according to an informant, olive oil was once used for anything but cooking, even as a lubricant for machinery (Dekleva 2022). Nowadays, virgin olive oil from Slovene Istria is highly prized and its origin is protected. Its superior quality is supported by prestigious

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<sup>16</sup> Two theoretical models of studying food as a cultural concept developed in the 20th century: the historical and ethnological (role of food and nutrition in time, space, and social group) vs. the structuralist (a dish as a carrier of identity).

international awards and in regular assessments of its biological characteristics (conducted at the Sensory Evaluation Laboratory of the Institute for Oliviculture of the Science and Research Centre Koper). In 2020, 2,437 hectares of farmland were planted with olive trees producing an estimated 900 tons of olive oil, while the number of registered olive growers or olive-growing holdings stood at 4,221.<sup>17</sup>

In the past, the cuisines of the coastal and inland areas of Slovene Istria, the former predominantly urban, the latter mainly rural, were quite distinct. Coastal cooking was based on fish, molluscs, and shellfish, its inland counterpart on farinaceous dishes, meat, and vegetables. While meat was a Sunday dish among the more prosperous farmers, many rural households could only afford it for the biggest festivities; in fishing families, it was eaten just as rarely. The Mediterranean influences in the Istrian cuisine are reflected in the use of spices and herbs (rosemary, sage, marjoram, bay leaf, parsley, celery) and olive oil. Among the favourite herbaceous plants were wild asparagus, typically used in the herb frittata (*fritaja*), as well as black bryony shoots, sea beet, and wild fennel. Among particularly well-loved seasonings used for enhancing simple fares were fennel seeds and flowers, while two of the salt-workers' most-liked dishes were beans with fennel and glasswort *fritaja*. Various legume and grain soups and side dishes started gaining ground from the early 19th century onwards.

Fish were less commonly found on farmers' menus, with the exception of creamed salt cod (*bakala*), freshwater fish, and crayfish. Before Christmas and Easter celebrations, strict abstinence from meat was observed in both urban and rural cuisines, and fish dishes, like the *bakala*, eel, or some other freshwater fish were prepared instead.

The cuisine of Istrian towns reflected the diversity of social groups and the food cultures of various political and historical periods (from La Serenissima to the Illyrian Provinces, from Hapsburg Carniola to

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<sup>17</sup> According to data provided by the Slovene national Register of Agricultural Holdings (RKG 2020).



*Alice rolling the fuži. At the Tripars', Belvedur.*

the Danubian macro-region and, later, Italian administration) and readily adopted culinary inventions from various European capitals and European food trends. These circumstances resulted in both town and countryside developing distinct cultural, culinary, and social variants of food consumption, with customs and practices also varying based on occasion. The social structure in the littoral towns of Istria differed from that in the Venetian Republic. The lower strata consisted of urban farmers (*paolani*), fishermen and other maritime workers, artisans, and unskilled labourers. Up until the mid-18th century, there was no working class. Upper urban strata, the nobility and clergy, enjoyed varied diets of high quality, mostly based on local products. They fished on their own or their commune's fishing grounds, with the fishing and sale of catches regulated in the town statutes. Their vegetables and grains came from their own gardens and fields, where they also bred cattle. Slaughter typically took place at the butchers' shops. Winegrowing was also a very important activity, with wine serving as a means of exchange and an inheritable asset. Since as early as 932, after an amicable social agreement with Venice, Koper had been supplying the Venetian doge with 100 amphorae of wine from its annual harvests (Rogoznica 2021, 53–57).

While we argue that the cuisine of Istrian towns has mainly Venetian, or Romance and Germanic (Austrian) roots, its modified influences and variants also spread to countryside kitchens. It would be difficult to prove the indigenous origins of Istrian peasant food, except through their authentic methods of preparation, but there are some dishes from the northern parts of Istria and from Šavriini Hills that can claim originality. The attribute *istrski*, i.e. Istrian, in their names (*istrski fuži*, *istrska supa*, *istrski kruh*), which they have supposedly carried since their emergence, is associated not only with the territory or origin, but also with the method of preparation, much like *koprski buzolaio* refers to a Koper-style biscuit, *piranske fritole* to the small fried doughnuts typically made in Piran, and *izolska polenta* to cornmeal porridge cooked in a typical Izolan way.

Some of these dishes can also be found in Slovenia's Gastronomy Strategy, specifically in the pyramid of all 24 gastronomy regions of





*'Pier of Tastes', old-style cooking of Noah's ark shells*

Slovenia, which includes Istria.<sup>18</sup> There have been numerous studies on Istrian cuisine (Pucer 2000, 2011, 2013, 2014; several authors in Bonin et al. 2021; Celestina and Todorović 2021), but especially the works by Alberto Pucer, an expert on the autochthonous identity of Slovene Istria, showcase Istrian cooking and food culture in all their dimensions. Also, there are various events and special occasions throughout the year that promote Istrian gastronomy and validate Slovene Istria as a culinary region in its own right. Readers of this book may already be familiar with much of what it presents, having perhaps seen it at a festival, read about it in an exhibition, or, thanks to the contemporary range of market choices, perhaps even tasted it. However, it is quite impossible for the dishes made according to old recipes, especially those adapted to modern tastes, to reproduce the flavours of the past. This is inevitable, as many of these publicised fares are in fact invented traditions, often of fake origin. This is something that Slovenia, having joined the European common market, should be particularly careful to avoid, for the European Union has

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<sup>18</sup> Development Strategy for Gastronomy in Slovenia, 2006.



obscured the understanding of cultural originality by promoting the development of a pan-European mentality, of melding individualities into a common identity, when in fact it should continue to build distinctiveness based on local and regional specifics, which are better equipped to resist globalisation and its erasure of diversity. The historical memory that is revived in the preservation of unique traits of any ethnicity and community within the European cultural archipelago also affects our lifestyles and customs, as well as the authenticity of every aspect of our lives.

While the boundary between the inland and coastal cuisines has disappeared and we can now speak of dishes prepared using Istrian techniques, it is not easy to describe in what way contemporary Istrian cooking may be regarded as singular, as modern trends and the invasion of all kinds of culinary borrowings, aimed at catering to even the most finicky eaters, have snuck flavours into popular Istrian dishes that do not align with the Istrian tradition. Still, among the locals and those who enjoy healthy food infused with the aroma of the sea and Istrian products, there are dishes that endure. These are, on the one hand, individual recollections passed down through a single family and, on the other, a representation of the collective memory and a heritage shared across the common spaces of the past. Although historical facts can become blurred in this interplay, there is an unmistakable and wistful longing for certain past ways of life among individuals and social/ethnic groups. In it, we recognise the higher value of tradition and oral history. From this perspective, culinary art helps preserve Istrian intangible cultural heritage in its most vibrant and experiential form.

“Just as soon as you approach Črni Kal,<sup>19</sup> you can already smell the sea.” This is something that us university students from the coast used to say every time we journeyed back home from Ljubljana. Visitors to littoral towns still regard the sea, fish, and shellfish as the anchor of Istrian cuisine. But how much of the seafood on our plates is actually sourced locally? It is not only that we are bound

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19 Črni Kal is a village located just below the Karst Rim, along the former main, now regional road to the coast in south-west Slovenia.

by common European agreements and treaties to import Croatian, Spanish, and Portuguese fish, and even Patagonian molluscs, the truth is that the variety of fish species in the Slovene sea is declining. Istrian fishermen continue their work diligently and their catches are valuable and in demand, but while the Slovene sea is abundant in oily fish (also known as blue fish), it is becoming increasingly rare to encounter a small-spotted catshark, a wild common dentex, or a scorpionfish.<sup>20</sup>

In truth, marine researchers have observed that the disappearance of formerly common fish species from our sea is merely the tip of the iceberg. Many other marine creatures that are less noticeable, but nonetheless essential for maintaining biological balance, are also experiencing an important decline in their number (Fonda 2006, 80). Ecologists and sustainable conservation policy-makers are directing their efforts towards preventing further loss of marine biodiversity, but being aware of how important it is to preserve sea life and resist consumerism should be the responsibility of us all. What history has taught us about regulating social relations should now be applied to our relationship with nature in order to establish a sustainable coexistence with the sea. Strong awareness about the importance of fishery, protecting the cultural heritage of Slovene Istria's fishing areas, and preservation of a lifestyle supported by the Mediterranean diet can only be ensured by developing new and attractive solutions that promote and bring attention to the possibilities offered by the littoral region. We *can* restore this area to its former beauty and at the same time harness its potential in gastronomy, tourism, and many other areas still.

For centuries, the three peoples now inhabiting the Istrian Peninsula have lived without prejudice, learning about, adopting, and asserting the composite identity of Istria through an intertwining of historical, social, and cultural developments. The preservation of customs and traditions that accompany the presentation of Istrian cuisine at various events, the evocation of the authentic flavours of characteristic Istrian herbs, spices, and vegetables, the freshness of local fish prepared in an original Istrian fashion, the collection and publication

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<sup>20</sup> Domenico Steffè, a fisherman from Koper.

of tried-and-tested recipes, and the tastings of meals prepared after them – all of this speaks to the value that authentic Istrian food culture holds for us. The knowledge of old Istrian dishes that we have gained from available written sources, notes, and manuscripts, as well as from interviews with the locals, is but a fragment of the culinary mosaic, a few peculiarities winnowed out from a wealth of information, which are of interest to the cross-cultural culinary heritage and traditions of Istria. By preserving old Istrian recipes, whether from urban or rural environments, we are also building shared cultural values in the ethnically and culturally converging and intermixing area of Slovene Istria, values that are cherished by all and that have contributed to the harmonious coexistence of ethnicities and cultures. In a desire to emphasise this specificity and highlight the local/regional identity, ‘Istrian cuisine’ has been created as a combination of rural and urban foodways throughout the rich history of the region (Novak Pucer 2021a, 94).



**From customs and traditions  
to stories and recipes**



*Notebook with the dessert recipes of the Madonizza family, 1829*



## Every dish tells its own story

Several researchers and gastronomy enthusiasts have devoted themselves to studying the origins and ingredients of dishes, exploring the gamut of flavours, the peculiar properties of spices, and particularly the health benefits of the genuine Mediterranean diet. Its historical legacy is especially well preserved and recognised in the countryside. The authenticity of the autochthonous Istrian diet, including the inhabitants of the Šavrin Hills, is at odds with the traditions in Istrian towns, where the food culture of the Italian nobility and bourgeoisie, both that of Romance and foreign origin,<sup>21</sup> was primarily influenced by the Venetian culinary heritage. The author's biggest quandary was adopting an appropriate perspective regarding Slovene Istria's culinary past, one that would allow for highlighting the historical facts without in any way distorting the present. So, what to choose from the wealth of recipes, customs and stories, habits and proverbs related to the Istrian cuisine if one's primary goal is to pay homage to the cultural food heritage of the contact area between the Slavic and Romance worlds? The food culture of our environment is not something we would normally give much thought to, yet it holds an important place in our perception of general living culture, as it is loaded with identity and defines how we see ourselves.

To ensure some originality of content, the present recipe collection does not include typical Venetian, northern Italian, and widely known fish dishes, unless their preparation bears a distinctively Istrian touch. For the same reasons, it seldom mentions meals that are common in the broader Primorska region, such as the Vipava Valley or the Brda Hills, and that match their Istrian variants in cooking methods and techniques. This leaves us with a few distinct dishes that are, accord-

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<sup>21</sup> Albanian nobility in Venetian Koper/Capodistria included the Albanese, Albani, Brati, Borisi, Bruni, and Bruti families; another prominent family of Albanian descent were the Carpaccios.

ing to multiple expert sources, information provided by key informants, and the author's own findings, closest to the authentic recipes from Slovene Istria and the whole of the Istrian Peninsula. Our wish is, above all, to reintroduce some of the abandoned seafood dishes to our menus and thus bolster the cultural tradition of fish consumption. The tuna, for instance, once a native and common fish species in the upper Gulf of Trieste (to the north of the Piran/Pirano-Grado/Gradež borderline), has disappeared, and with it the tuna fishery. In the past, locally caught tuna frequently graced the plates of fishermen and their families, served pan-roasted or grilled, with a drizzle of virgin olive oil, and a garnish of wild fennel flowers. By describing the once typical seafood fare that was also popular among the rural populations (such as cuttlefish and stockfish prepared in various ways, and meatballs made with grey mullet intestines), we would like to encourage the Slovene people, especially the younger generations, to eat more fish and more frequently. In fact, statistics on seafood consumption paint a bleak picture for our country: with only 12 kg of seafood consumed per capita per year, Slovenia ranks at the lower end of the scale compared to other Mediterranean coastal nations (Portugal 57 kg, Spain 42 kg, France 33 kg, or neighbouring Croatia 19 kg) (Landgeist 2021).

Although some of the recipes come from our mothers', grandmothers', or great-grandmothers' kitchens, most of them have been learnt through conversations with older locals (such as those for beans with wild fennel, glasswort or wild asparagus frittata, pumpkin fritters, fish offal meatballs, etc.), and we feel it is important to pass them on to a wider audience of food lovers to appreciate and preserve them. These are mostly forgotten, simple dishes, some with, admittedly, quite *peculiar* flavours, but all deserving to be better known. Often, they were the result of a family's need to save money, a cook's improvised solution due to time constraints, or, sometimes, just a fortuitous chance of combinations. Wherever possible, the presented dish is accompanied by the story of its origin and the name of the person who shared it with us.



## **The seafood diet and menus of common Istrian families**

The mild maritime climate, favourable for the cultivation and production of food (olive oil, vegetables, wine, and other produce characteristic of temperate regions), and the sea (a resource of fish, molluscs, and shellfish) were two key influences shaping the diets of the Istrian people. Since fishing was the principal economic activity in towns, fish – particularly smaller, oily species (pilchard, anchovy, garfish, mackerel, whiting, grey mullet, and picarel)<sup>22</sup> – was an everyday ingredient in urban households. Living with and off the sea – utilising the economic opportunities it offered through fishing or otherwise, and eating according to Mediterranean traditions – historically allowed the inhabitants of coastal municipalities to enjoy a high quality of life.

Salt-makers, people of a respected occupation, had the closest and most long-standing all-around connection with the sea. The first document on the production of salt in Istria dates back to the Carolingian period, specifically to the year 804, and mentions the establishment of saltpans in Lucija/Lucia (in the Fazan/Fasano quarter), in Strunjan/Strugnano, and in Sečovlje/Sicciole. A later document, the Statute of Piran (1274), records regular salt-making seasons. Salt, including fleur de sel, has been produced here for over 700 years using the same method – harnessing the resources of the sea, the power of the sun, and the work of human hands (Bogataj 2021, 101). The fact that saltworkers spent at least five to six months per year living and working in the saltpans decisively influenced their diet. Their prevalent food was, naturally, fish. Typically, they would catch in traps those fish that sought refuge in the saltpan ditches, but capture eels with their bare hands (Bonin 2021, 137). The children collected crabs, mussels,

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22 Marjuča Offizia, 2013.

and sea snails for fish stew (*brodet*), which were then eaten with polenta or bread. They also caught small brown shrimps (*schie*) using primitive nets or even just wild asparagus. They tied the stalks in bundles, weighed them down on the edge of the water with stones so that they floated on the surface, and collected whatever animals got entangled in them. Fried shrimp with pasta was a real delicacy for children.

In springtime, the saltpan ditches were overgrown with herbaceous plants, particularly glasswort (*sburioni*), wild asparagus (*paresi*), wild fennel (*finocio*), and spinach beet (*bledes*). Glasswort was particularly delicious in late spring, when it was prepared as a salad, seasoned with olive oil and vinegar, or as a side dish to fish or ingredient in an egg *fritaja*. The medicinal bluish wormwood (*santonego*) was picked to make tea or syrup for treating threadworm in children (Bartole 2021, 8).

While the townspeople's eating practices varied according to season and wealth, the diet of the rural population was plain and repetitive. All year round, breakfast consisted of corn flour bread and barley or chicory coffee with milk. To obtain a homemade coffee substitute, chicory roots were dried, roasted, and ground, and then the powder was mixed with milk.<sup>23</sup> For the mid-morning meal, the women brought beans with fennel and polenta to the family in the fields; only during hay-making and grape-harvest seasons, with neighbours and hired labour helping, they would bring fried eggs with dry-cured ham. During work in the fields, they did not drink wine, but rather a mixture of vinegar and water (*temperanje*). For lunch, they had pasta with meat (*žgvacet*), various legume and grain soups, or, in the colder months, dried meat with sauerkraut, savoy cabbage, or polenta. The mid-afternoon snack, which was sometimes skipped during winter, was modest: a piece of bread or polenta with barley coffee. The light supper often consisted of bean stew or radicchio with polenta or, on occasion, fried sausage as a treat. Breakfast was called *frústik* or *bivarin* in the local dialect, the mid-morning meal *kaličjon* or *merenda*. In wealthier families, breakfast could also consist of eggs or bread and butter with cultured milk; with

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<sup>23</sup> The first roasters of chicory, a plant that is related to radicchio, were established in the 18th century by decree of Frederick the Great to serve the needs of the Prussian army. Ersatz coffee made of chicory was also drunk in Napoleon's army and by British soldiers in WWII.

physically more demanding farm work, men would also be served *šope* (slices of bread bathed in olive oil or wine) or an asparagus *fritaja*.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned earlier, fish usually made an appearance on farmers' dinner tables during Lent or on the eve of religious celebrations. Traditional festive dishes were plain *bakala* for Christmas, and, for Easter, roasted lamb and several types of dessert, such as *pinca* (sweet bread baked for the Easter blessing of food in church), *potica* (a walnut rolled-up cake), the mentioned *fritole*, and *flancati* (fried pastries, also known in the local dialect as *broštole*).<sup>25</sup>

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24 Transcripts of field notes from 1949 to 1954. Archives of the Koper Regional Museum's collection, in Novak 2021, 103.

25 Gračišče Primary School, 1986.



## The bread of Istrian *krušarice*

In Istria, the first bakeries only emerged at the turn of the 20th century. Before that, the noble households had their own bakers, but the rest of the urban population was supplied by the *krušarice* (peasant women from inland Istria who baked bread for sale in towns), and in the countryside, women baked bread at home (in a deep pan placed under the coals in the fireplace) or in the village's communal oven.

Due to a large number of mills along the Istrian rivers and streams (best known are the mills on the Rižana River), which produced fine flour, the network of *krušarice* and later town bakeries was wide and intricate. When the demand for delicious Istrian bread increased among families in Trieste, many *krušarice* redirected their supply there.

*Krušarice* worked a wooden kneading bar to mix and knead the dough in wooden troughs (called *kodinje*), which were made of hollowed-out logs and were large enough to hold batches of up to 25 kg. Throughout the night, several bread-bakers would take turns using the oven, and its owner would receive a small loaf from each as payment. Usually, the women had to bring their own firewood, too. Early in the morning, the *krušarice* loaded their fresh-baked bread onto their donkeys and took it to Trieste to sell, returning in the afternoon with sacks of flour. They made various types and shapes of bread: loaves, cobs, batch rolls, finger rolls, and braids. The bakers from Črni Kal – there were as many as 15 in this village alone – were known for their finger rolls and buns. The villages of Šmarje (with 30 bakers, 15 bread ovens) and Koštabona (15 bakers, 3 ovens) were bread suppliers for the town of Koper (Titl 1988, 76–88).

Bread-baking was an important matter among salt-working families as well. In the ovens belonging to the individual salt-field units, women bakers (*fornerie*) used to bake one week's worth of everyday



*A farmwoman from the surroundings of Koper, late 19th century*

bread and festive cakes. The dough was prepared in kneading hutch-  
es (*alboli*) or dough boxes (*panaroli*). Several families used the same  
oven and, to avoid mixing the breads, each family marked theirs with  
their own stamp before putting them into the oven. While the salt-  
ers would make wooden stamps from box or oak wood themselves,  
they had metal ones crafted by the town blacksmiths. In addition to  
everyday bread in the shapes of round cob, four-horn cob, finger rolls,  
and batch rolls, various sweet breads were baked for Easter: a *pinca*  
for the whole family, and then, just for the children, sweet bread in  
the form of a bird, braid (*titica*), or swaddled baby with an egg for the  
head (*menih*) (Žagar 1992, 78).

*Pinca* was the centrepiece of the basket taken to church for the East-  
er blessing, and every member of the family received a piece of it  
the following day. The yeast-leavened dough made with white flour,  
butter, sugar, and eggs was fluffy when thoroughly kneaded. Its name  
is, according to certain sources, a derivation from the Latin *pinsere*  
(Pucer 2019, 248), which means to press or pound with hands. *Pince*  
were sometimes enriched with additions of olives or figs.

In the past, one of the types of cereals sown in Istria was rye. While its  
stalks were used for stuffing donkey saddles, the grains were ground  
and the rye flour was mixed with wheat to make bread. Since such  
bread was darker, it was sometimes called 'dirty bread' and sometimes  
*pan de šegala* (Pucer 2019, 191).



*An Istrian spahnjenca – a large alcove opening off the main floorplan of the kitchen, accommodating an open hearth with flue to convey the smoke outside the central room of the house.*







## Mineštra and other spoon fare

Thanks to Columbus's voyages, Europe was overtaken by legumes, with beans soon superseding all other species of this family of plants. From the 18th century onwards, rice, millet, and lentils were also purchased to make legume and grain soups. Corn first established itself in Portugal, travelled to Turkey, and, from there, made its way back to Europe. In Italian, one of the words for corn is accordingly *grano turco* (literally 'Turkish wheat'). The Slovene dialectal expression *turščica*, also associated with corn's second land of origin, is known in Istria, the Vipava Valley further north in the Primorska region, and even in Gorenjska. Another term for corn preserved in the Istrian dialects is *formenton* (derived from the Italian term *frumento* – 'cereal') (Pucer 2014, 16).

*Mineštre*, thick soups made from cereals, legumes, and other vegetables, were the food of the poor. Often, in deprived households, the *mineštra* was the only dish in the entire meal. The soups varied according to the season: in spring and summer they were teeming with all kinds of vegetables, while in winter the choice was mainly between dried corn and dried peas. In times of hardships, the hot meal sometimes consisted of a thin soup of flour and water, or a soup made with water, a drizzle of olive oil, cubes of stale bread, and, sometimes, a lightly beaten egg. Boiled bread with olive oil and a bay leaf was also a remedy for indigestion. When hard-pressed, the cooks also resorted to bone broth (*brodo de bechi*) (Lusa 2020).

Soups were commonly seasoned with *taco*,<sup>26</sup> a mixture of finely chopped pork fatback, garlic, and parsley, which deepened their flavours. Since *taco* took some time to break down and infuse into the broth, the *mineštra* would typically cook for several hours. This way

26 The noun *taco* is derived from the verb *tacati*, meaning 'to chop finely' in the Istrian dialect. The c in *taco* is pronounced like *tz* in pretzel. Other than being its homograph, the Istrian *taco* has nothing in common with the Mexican one.

of enriching *mineštre* has been in use to this day not only in Istria, but also in the broader Primorska region. Besides the widespread bean and pasta soup (*pasta fažoj*) and dried pea *mineštra* (*biži spakai*), the most characteristic and possibly autochthonous Istrian legume and grain soup is the *bobiči*.

Istr.-Ven. *mineštra*: a legume and grain soup; from the Ita. *minestra*: a pasta- or rice-based dish cooked in water with legumes and vegetables; Lat. *ministrare*: 1. to pour into a deep dish or bowl; 2. to serve a dish at a table.

## Bobiči

This Istrian *mineštra*, made in summer with kernels from young corn cobs and in winter with dried corn, used to be underappreciated, for it was prepared with the same ingredients as pig feed (Celestina and Todorovič 2021, 57). Today it is very popular and served even in better restaurants.

### Ingredients:

5 cobs of young corn  
(or fewer, if desired)  
½ kg potatoes  
20 dag beans  
2 carrots  
2 ripe tomatoes  
olive oil, garlic, salt, pepper,  
bay leaf  
dry-cured ribs



Cook all the ingredients together; the longer they cook, the better the *mineštra*.<sup>27</sup> If you like, you can also add kohlrabi or zucchini. Another recommended version is to first sauté pancetta, onion, and garlic, add *taco*, diced potatoes, carrots, and, corn kernels, let the mixture sweat a little, then add water to the pot to cover all. Cook the beans separately, and when the corn and potatoes are tender enough, mash the beans and add them to the pot. An even more original recipe recommends placing all the ingredients in cold water and start cooking them all together (Lusa 2006). Any *mineštra* will taste better “if a pig steps into it”, say the Istrians, and adding a piece of pork to the pot will indeed help the soup develop a richer flavour.

Istr.-Ven. *bobiči*: a corn *mineštra*; Ita. *sbobba*: 1. a thin broth served to prisoners, 2. a legume and grain soup; in Istria, *bobiči* is also known as *formentonova mineštra*, from the reg. or arch. Ita. *fromento*, *formento* for *frumento* ‘grain’.

<sup>27</sup> Ivanka Markežič, Pregara.

## Beans with wild fennel

The wild fennel (known as *koromač* or *finocio* in the local dialects) is a bushy, herbaceous plant native to the Mediterranean, with edible fronds and stalks, and with seeds commonly used as a spice. Fennel's aromatic and therapeutic properties have been known and appreciated since ancient times, but it was Charlemagne who first recognised the plant's value as a food. During the Middle Ages, fennel was believed to be an antidote against witchcraft and was often thrown into the fires when victims of the Inquisition were burned at the stake.<sup>28</sup> Fennel's intensely sweet flavour is the trademark of a variety of dishes and baked goods, and the plant is also used to make sweet liqueurs and tea.

Beans with fennel is not an endemic Istrian dish – Sicilian cuisine knows it too – but the addition of ingredients and the way it is paired with polenta sets it apart from other similar recipes. The freshness of the wild fennel and the filling nature of the beans make this dish both tasty and nutritious. It is important to use a generous amount of fennel so that it stands out among the beans. This dish was a favoured mid-morning meal for workers in the fields.<sup>29</sup>

### Ingredients:

½ kg beans

taco (10 dag pork fatback,  
finely chopped garlic  
and parsley)

1 white onion

1 handful of finely  
chopped wild fennel  
(both fronds and stalks)

salt, pepper



<sup>28</sup> "Koromač", Društvo za zdravilne rastline Zasavje, <https://www.rastline-zasavje.si/koromac/>.

<sup>29</sup> Fulvia Zudič, Piran.

Soak the beans overnight. Sauté the onion in olive oil, add beans, cover with water, and cook until tender. Once the water has boiled away and the beans are done, add a handful of finely chopped wild fennel and *taco*, and season with salt and pepper. In place of the *taco*, you can use a garlic and flour roux browned in olive oil. Add a little water and cook for a bit longer. When the beans are thoroughly tender and can be easily crushed, the dish is ready. Serve with polenta.

Istr. *koromač*: fennel; dial. form for Slo. *komarček*, also known as *kopr*.

Istr.-Ven. *finocio*: fennel; from the Ven. *fenocio*, Lat. *faeniculum*; scientific Lat. name: *Foeniculum vulgare*.

## Pasta fažoj

Beans were once called the ‘poor man’s meat’ due to their high nutritional value. This legume, which is believed to have been cultivated in Mexico and Peru as far back as 5000 years BC, was introduced to Europe in the 15th century and has been a staple in daily meals ever since. While the most common bean species originated in the Americas, many new varieties have since been developed in Europe, and in Slovenia as well.

We cannot claim that *pasta fažoj* is an original Istrian dish as, after all, *pasta e fagioli* is one of Italy’s signature recipes. However, since it exists in so many variants, both in Italy and in Istria, we can conclude that dishes originally created elsewhere, but in convergent geographical zones, are not copies of the original, rather its adapted or customised versions, tailored to the local dietary needs, possibilities, and environmental conditions.

The Istrian-style rendition of this bean and pasta recipe recommends soaking the dried beans overnight and cooking them the next day until tender. Add homemade noodles or some small variety of pasta (e.g. ditalini), and deepen the flavour with *taco* and a basil and pine nut pesto. In summer, you can use beans shelled fresh from the pods, in winter, the dried pulses. While the addition of potato is less common, onion, garlic, carrot, tomato, celery, and hot paprika are often

included in the dish. This *pasta fažoj* recipe<sup>30</sup> is undoubtedly closer to contemporary tastes.

Istr.-Ven. *pasta fažoj*: a pasta and bean soup; from the Ven. *pasta e fasioi*, Ita. *pasta e fagioli* 'pasta and beans'.

### Springtime *mineštra*

Except for the harshest of winters, Istrian gardens abounded with a variety of vegetables throughout the year. The reasons for this were found in the mild Mediterranean climate favouring growth, as well as in the dietary habits of the coastal population, who saw vegetables as a necessary part of every meal, whether as a standalone or side dish, or simply an ingredient. Besides milk, eggs, and bread, the women from the Šavřini Hills and broader inland Istria also sold their garden produce in town. Often, they would exchange vegetables for fish.

In the countryside, vegetable gardens were usually situated next to houses or on nearby south-facing terraced slopes. In towns, they were planted in inner courtyards and were often not visible from the street. In the inner urban blocks of Old Town Koper, for example, there were 18 large gardens of this type. Besides flowers, there the locals grew vegetables to sell in the town's market or in smaller grocery stores. Later, some of these green spaces were repurposed by the town's nobility as sanctuaries for exotic flora (the Totto Gardens) or roses (the rose garden of the De Belli Palace) and were entrusted to the care of their gardeners (Cherini 2001, 13). Unfortunately, redevelopment stripped Slovenia's littoral towns of the charm of inner gardens and courtyards.

Early vegetables, such as carrots, spring peas, green beans, spring potatoes, as well as various herbs, made up a delicious vegetable *mineštra*, which brought together the vibrant flavours of spring and the sunshine of Istrian fields and gardens.

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30 *Recepti naših non.* Sečovlje: Sečovlje Primary School, 2009.



## Riži biži

Since rice was introduced to Europe from the Far East, it is assumed that the Venetians adopted this recipe from there. In fact, a similar dish called *mame gohan* (豆ご飯) is still served in Japan during springtime today. In the Mediterranean, the *risi e bisi*, as it is called in the Venetian dialect, is cooked in various ways wherever La Serenissima established its rule. This dish, which combined green peas and rice in a manner similar to risotto, was highly esteemed and at the annual celebration of Venice's patron saint, San Marco, on 25 April, served to the doge himself.

In Istria, the *riži biži* dish is more commonly prepared as a *mineštra*. In springtime, it is made with young peas. Skilful cooks can scrape off the juicy skins from young pea pods, add the scrapings to parsley and garlic, finely chop everything, and incorporate it into this legume and grain soup, imparting to it a lovely greenish hue, a touch of spring.<sup>31</sup>

Sauté the onion with pieces of dry-cured ham or pork fatback, add young peas and finely chopped garlic and parsley, and season with salt and pepper. Cover with water and cook until the peas are tender, then add rice. Some recipes include celery and carrots.

Let simmer for another 10 minutes for the rice to cook. Serve with toasted bread slices. In winter, when young peas are not available, use dried peas (*biži spakai*) instead. Soak overnight for faster cooking. Everything else remains the same as when cooking with fresh peas.



Istr.-Ven. *riži biži*: a rice and pea soup; comp. of Istr.-Ven. *riži* – from the Lat. *oryza*, Slo. *riž*, Ita. *riso*: rice, and Istr.-Ven. *biži* – from the Lat. *pisum*, Ven. *bisi*: peas.

<sup>31</sup> [Author's note] This Venetian-Friulian cooking specialty was passed down to my mother by her mother, and then to me by both of them.



## Seafood dishes

While simple fish dishes prepared from the daily catch graced fishing families' dinner tables every day, festivities were marked by plentiful spreads of true delicacies, from pilchard in *šavor* to clams baked on a griddle (such as Mediterranean mussels *a scotadeo*). It is important to reintroduce some lesser-known Istrian fish dishes to the public and encourage chefs as well as cooking enthusiasts to incorporate them again into healthy meal plans. Particularly valuable are recipes from our grandmothers, who knew how to make the most of abundant catches, notably sardines and grey mullets, to sustain themselves through leaner times.

After a night's work, the fishermen would sell their catches directly from the pier and bring home an array of unsold small fish. The fritters they made with them were the best of all snacks. Families that lived primarily off fishing but also owned a piece of land for cultivation never experienced hunger; fish was always readily available to them. As *nono* Zigante would say to his wife before dinner: "You make the polenta, I'll go get the fish." There were plenty of gilt-head breams by the salt storehouses in Portorož/Portorose, which were quite easy to catch.<sup>32</sup>

The houses of the coastal population smelled like fish, as seafood was their daily meal. A well-loved treat among children was fried brown shrimp (called *schile* or *schie* in dialect), which they were skilled at catching on their own. They would lay willow or other twigs in the inland canals of Strunjan, and after a while, shrimp would take shelter beneath them. The children would then shake the little animals off the twigs and take their catch home to enjoy as a mid-morning snack. Our informant Zigante reminisced about catching shrimp around the Strunjan saltpans and European bullheads (*guati*) in St. Bartho-

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32 Maria Zigante, Portorož.

Iomew's canal, where various shellfish, like clams (*vongole*) and oysters, could also be found. They also caught annular sea breams and picarels (*menole*), and searched for venus clams (*dondole*) among the rocks, eating them raw. One of the specialties was the sea fig (*sponza*), a very juicy type of orange-coloured and sharp-tasting mollusc, which the fishermen used to bring home to their children. The sea figs were also eaten raw, right there at the pier.<sup>33</sup> When the catches of pilchard were very large, the fishermen shared the fish with the poorer families.

Grey mullet fishing was a special event that occurred several times a year. The fishermen waited in groups for the schools of fish to arrive. They would use a special surrounding net (*šakaleva*) to intercept them and divided the earnings from the sale of the round among themselves. The fishing cooperative purchased mullets for processing. Notably, in 1959 there was a catch where the fish were so large that the workers at the Izola processing plants had to cut off their heads and tails to fit them into standard-sized tins.<sup>34</sup> Grey mullets were commonly prepared as fish stew, fried, or grilled. A particularly small grill in the form of a square grid, known as *fornazzetta* in the local dialect, was always kept at hand. The traditional method of preserving mullets differed from the procedures used in industrial plants: the fish would be bought in bulk, gutted, and put to salt with their backbones removed. One of our informants remembers her mother putting a large quantity of mullets on ice and referring to this stock as *zaladija*.<sup>35</sup> The fish preserved in this manner was then almost ready for use: before cooking it in various ways, it had to be thoroughly rinsed for several hours. The innards removed were not discarded; instead, they were washed, rolled in flour, shaped into balls, and fried in oil. Another informant<sup>36</sup> still remembers eating these balls with polenta. There is a local saying about this delicacy that goes: *Nel zievolo el boton xe 'l meio bocon*.<sup>37</sup> This is culinary advice, based on the opinion of fishermen that the mullet's gut serves as a scrumptious fare. Nowadays, with the seas often polluted, such an idea never even crosses our minds.

33 Ondina Lusa, Lucija.

34 Silva Červar, Piran.

35 Fedora Radojković, Izola.

36 Ondina Lusa, Lucija.

37 The best morsel in a mullet is the gut (Forlani, 2014).

Informants from the countryside recall eating fish during Lent or occasionally in other periods of the year. *Bakala*, with or without tomato, was served for Christmas, as were freshwater fish and crayfish.

Seafood was a common feature on the townspeople's plates, with the noble families primarily consuming high-quality lean fish from the local sea that was typically made in the style of Venetian cuisine. Archival documents show that the bourgeoisie and nobility relied on the quality of local products.<sup>38</sup> They would often send various homemade and regionally sourced foods, including fruit, olive oil, wine, and meat, to their relatives around La Serenissima.

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38 Letters by Ottavio del Bello 1666–1682 (SI PAK 289, t. e. 4).

## Bakala

The Venetians began importing unsalted dried cod or stockfish from Nordic countries in 1562 (Pucer 2014, 10), and used it for food as well as a trade commodity. While the term *stokfiš* or *stokviž* (derived from Middle Dutch *stocvisch*) is known throughout the Primorska region, the way the fish is prepared (as *bakala* spread made with or without tomatoes, as an entrée with potatoes or various vegetables, as a stew or a soup) reveals the dish's more specific geographical origin. The method of preparation is also recognisable from the names of the dishes: in the Neapolitan style, dried cod is cooked in large chunks with tomato and olive sauce, in Florentine or Abruzzi style, it is rolled in flour and fried in oil or sautéed in vegetable sauce, and the Venetian creamed stockfish or *baccalà mantecato* is similar to the way this spread is made in Slovene Istria.

The Istrians bought the whole stockfish and beat it into small pieces before use. They cooked it in stews, serving it the Dalmatian way with potatoes, or turned it into a cream to accompany braised savoy cabbage and polenta. Freshly pressed olive oil was perfect for this.

In the countryside, the plain style of creamy *bakala* served on Easter Friday or Advent Saturday was also known as 'the plate of the poor' (*el magnar d'i povareti*), as it was made with such common and modest ingredients that everyone should have been able to afford it. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, the villages echoed with the pounding sounds of stockfish being readied for soaking or creamed into a *bakala* spread with olive oil. One informant<sup>39</sup> was told by her grandmother (or *nona*, in the local dialect) that in poor families who could not afford to buy stockfish, they would thump



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39 Daniela Grego, Piran.

old shoe soles together to make it sound as if they were beating the fish.

To make the *bakala* cream, soak the stockfish in tepid water for twenty-four hours. The weight of the fish you need will depend on the amount of spread you want to produce. After soaking, debone the fish and remove the skin. Cook together with soup vegetables and spices for 40 minutes, then transfer the fish pieces to a separate bowl. Use a wooden pestle to pound them as if grinding and mashing spices in a mortar, all the while adding olive oil and some filtered water in which the fish was cooked. Mix in freshly ground garlic, and season with salt and pepper. Keep pounding, stirring, and adding oil until the white mixture reaches a creamy consistency.

Istr.-Ven. *bakala* – stockfish spread; from the Ita. *baccalà*, which is borrowed from the Spa. *bacalao*, Port. *bacalhau*: salted fish.

## Mackerel spread

Mackerel spread is not a typical Istrian cold appetiser. Less fatty than Istrian *bakala* and with a milder flavour, it is popular among children and those who find the intense taste of stockfish less appealing. It is chunkier than spreads made from stockfish, as its recipe recommends keeping the pieces of mackerel meat visible in the mixture of fish, oil, and spices.

### Ingredients:

2 large mackerels  
soup vegetables  
olive oil, salt, pepper  
2 salted anchovy fillets (optional)  
2 cloves garlic

Rinse and gut the mackerel and cook them together with soup vegetables for about 10 minutes. Remove the fish from the pot and debone. Season the fish meat with salt and pepper, and add olive oil to your liking. Mash the mixture by hand or blend it, but be careful not to purée it too much, as having chunks of meat in the spread enhances its flavour with a subtle hint of fish and sea. For those who prefer bolder fish flavours, add two salted anchovy fillets to the mixture to deepen its marine taste.

Spread on toasted bread slices.





## Pilchard

An inexpensive fish, the pilchard was in the past, along with grey mullet and mackerel, a common food in Istrian families, as the quality of its meat is quite comparable to that of lean fish, and it is both nutritious and rich in omega-3 fatty acids. The pilchard's range spreads from Iceland to the northern and western Mediterranean. This oily fish can be caught year-round and is versatile in terms of cooking methods. In Istria, it has been commonly grilled, fried, cooked in *šavor*, oven-roasted, salted in filets, or breaded. A fresh pilchard can easily be identified by its tight and firm body, shiny skin and scales, clear eyes, and the mild salty smell of the sea.<sup>40</sup>

### Piran-style pilchard (*sardele alla piranesa*)<sup>41</sup>

Without cutting them open, remove the heads and backbones of the fish, as well as the bones from the side fins. Deep fry in olive oil. In a separate bowl, stir together a mixture of a little water with vinegar, pepper, and salt. Add flour to the heated olive oil, a knife tip of fleur de sel (*pontisino de l'afior*<sup>42</sup>), a small piece of onion (*tochetin de sevola*), and finely chopped parsley. When the flour has browned, pour in the seasoned water, place the pilchard in the mixture, and boil for 10 minutes. Sprinkle with fresh chopped parsley and bread-crumbs, and remove from heat after a few minutes. Let the dish sit for a while before serving.

40 *Izolski okusi 2022* (Izola Tourism Association: 2022), 41.

41 *El mar de Piran*, Ondina Lusa from Lucija, 122.

42 After a period of windy weather, small white crystals emerge at the bottom of a salt crystallisation pond (*kavedin*), and a thin crust forms on the water's surface, called *l'afioreto* or *l'afior* in the local Istrian-Venetian dialect (fleur de sel).

## Marinated pilchard

Clean the pilchard, sprinkle with salt, roll in flour, and fry in hot oil. Arrange the fried fish in a large dish and allow to cool.

Sauté finely chopped onion in olive oil, add minced garlic, and once the onion has lightly browned, add chopped tomato and parsley, a bay leaf, and a sprig of rosemary. Pour in white wine, cover with a lid, and simmer over low heat until the marinade thickens. Finally, pour the hot marinade over the fried pilchard.

Serve as an appetiser or a complete meal alongside polenta.

## Pilchard in *šavor*

This is a very old mariners' dish<sup>43</sup> and a method of preservation that allowed the fish to be consumed gradually over a period of 3 to 4 weeks. During the time between servings, they were stored in the cool of the cellars or in a special container floating on the surface of a home well (Celestina and Todorovič 2021, 45). In the countryside, this delicious dish was an ideal mid-morning meal during the grape harvest season, when the catches of pilchard were particularly plentiful. Our informant<sup>44</sup> remembers how eagerly they all awaited their mother's arrival in the vineyard with that special covered vessel (*cialdina serada*) in which she brought the pilchard in *šavor* (Il Trillo 2006, 123).

### Ingredients:

1 kg pilchard  
2 medium-sized onions  
4 cloves garlic  
plain flour  
olive oil  
1.5 dl white wine (Malvasia)

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<sup>43</sup> First mentioned in the 14th century (Pucer 2014, 58).

<sup>44</sup> Irma Fonda, Piran.

2.5 dl wine vinegar, diluted  
salt, pepper  
1 bay leaf, 1 rosemary sprig

Clean and halve the fish, removing bones and heads. Skilled cooks can pull out the backbone without halving the fish. Roll in plain flour and fry in olive oil. Remove from the pan and lay on paper to absorb grease, then transfer to a deeper dish and arrange in crossed layers. Now place in the heated oil the chopped onion and pressed garlic, fry for a little while, then add some water, and sauté for about 10 minutes. Finally, season with salt, pepper, bay leaf, and rosemary, and top with wine and diluted vinegar. Allow the mixture to cool down, then pour over the fish until they are completely submerged. Leave to sit for at least 24 hours in a cool place. This is the basic recipe for *šavor*. Slices of lemon, as well as tomato, carrot, parsley, and even a pinch of sugar can be added, but the salty marine flavour of the pickerel is best preserved without too many additions.

Serve cold with polenta or home-baked bread.

Istr.-Ven. *šavor*: typical fish mixture of a slightly acidic aroma and taste; from the Ita. *sapore* 'flavour'.



## Anchovy

### Salted anchovy

When the catch of anchovy is large, the excess fish can be put to salt in small barrels and serve as a home supply for several months.

Clean the fish, then start layering them in a barrel, arranged in alternating directions. Sprinkle abundantly with sea salt mixed with some cane sugar and repeat the process for each layer all the way to the top of the container. Place on top a wooden lid of the same diameter as the inside of the barrel and weigh it down with a weight or a heavy rock. Let the fish rest for about two months. Local custom says it is best to store them during a full moon between July and September, so that they will be ready to eat by November. During curing, as the brine starts to seep out, make sure to keep the lid soaked and covered with brine at all times.

Before serving, thoroughly rinse the fish in a mixture of water and vinegar, then put it in olive oil for an hour. Be careful not to marinate it too long, as it may develop a bitter taste.<sup>45</sup>

### Pasta with salted anchovy

Thoroughly rinse the anchovies under running water, pat them dry, and cover in olive oil. Cook the *bigoli* pasta al dente and season with lightly golden-browned garlic and ground almonds. Add the anchovy and serve.<sup>46</sup>



<sup>45</sup> .....  
*El mar de Piran*, Paolo from Koper, 124.

<sup>46</sup> *El mar de Piran*, Marino Vocci, 49.

### Anchovy in lemon

Clean and gut fresh anchovy removing the backbone and making butterflied fillets. In a casserole dish, alternate layers of lemon and fish, seasoning each fish layer with salt and pepper. Repeat the process 2 to 3 times. Cover all with diluted lemon juice (1 part lemon, 2 parts water). Leave all to rest for 24 hours. Just before serving, moisten the fish with olive oil. Store in a cool place and the dish will keep for a whole week.<sup>47</sup>

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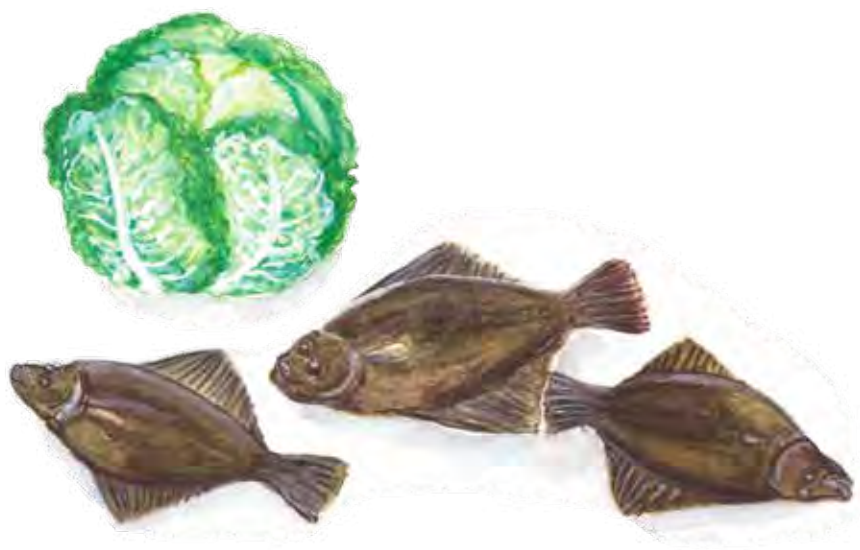
<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Ribiči priporočajo*, recipe by Alen Pušpan, 39.

## Plaice with savoy cabbage

Plaice (*pašera*) is not as highly valued a fish as sole is, but is just as tasty. In the Gulf of Trieste, it is quite common and easily caught. The fish goes really well with stewed savoy cabbage (*verze sofegade*), which used to be a frequent side dish along wintertime main courses.

Brown some chopped onion in olive oil, add *taco*, and sauté. Add sliced savoy cabbage and cook until tender. Season with salt and pepper, adding stock as needed.

Stewed savoy cabbage with fried *pašere* was a traditional Christmas Eve dish in Koper.



## Fish stew

The 14th-century cookbook by Anonimo Veneziano (Frati, ed. 1899) also includes some simple recipes, like the fish stew (*brodetto de pessi*). This dish was a common one in Istrian towns, in countless variants that differ in ingredient selection and preparation methods. Two of the most typical recipes were cuttlefish stew (*sipe na brodet*) and eel stew (*bižatin brodet*). In Venice, a specific type of fish stew is referred to as *zuppa di pesce*, which in Istria is a term for proper fish soup.

Initially, the fish stew was made from leftover or lower-quality fish. Allegedly, poor families even cooked the fish together with sea rocks overgrown with algae and molluscs (Pucer 2014, 18). The quality and specific flavours of the stew depend on the fish and spices used, and, of course, cooking secrets. An informant<sup>48</sup> recalled the custom of cooking fish stew in the past, with the extended family gathering around a large cauldron or pot, in which fish stew was made from various fishes, sea crabs (including the spinous spider crab), and shellfish, and everyone, from children to grandparents, enjoying the good company and a plate of fish stew with polenta.

A dish similar to fish stew is *čupin*. This is a soup made with the water in which the fish was cooked together with soup vegetables and to which onions sautéed in olive oil, along with wine, garlic, parsley, and tomato, are added after deboning the fish, removing the skin, and returning the fish meat into the pot. When the soup thickens, serve with toasted bread slices.<sup>49</sup>

Istr.-Ven. *brodet*: fish stew; from the Ita. *brodetto*, diminutive of *brodo*: soup.

48 Daniela Ipsa, Portorož.

49 Cf. *El mar de Piran*, Jole from Portorož, 125.

### Brodet from warty crab<sup>50</sup>

The most common fish stew to be found in Istria is the one made with several types of fish (gilt-head bream, scorpionfish, conger), as well as crab, cuttlefish or squid, scampi, Mediterranean mussels, and clams. The recipe, found in every cookbook about Istrian cuisine, is commonly listed as salters' or Dalmatian fish stew. Here, however, we would like to suggest a recipe for a fish stew made with the warty crab, referred to as *gransiporo* in the local dialect.

Place warty crab in pot, add water, soup vegetables, a bay leaf, and a drizzle vinegar. Cook the crab for 20 minutes, remove from the pot, and allow to cool. Extract the pulp from the shell, claws, and legs. In a pan, brown some onion in olive oil, add crab pulp, crushed garlic, finely chopped parsley and tomato, and season with salt, pepper, and a squirt of lemon. Top with the liquid from the cooked crab, and simmer for 25 to 30 minutes, during which time add a glass of Malvasia and, if needed, thicken with breadcrumbs. Serve with polenta.

Istr.-Ven. *gransiporo*: warty crab; from the Ven. *grançiporo*, comp. of *granso* 'crab' (from the Lat. *crancium*, *crancru*, dim. of *cancer* 'crab') and *\*porro* (from the Gr. *págouros*, 'kind of crab', itself a composite supposedly derived from *págos* 'rock' and *ourá*, 'tail').



<sup>50</sup> Cf. *El mar de Piran*, Renata Fonda from Dragonja, 125.



## Spottail mantis shrimp in sauce

Spottail mantis shrimp (*kanoče*) live in coastal lagoons and can also be found in the Bay of Piran. They are not very plump; in summer, their shells are almost empty, but they do fill up a little with tasty flesh during the autumn and winter. Prepared in sauce, they are a sought-after delicacy among lovers of crustaceans. To enjoy them, they must be fresh and measure between 15 and 20 cm in length.

### Ingredients:

½ kg spottail mantis shrimp  
1 clove garlic  
1 small bunch parsley  
1 glass white wine  
1 tbsp breadcrumbs  
salt, pepper  
olive oil



After rinsing the shrimp, remove the head, legs, and swimmerets, and pull out the vein. In a pan, fry finely chopped garlic and parsley in olive oil until slightly brown, then add the cleaned shrimp. Sauté for a few minutes, then pour in white wine and season with salt and pepper. Cover with the lid and stew. After 15 minutes, add breadcrumbs and cook for a little while longer. The spottail mantis shrimp pairs perfectly with polenta. Eat the shrimp with your hands, sucking its tasty pulp from the shell. If you remove the shell when cleaning the shrimp before cooking, the pulp will break down in the sauce.

Istr.-Ven. *kanoča*; from the Ita. *canocchia*; scientific Lat. name *Squilla mantis*: species of mantis shrimp.

## Spinous spider crab with rosemary

The spinous spider crab is the largest crab in the Adriatic Sea. It is often found in the vegetated and rocky bottoms of the Istrian coastal sea. The spider crab was revered by the Ancient Greeks; nowadays, it is mainly considered a delicacy for its tasty meat.

According to accounts,<sup>51</sup> children used to greatly enjoy cleaning the cooked spider crab, as it allowed them to secretly savour its delicious pulp. Several informants praised its flavour, reminiscing about the times when the crab was eaten much more often than it is today. The recipe for the spinous spider crab with rosemary is well known throughout the northern Adriatic.

Place the crab in a pot, add water and soup vegetables, 2 cloves garlic, and a drizzle of vinegar. Cook for 10 minutes, then remove from the heat and allow to cool. Extract the pulp from the shell, claws, and legs. Use a wooden mallet to crack open the hard, back part of the shell. Pour some olive oil into a separate pan, add garlic and a rosemary sprig, and, once the oil has heated, the crab pulp. Stew the mixture until the pulp is tender, stirring regularly. Finally, pour in a glass of Malvasia. Serve with tagliatelle.

Spinous spider crab (scientific Lat. name *Maja squinado*): a migratory crab found in the northeast Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea.



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51 Daniela Ipsa, Portorož.

## Mušlji a scotadeo

The shape of this shellfish is reminiscent of a boat, which is reflected in its name, Noah's ark. In Istria, it is also known as *mušl*, *mušelj*, or *mušolo*. In the past, the Istrian coast was lined with beds of these molluscs. In the 1950s, itinerant food hawkers would stew them at their stalls set up around the Istrian coastal towns and sell them in special wooden bowls at 10 yugolira apiece. Although the best-known Noah's ark hawkers were women from Trieste, the so-called *mušolere*, the vendors from Piran were also highly regarded. During the interwar period, Piran was famous for these shells, which continued to be sold at the stalls in Trieste, the so-called *barakini*, well into the 1970s. However, not long after that, the populations of Noah's ark were nearly wiped out by a disease and have remained quite sparse to this day.

The most common way of preparing these shells is still by broiling them on a gridiron over an open fire. A quite unique method is cooking them on a griddle (*a scotadeo*) or in a cast-iron pan according to the following recipe.

Arrange the shells on a griddle or in a pan in a single layer. Add a small amount of water and cover them with a damp dishcloth. Cooking time is crucial: leave the shells on the heat too long, and the meat will be tough; remove them too soon, and it will be watery and tasteless. To determine the right moment to take them off, repeatedly place the palm of your hand on the dishcloth; when the cloth becomes too hot to touch, the shells are done. Serve with a wedge of lemon on the side.



When prepared correctly, the shells are a gourmet treat. Their flavour is reminiscent of the freshness of the ocean in our mouths, from the rocky surfaces and algae that cover the seabed to the tanginess of sea salt and the coolness of the waves driven by the bora wind.

*Mušlji* were often served on All Saint's Day (1 November). Istrian homemakers sometimes cooked them as meatballs – chopped shellfish meat rolled in flour and fried made for a true culinary pleasure. They were also exquisite in tomato sauce with polenta or in risotto.

Istr.-Ven. *mušolo*: Noah's ark shell; from the Ita. *mussolo*; also *mušl*, *mušelj* from the Ger. *Muschel*, all from the Lat. *musculus*: muscle. Also called *noetova barčica* in Slovene (Lat. *Arca noae*).

The mollusc is all muscle.

## **Buzara-style *pedoči***

Mediterranean mussels, known as *pedoči* in the local dialect, can be eaten year-round. If the sea is clean, they are at their best and fullest in July and August. They grow on piers, stilts, walls, buoys, and wherever else they can attach and feed on plankton filtered from the seawater. Farmed mussels are grown in nets and on ropes suspended from buoys. Slovene Istria boasts over 20 mussel-farming sites, variously located in Sečovlje, Strunjan, and along Cape Debeli Rtič. Since mussels are easily accessible, whether wild or cultivated, they are ubiquitous in Istrian cuisine and throughout the Mediterranean.

Before cooking, carefully inspect all the mussels and discard any that are fully open or broken. If a mussel is just gaping, tap it with a knife, and if it is fresh, it will close up tightly.

### **Ingredients:**

1 kg Mediterranean mussel  
olive oil  
5 dl dry white wine  
pinch of salt, pepper  
4 cloves garlic  
parsley, finely chopped  
breadcrumbs

Heat the olive oil in a large cast-iron pan and fry the chopped garlic together with half of the chopped parsley. Add a tablespoon of breadcrumbs, the remaining parsley, and half of the white wine, then bring to a boil. In a separate pot, cook the thoroughly cleaned and scraped mussels for a few minutes, just until they open. Strain and add them to the mixture in the pan, shaking or stirring the pan to distribute the ingredients evenly over the mussels. Cover with a lid and cook for about 10 minutes, adding the rest of the wine at intervals. If necessary, top up with some of the cooking water. Do not cook the mussels too long or they will become chewy.

Other varieties of mussels, clams, and oysters can also be cooked in the *buzara* style. You can substitute white wine with red to give the dish a different flavour. A delicious option is mussels cooked in red *buzara* style (with the addition of tomato) and served with polenta.

Serve the mussels in a preheated clay vessel and eat them with your hands. Use the top part of the shell to scoop out the meat from the bottom part. Mop up the delicious sauce with pieces of bread.

Istr. *pedoči*: Mediterranean mussels; from the Triest. *pedoci*. In Ita. *cozze*, *mitili*, Slo. *klapavice*, Cro. *dagnji*.

Istr.-Ven. *buzara*, a word of disputed etymon. Speculated origins of the word include: 1. pan of specific form, used for preparing food on board fishing boats; 2. from Ven. *busaria* - fraud, deception – the deception would lie in the fact that fishermen used tomatoes to enrich the flavour of their dishes.



## Octopus

Octopuses, particularly the large ones that can grow up to 3 m or more, are often portrayed as scary beings in hair-raising stories. However, some fairy tales feature benevolent octopuses, such as the one that wisely advises the rainbow fish on making friends.<sup>52</sup> In reality, the octopus is a remarkable creature that is both intelligent and agile. Not only does it use its head to think, but also its tentacles, employing various clever tactics to elude its predators. This cephalopod is incredibly ancient; in fact, a fossil of an octopus was discovered inside a creature dating back to the Carboniferous period (approximately 300 million years ago) (Šprohar 2022).

Although both are members of the cephalopod family and share some extraordinary abilities, such as changing the colour and texture of their skin for camouflage, the octopus differs from the cuttlefish in appearance: it has longer and stronger tentacles, bulging eyes, and even a kind of beak.

In terms of cooking, octopus and cuttlefish differ in the tenderness of their meats. While the milder flavour makes the cuttlefish a little more versatile, the octopus's more intense taste makes dishes like octopus risotto, octopus salad, and octopus cooked under coals (*pod črepnjo*) veritable epicurean delights.

### Octopus with potatoes *pod črepnjo*

The *črepnja* (also *čripnja*) is a clay or metal bell that is placed over a deep baking pan with all the ingredients, and then covered with live coals and cinders. The complete equipment for this cooking method includes the bell, the baking pan (made of the same material as the bell), a tripod for the pan, and a triangular spatula for the coals and cinders. The origin of the *črepnja* dates back to the Illyrians (2000 BC), who prepared their meals under a dome-like cover instead of adopting the Roman custom of cooking them in wood-fired ovens. It has not been determined what material the cover was originally

<sup>52</sup> Marcus Pfister, *Regenbogenfisch* [*The Rainbow Fish*] Zurich: NordSüd Verlag AG, 1993.

made of, whether baked clay or wrought iron. Nowadays, the terracotta version is rarer, primarily because the material is more delicate and difficult to handle. The bells are therefore most often made of sheet metal or cast iron, with a grooved surface to retain the live coals/cinders. Before the first use, prepare the bell by boiling a mixture of water and salt in it for 20 minutes. Then pour out the liquid, wipe the bell dry, and coat it with cooking oil.

The octopus or cuttlefish should be cooked under the *črepnja* along with potatoes and other vegetables (such as carrots, peppers, zucchinis, spring onions, garlic, etc.) without allowing the air to enter. Therefore, do not remove the bell while cooking. Before covering the bell with coals, top the pan's contents with olive oil and season it with salt and pepper. If preparing larger quantities, add a little water and one glass of dry white wine. Tie the herbs to go with it (rosemary, thyme, bay laurel) in a small bunch and add them to the pan. Typical foods baked, roasted, or braised under the coals typically include fish, bread, and, particularly, meat.

Slo. *črepnja*, in the dialects of Primorska also *čripnja*: a terracotta cover under which food is baked or roasted; derived from the term for the material from which it is made. In the Slovene region of Bela Krajina also called *pekva*.





## Cuttlefish

### Cuttlefish with spinach beet (*sipe z bledešem*)

Cuttlefish were traditionally caught by fishermen using special trap nets, but also by other residents of coastal towns, especially the younger generations. At night, young people would lure the fish to the piers with lanterns and catch them there using harpoons (*fošine*). Cuttlefish, typically prepared with vegetables, was also popular among rural populations. This ancient Istrian dish, which combines vegetables and fish, served as a bridge between the coastal and inland cuisines: spinach beet paired with cuttlefish is a delightful fusion of land and sea.

The women from the Šavrini Hills brought vegetables from their home gardens to the towns and exchanged them for cuttlefish in order to prepare this original Istrian dish. They would combine the fish with various seasonal vegetables like spinach beet (*bledeš*), asparagus (*šparga*), and peas (*biži*). Once the cuttlefish with spinach beet was ready, they would make a well in the polenta and pour the mixture into it, allowing the polenta to soak up the cuttlefish and its sauce.

Another similar and popular dish in northern Istria was cuttlefish with spring peas. People in rural areas grew peas and other greens primarily to meet the high demand for spring vegetables in the towns.

#### Ingredients:

1 kg cleaned cuttlefish  
½ kg leaves young spinach beet  
1 small bunch wild fennel  
1 onion, 1 clove garlic  
salt, pepper  
olive oil

Wash and gut the cuttlefish, remove the ink sac, and cut it into medium-sized pieces. Heat olive oil in a pan, add finely chopped garlic and sliced onion, and brown lightly. Add the cuttlefish, stir-fry for a

few minutes, pour in a small amount of water, and cook until tender. Finally, add parboiled spinach beet and fennel. Season with salt and pepper, cover with the lid, and leave to cook in its own steam. Serve with polenta.

Istr. *bledes* from the Ven. *bleda* and Friul. *bledes*, in other Primorska dialects *blede*, *bleda*: spinach beet. In standard Ita. *bietola*, derived from the Lat. *bleta*, a development of *beta* 'beet' under the influence of *blitum* 'type of spinach'. In standard Slo. *blitva*.

### Stewed cuttlefish (*sepe sofegade*)

This dish is made in a similar way to cuttlefish with spinach beet, only without the vegetables. Add the cuttlefish to garlic and onion already lightly browned in olive oil, and cook until tender. Add a glass of Malvasia and some breadcrumbs to thicken the sauce. Serve with polenta.



## Pasta, side dishes, and egg recipes

The assumption that Marco Polo brought the recipe for spaghetti from China is incorrect. Though precursors to what we consider pasta today were found already among the Etruscans, general historical consensus is that modern spaghetti and the egg noodle style of cooking is a 6th-century Arab introduction. At the beginning of the time period discussed in this book, pasta was not an everyday dish at all; in fact, it was made at home only during festivities and special occasions such as wedding breakfasts (Bogataj 2021, 105). Today, it is a much more common food. Although it already comes in all shapes and sizes, creative chefs keep inventing new textures and incorporating new ingredients all the time. The most commonly cooked pasta in Istria are the ribbonny *lazanje*, square *bleki*, spindle-form *fuži*, and thick spaghetti-like *bigoli*. Homemade *bigoli* and *fuži* accompanied by various sauces are also served at some restaurants in Istria or in villages lying at the foot of the Karst Rim.



### Fuži<sup>53</sup>

#### Ingredients:

1 kg flour

4 eggs

lukewarm water, as needed



Pour the flour out onto a working surface, make a well in the middle, and pour in the whisked eggs. Gradually mix flour and eggs together, adding water by feel. Knead the dough firmly until smooth, then set

53 Recipe by Alice Tripar, Belvedur.

it aside to rest for about 30 minutes. To shape the *fuži*, roll out the dough very thinly, using a special rolling pin (*bigolaro*), then cut the pasta sheet lengthwise and crosswise to create approximately 3 cm squares. Fold two opposite corners of each square inward, towards the centre, until their tips slightly overlap, then press together. Place the *fuži* on a flour-dusted dishcloth and allow them to dry in a well-aired room for a day and a half. Cook the *fuži* for 8 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve with meat (a chicken *žgvacet*), grated Parmesan cheese, or mushrooms, with asparagus and dry-cured ham, or with fish, especially dried salted herring.

Some versions of the recipe suggest adding salt and a few tablespoons of olive oil to the pasta dough while kneading. Our informant<sup>54</sup> recommends using more eggs in the dough rather than adding olive oil.

An ideal dish for food connoisseurs is *fuži* with truffle. This fungus of the Tuber genus, known as a culinary gem, also grows in the hills above Koper, from the village of Črni Kal all the way down to the valley of the Dragonja River. Its habitats are closely guarded secrets, as truffles fetch steep market prices. They thrive at an altitude of approximately 600 m and start maturing towards the end of August, continuing all through November. While in the past, truffle hunters used pigs to find these prized fungi, nowadays they typically rely on specially trained dogs.

The truffle is a commonly used condiment in sauces, meat dishes, pasta, and marinades. The so-called *tartufada* is a spread made with olives and grated dried truffle. The *fuži* are ideally paired with freshly grated white truffle. Alice from Belvedur suggests coating the *fuži* with butter and a small amount of cultured cream, and topping them with a generous amount of grated Parmesan cheese and grated black or, for an even better flavour, white truffle.

Istr.-Ven. *fuži*: fusiform pasta; related to the Ita. *fusilli*: pasta in the shape of spirals; derived from the Lat. *fuscus*: spindle.

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54 Alice Tripar, Belvedur.

## Brovada

The *brovada* is an old peasant dish made with turnip or beetroot, which was brought to Istria from the region of Friuli. Its preparation was likely linked to the pressing of the Refosco grapes. After the grape harvest, beet plants were cleaned and the taproot portions left to ferment in grape pomace for two months. The grated roots were then served with polenta during the traditional pig slaughter season.

It might be simpler to soak grated beetroot in Refosco wine, as it imparts a similar flavour to the vegetable. Nowadays, the *brovada* prepared according to the old recipe is a rare appearance in domestic Istrian cooking (Pucer 2014, 20). The beetroot has mostly been substituted with turnip, which is also fermented in Refosco pomace.

Istr.-Ven. *brovada*: fermented turnip; from Ven. *brovada*, the variant *brovada carso-lina* (from the Karst region), originally known as *rava garba*, from *rava* (Ita. *rapa*) 'turnip' and *garbo* (uncertain origin) 'sour'.



## Fritaja

Eggs serve as an ingredient or the basis for numerous dishes. For Istrian rural families, they were also a source of income, as the *jajčarice*, egg-selling women from the Šavrini Hills and broader inland areas, supplied them to their regular customers in Trieste. The egg frittata, known as *fritaja* or *fritalja* in the Istrian dialects, is easy to make and can be gussied up in a variety of ways. *Erbe per ovi* ('herbs for eggs') is the term used for the medicinal plants that were typically added to spring frittatas, including fennel, (pepper) mint, balm, yarrow, and tansy.

Though a *fritaja* can be prepared with meat, it is more commonly made with vegetables. In spring, when home gardens are full of young greens, it often serves as the evening meal. The most popular frittatas are those made with wild asparagus, sea beet, dandelion, glasswort, porcini mushrooms, even young nettles, and fennel. A *fritaja* with truffle is a true delicacy. A meat frittata with sausage or dry-cured ham cubes makes for a tasty dinner, even tastier when dressed with Refosco wine. The Mardi Gras frittata was made with the eggs gathered by children on their door-to-door rounds in the days of the carnival. In late April or around 1 May, Slovene Istria comes alive with events boasting the *fritaja s špargo*. Indeed, asparagus frittata is the star of Šparga Fest in Pomjan above Koper, in Gračišče, and in many of the region's rustic restaurants. Until recently, one of the main attractions of the annual Pomjan Šparga Fest was the making of a giant asparagus and pancetta *fritaja*. In 2012, for example, they used for it the same amount of eggs as the year in which it was prepared.

Stallholders in the markets of Istrian towns have been expanding their range of products with the reintroduction of red-skinned garlic scapes, thus reviving the Istrian garlic scape frittata. Interestingly, in the local dialects, the scapes are referred to as *peski* ('puppies'), supposedly due to their resemblance to the tails of young dogs. A *fritaja s peski* can be enriched with pancetta, bacon, or dry-cured ham cubes.

Istr.-Ven. *fritaja*: thick unfolded egg omelette; from the Ita. *frittata*, from *fritto* 'fried'.

### Glasswort fritaja

Glasswort is a halophyte, a plant adapted to living in a saline environment. The salt-makers were familiar with several kinds of them (*erbete*, *romanini*, *sburioni*). They would cook the freshly picked plants, season them, and eat them as a side dish with fish. The common glasswort (Lat. *Salicornia europaea*) that grows in the territories of the Sečovlje and Strunjan landscape parks is protected, wherefore the young shoots should be harvested elsewhere, in sandy soil that is regularly inundated by the sea.

Wash the whole glasswort plant and boil it, changing the water several times until the plant loses its pronounced saltiness. Once it is cooked, pick the young shoots and the fleshy parts of older shoots, discarding the woody stems. Chop and fry for a little while in olive oil. Then add whisked eggs and fresh cheese.







## Farinaceous dishes

### *Nakelda*

The *nakelda*, also known as *nada<sup>va</sup>* and *nado<sup>va</sup>*, is believed to be an authentic Slovene Istrian dish (Pucer 2014, 42). It was traditionally baked during Easter or the Sunday after that (for *mali vezom* or Divine Mercy Sunday) from leftover Easter sweet bread *pinca* and everyday stale bread. The ingredients varied depending on what remained from the festivities and what the cook had on hand.

Grate stale bread and pieces of *pinca*, then add eggs, grated sheep milk cheese, pepper, salt, oil, and the herb savoury. For a richer *nakelda*, you can also add pancetta or dry-cured ham. Add chicken stock and knead the mixture into a thick dough. Shape into fairly large dumplings or buns, then roll in flour and cook in chicken stock or salted boiling water. When they float to the top, they are done. Alternatively, the dough can be rolled into a thick loaf and cooked in boiling water like štruklji dumplings, wrapped in a linen cloth.

For a sweeter version, add raisins or lemon or orange zest to the kneaded dough. Once the dumplings are cooked, serve them topped with buttery breadcrumbs.

### *Panada*

This is a simple, yet hearty dish that was once adored by children. Place a few slices of stale bread into an earthen pot, add 1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil, and cover with water. Cook until the liquid has evaporated and the bread has boiled into a thick pulp. Add a pinch of salt and some sugar, and continue cooking. Once a crust has formed on the inside wall of the pot, the dish is ready.

The terms *panada* or *panata* are widely known in Romance languages. In the Istr.-Ven. dialect, it refers to: 1. soup made with boiled stale bread, 2. a bread bowl filled with soup, stew, etc.

## Šopa

Reverence for bread has ancient origins. Bread was once considered a sanctity and the measure of a person's genuine goodness,<sup>55</sup> and wheat was even used as a form of currency. Bread divided people into the haves and have-nots. The latter carefully saved every last crumb of it and invented dishes that used its leftovers. One such dish is the Istrian *šopa* or *supa*, which was made with bread, wine, and olive oil.

### Egg, sugar, and Refosco šopa

Slice two-day-old bread, soak it in milk, then roll in beaten eggs. Fry it in olive oil on both sides until nicely browned. Place bread on a plate, sprinkle with sugar, and lightly moisten with a few spoonfuls of Refosco wine.

### Toasted šopa

Toast the bread on the edge of the stove until crispy. Place in the bowl, pouring oil and wine (preferably Refosco) over it. This dish, in particular, is known for its ability to relieve stomachaches,<sup>56</sup> but it is said that the Istrian *šopa* with Refosco has healing properties in general. A popular adage attributes it as many as seven beneficial qualities: *La sopa ga sete virtù: la fa alti e grassi, bianchi e rossi, la fa digeri, la calma la bile, la fa ben dormi.*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The Slovene simile 'to be as good as bread' has the same meaning as the English expression 'to have a heart of gold'.

<sup>56</sup> Gračišče Primary School, 1986.

<sup>57</sup> [Istrian] *supa* has seven merits: it makes us tall and fat, white and red, helps with digestion, calms the bile, and makes us sleep well (Forlani, 2014, 357).

## Bean šopa

Cook beans in salted water until tender. Moisten slices of stale bread with the water from the beans, then pour beans onto it. Coat with olive oil, and, if desired, add a pinch pepper.

## Istrian supa

### Ingredients:

1 l high-quality Istrian Refosco  
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
2 tbsp sugar  
1 pinch pepper  
home-baked bread

Cut home-baked bread into approximately 1 cm thick slices and char over an open flame (grill, for example). In a clay bowl, combine sugar, pepper, and oil. Pour in some slightly warmed Refosco and give it a good stir. Plunge the bread slices, still hot, into the mixture and press them down with a spoon. This speciality is traditionally served in one communal bowl, with the diners joined around it, scooping out the food with their spoons in merry company.

Istr.-Ven. *supa*, *šopa*; Cro. *supati*: to dip bread in a liquid/wine; Fr. *soupe*: soup.



## Polenta

Polenta is the successor to an ancient dish made of coarsely ground grains. In fact, before corn was brought from the Americas and found its way to the region, polenta was cooked with wheat semolina. In the 16th century, the introduction of corn significantly changed both animal feeding and human nutrition in Europe. Corn polenta (*palenta*) likely spread to the Istrian Peninsula from the Friuli region. In Friuli, Istria, and the Vipava Valley, it was prepared from corn flour and cooked in copper cauldrons over an open fire for 45 to 60 minutes. In the past, it was a staple food eaten every weekday, sometimes even twice a day, for both breakfast and dinner.

In the evenings, the family would gather around the hearth and wait for the polenta to cook. Before the emergence of a *spahnjenec*<sup>58</sup>, the fire pleasantly warmed the kitchen (*kužina*) – the only common room in the house – but also made it quite smoky, especially in bad weather. The polenta was stirred over hot flames with a special wooden paddle called *polentar*, and seasoned in the end with a spoonful of lard or olive oil. Poured out onto a cutting board and allowed to set and cool a little, it was then cut into medium-sized cubes using a piece of string. The children looked forward to the crust that peeled off the bottom and sides of the cauldron once it dried up.

How common polenta was in Istria is evident from the local folk saying: *Duto el mondo se lamenta, co xe cara la polenta*.<sup>59</sup>

During the traditional pig slaughter season (*koline*), it was customary to serve a dish called bloody polenta. Pork blood was added to onions sautéed in lard, and the mixture was brought to a boil over medium heat. It was then stirred into the polenta or served alongside.<sup>60</sup>

58 Unlike houses with the fireplace in the middle of the kitchen, those with a *spahnjenca* had a dislocated hearth and flue diverting the smoke outside the main room. They were typically built in a large alcove that jutted out of the main floorplan.

59 The whole world complains when the price of polenta goes up (Forlani, 2014, 333).

60 Marija Šavle Gradin, from the typescript of the Gračišče Primary School, 1986.

*Krompirnica* or potato polenta is a dish made by mixing corn flour to soft-boiled mashed potatoes and adding olive oil or lard. For a light and tasty dinner, pair *krompirnica* with boiled artichokes sprinkled with garlic and finely chopped parsley, and seasoned with olive oil. Any vegetable, fish, or meat dish served with polenta should be poured into the well made in the centre of polenta, so that the juices soak into it and make it more savoury.

Polenta: a thick mush made of boiled cornmeal; from the Lat. *puls*, *pulmentum*: grain mush.





## Meat dishes

The Istrian fishing families relied on a daily diet of fish, but, on Sundays and festive occasions, they would enjoy meat dishes: meat soup, meat taken from the soup and served with horseradish, or a sausage, with cabbage or another dish on the side. The Sunday or holiday meal also featured *pinca* sweet bread for dessert. The cakes were typically prepared on Thursdays, marked by the family's stamp and baked in the communal ovens. Although the house was pervaded by the sweet smell of *pinca*, the cake was not to be touched until the actual festivity. By then it had, to the disappointment of the family, become rather dry and much less fragrant.<sup>61</sup> The gathering of extended family on Sundays and special occasions was frequent and popular; after the meal, the men sat down to a game of cards, while the women exchanged the news of the week in another room or in the summer kitchen.<sup>62</sup>

In peasant families, meat was more often on the dinner table at the time of pig slaughter, as well as for holidays and various celebrations. Next to olive oil, greaves and lard were the fats most often used for seasoning and enriching the food. Meat was dried to be used throughout the year. Certain dishes were associated with particular festivities: dried pork tongue with polenta, fennel, and spinach beet was served for Pentecost, and bloody corn polenta with greaves at pig slaughter. The cuisine of the bourgeoisie, and before that of the Istrian nobility, featured all kinds of meats, from beef and poultry to mutton, lamb, chevon, and game. *Castradino*, a dish made with salted, dried, and smoked mutton with a side of savoy cabbage (*vrzote*) was served on 21 November on the feast of Saint Mary of Health (*Madonna della Salute*) (Rogoznica 2021, 65).

61 Ondina Lusa, Lucija.

62 Fulvia Zudič, Piran.

## Istrian sausages

Central European cuisine features an impressive variety of sausages. Some have protected designation of origin certificates, such as the Carniolan sausage (*Kranjska klobasa*), while the origin of others has been forgotten and they have assumed a generic meaning, as in the case of *luganega*: in Trieste, it is merely the dialectal moniker for ‘sausage’, while originally it meant ‘a sausage from the Italian region of Lucania’. Istrian sausages are particular in terms of preparation: the chunks of chopped pork, mixed with salt, pepper, and minced garlic, were pan-fried before being stuffed into skinny pork casings. The sausages were slightly smoked, also over a juniper fire, and hung to dry outside in the bora or in the crack of an opening that the wind blew through (Pucer 2014, 32).

Sausages can be roasted, cooked in wine, cut into a *fritaja*, or eaten with polenta; cured sausages can also be sliced and served with sheep milk cheese and black olives. Sausages and savoy cabbage made for widespread fare even as far back as the Middle Ages, and was a highly appreciated dish among the Venetian doges and patriarchs of Aquileia. While the savoy cabbage in the traditional recipe was sautéed together with the sausages, the modern version will have them roasted separately and added to the sautéed savoy cabbage only once they are done, coating everything with the grease in which the sausages had cooked.





### Polenta with rooster *šugo* / *žgvacet*<sup>63</sup>

In Istrian villages, you can see roosters and hens foraging freely around the houses even today. Rooster meat is slightly firmer than chicken meat, but also tastier.

#### Ingredients:

meat of a small rooster  
2 onions, 4 cloves garlic  
4 medium ripe tomatoes  
olive oil  
1 tbsp flour  
1 dl white wine  
2 stalks celery  
pinch marjoram, basil  
salt, pepper



To prepare the ragout, known as *šugo* or *žgvacet*, clean the rooster, cut it into small pieces, and braise them in olive oil. When they are browned on both sides, add finely sliced onions and pressed garlic, then season with salt, pepper, and spices. Add liquid. Once the meat has softened, mix a tablespoon of flour in a glass of white wine and add it to the pot. While cooking, the meat has to be covered by liquid all the time, so keep adding water if necessary. Cook over low heat until the sauce around the meat thickens. This Sunday dish is served with polenta.

Cro. *istarski žgvacet*: a ragout made exclusively with hen or rooster meat.

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63 Flavia Forlani. Agromin – kmetijstvo manjšin, 2005.

## Pork pluck, tongue, and brains

In the past, each rural household in Istria used to rear one or two pigs per year for meat and fat. Every part of the animal was utilised. Along with the cuts typically used for making dry-cured ham, hocks, sausages, and pancetta, they also devised meals with the pluck, tongue, and brains. Pork lung (*koradela*) and liver were cooked with polenta, kidneys were eaten in a sauce, the tongue was enjoyed with fennel and spinach beet, and the brains were served with eggs. Nowadays, these are all very seldom prepared dishes. Pluck, except for beef liver, is generally not highly valued.

### *Koradela with šalša*

Tomato sauce (*šalša*) is an Italian culinary invention. The first recipe for *salsa* was recorded in 1773 by Vincenzo Corrado, a philosopher and gastronome at the court of Naples. Soon thereafter, the *salsa all'italiana*, made with tomato, basil, garlic, and olive oil, conquered European cuisines with its aromatic flavour, quick preparation, and versatility in various recipes. Through Venetian cooking, it also made its way to the Istrian Peninsula.

In Istria, the tomatoes are at their ripest and best for making *šalša* in August. Peel, seed, and dice the tomatoes, then cook them over medium heat, stirring constantly. Add basil and garlic and, in the Istrian style, celery and onions. Once the sauce is cooked, drain any excess liquid to make it thicker, then puree the mixture. Pour into jars, topping with a few drops of olive oil and a fresh basil leaf.

Rinse the lungs of a pig, goat or sheep (*koradela*), remove the windpipe, and cook for about half an hour to soften. Cut the lung portions into smaller pieces or slices. Place them in hot oil, in which you have lightly browned some flour, onions, and finely chopped garlic, add *šalša*, salt, pepper, and a small amount of water, and cook over medium heat for another 20 minutes or so. Serve with polenta.

Istr.-Ven. *koradela*: pig, sheep or goat lungs; from the Ita. *corata*: collective noun for heart, lungs, liver, and spleen of slaughtered animals, dim. *coratella* in use for smaller animals, such as lamb or rabbit.

Istr.-Ven. *šalša*: tomato sauce; from the Ita. *salsa di pomodoro*.

## Sweets

Until the 19th century, ordinary people could not afford the luxury of sweets. Desserts as a course that habitually concluded a daily meal distinguished wealthy folks from the less fortunate ones, thus reflecting social status. However, when the cultivation of sugarcane expanded, and especially with the extraction of sugar from beets in 1747, this sweetener became accessible even to families of more modest means and the art of making confectionery began to spread (Pokorn 2009, 77). *Buzzolai*, *pinza*, and *ravioli fritti* are just a few examples of desserts mentioned in the recipe notebook of the Madonizza family from 1829. After the fall of Napoleon's empire and the Illyrian provinces, the sway of Venetian culinary art over Istria, at least in the realm of sweet dishes, waned, as the peninsula assimilated Austrian influences, embracing fried ravioli, filo pastry, and custards (Rogoznica 2021, 72–75).



## Buzolai

*Buzolai* (also spelt *busolai*, *buzzolai*, *buzolaji*) are ring-shaped cakes or biscuits. Yeast-leavened and of varying sizes, they were a frequent wedding dessert and, as such, part of various past customs and traditions. It is said, for example, that the bride and the groom would share a large *buzolaio* on their wedding day as a confirmation of their joint journey towards building a family. Interestingly though, the Slovene scholar Valvasor described this Istrian tradition in a slightly different way: according to him, the village elder would throw the sweet bread or cake at the groom's head so that it crumbled to pieces and, in doing so, the elder would say: "All good times, these ones the best!" (Valvasor 1689, 332; 2017, 143). Symbolising prosperity in later periods as well, *buzolai* cakes were therefore commonly made on festive occasions. Today, they are still baked in Grožnjan, in Croatian Istria, for the feast of St. Blaise on 3 February.

They were traditionally served at confirmations and weddings, as corroborated by a saying in rhymed form:

*O beato busolà,  
bel anel insucarà,  
che se a cresima i lo ciama,  
i novisi se lo brama.*<sup>64</sup>

Istrian and Dalmatian recipes for *buzolai* may vary, but the dough is typically similar to that prepared for the *pinca* Easter sweet bread. The recipe included herein is a slightly updated version of the one recorded in the Madonizza family notebook, mainly in terms of units of weight. Namely, the old recipe gives the ingredients in Austrian (Vienna) pounds (1 lb equalled 560 g). According to Madonizza's note, with 5 lbs of flour (2800 g), 1 lb of sugar (560 g), 1 lb of oil (520 ml), and yeast you can make as many as 60 *buzolai*. There is an interesting tip in the notebook for checking whether the cakes have risen enough: dip one in warm water and, if it floats, it is ready to be baked.

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64 Blessed be, oh busolà / beautiful sugary ring, / if it is called for at a confirmation, / it is wished for at a wedding (Forlani, 2014, 360).

Ingredients:

500 g flour  
100 g sugar  
75 g butter  
lemon zest  
25 g yeast  
1/2 glass dry white wine  
tepid water  
1 pinch salt  
powdered sugar

Pour a small amount of lukewarm water into a small bowl and add a handful of flour, and yeast. Then, add a teaspoon of sugar and a pinch of salt, and gently stir with a wooden spoon. Let the mixture sit for half an hour, during which time it should double in size. Pour the flour onto your working surface, make a well in the middle, and pour the yeast mixture, sugar, and lemon zest into the well. Mix the ingredients together until a soft dough forms. Begin kneading and add wine until it is fully absorbed by the flour. Allow the dough to rise for two hours, then divide it into four large cakes/rings or several smaller ones. Heat the oven to 170 °C and bake for about 20 minutes. If the cakes seem too soft, cover them with a linen cloth and reheat the next day for a few minutes. Coat them with powdered sugar, and serve. They make a delicious and fluffy dessert!

Istr.-Ven. *buzolaio*; Ven. *busolaio*, from *buso* (Ita. *buco*): hole.



## Fig cake and bread

The fig is one of the longest known subtropical fruits. It originates from Syria and is mentioned in the oldest texts of the Bible. There are over a thousand known species of fig, twenty of which grow in Slovenia. In the past, Istrian farmers would eat figs with bread for their mid-afternoon meal (Pucer 2019, 97). Our informant remembers that the adults made sure that the children did not pick the fruits until they were fully ripe because, for drying, they needed to stay on the tree as long as possible.<sup>65</sup>

The Slovene word for fig is *figa* or *smokva*, and there is a clustered village right on the Karst Rim whose name appears to be linked to this sweet delicacy. Smokvica (literally, ‘a small fig’) was first mentioned in written documents (as Figaruola) in 1028 when it was awarded to the Patriarchate of Aquileia. The gem of the village is the Bržan homestead from the 16th century, a fine example of Istrian vernacular architecture and one of the hundred most beautiful homesteads in Slovenia. On the day of the village’s patron, St. Mary Magdalene, celebrated on 23 July, the annual festival *Šagra kur en bot* (A Feast like in the Olden Days) is held, where you can taste various fig-themed confections.

### Raw fig cake

Pick ripe figs, arrange them on a wooden board, and allow them to dry. When they become chewy, with wrinkled skin, chop them and knead together, adding a splash of white must. Incorporate some raisins and ground almonds. Shape the thick fig mixture into a bun, lay it onto a wooden plate lined with bay leaves, cover it with additional bay leaves, and place it in the sun to dry for at least a week. Afterwards, store the treat in a cool place and serve it in slices as a dessert. Small portions of the fig mixture can also be rolled into balls (*figove balce*).

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65 Fulvia Zudič, Piran.

Figs can also be made into jam or steeped in Refosco seasoned with cloves, cinnamon, and bay leaf. After two days, when they have soaked up all the wine, they are delicious.

#### Fig or olive bread<sup>66</sup>

##### Ingredients:

- 1 kg plain flour
- 5 dl warm water
- 1 tbsp salt, 1 tbsp olive oil
- 5 dag yeast
- 1 tsp sugar
- 25 dag black pickled olives or dried figs



Crumble yeast into a cup, sprinkle with sugar, add some tepid water, and leave in a warm place to rise. Pour about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the flour into a large bowl or onto a working surface and make a well in the middle. Pour the water and oil into the centre, add salt and the pitted olives or chopped figs. Gently mix the ingredients together with your hand, then pour in the leavened yeast. Start kneading, adding the rest of the flour until the dough is firm and no longer sticky. Cover it with a dishcloth and allow to rise for about 30 minutes. Knead the risen yeast dough again and shape it into a loaf or several smaller buns. Set aside and leave to rise for another 20 or 30 minutes.

In the meantime, preheat the oven to about 150 °C. Right before putting the risen buns into the oven, increase the heat to 200 °C. When the bread is done, turn off the oven, but leave the bread in a little longer. After removing it from the oven, cover it with a tablecloth and allow it to cool.

66 Janez Bogataj (2021, 102).

## **Fritole**

*Fritole* have been known in Istria since the times of the Venetian rule. In fact, fried foods became more widespread during the period of Marco Polo (13th–14th century). However, in the notebook of the Madonizza family (1829), these small fried doughnuts are featured alongside creams, custards, and sweet puddings, which also suggests an influence from the central European-Habsburg cooking tradition.

*Fritole*, in Slovenia also known as *miške* (literally, ‘little mice’), are a common Mediterranean carnival dish. They come in sweet and savoury variants: in Piran, for example, they are made with pumpkin, apples, raisins, almonds, grated chocolate, and pine nuts,<sup>67</sup> while another Istrian recipe prepares them with chopped dried salted herring, making them an ideal snack to accompany a glass of Malvasia.

### Piran-style *fritole*

#### Ingredients:

1/2 kg pumpkin  
1/2 kg apples  
100 g ground almonds  
100 g dried figs, chopped  
100 g raisins, soaked in rum  
100 g grated chocolate  
lemon zest  
1 handful of chopped pine nuts  
1 packet vanilla sugar  
powdered sugar  
salt, flour as needed  
yeast (optional), frying oil

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<sup>67</sup> Fulvia Zudič, Piran.



Cook the diced pumpkin and sliced apples separately, in two pots with a small amount of water. Once the water has evaporated, combine the two ingredients in a bowl and gradually add flour to create a soft dough. If you like, you can add yeast. While kneading, incorporate the remaining ingredients: vanilla sugar, chocolate, raisins, dried figs, lemon zest, almonds, and pine nuts. If using yeast, allow the dough to rise. Use a spoon to scoop the dough into balls and fry them in hot oil until browned on both sides. Place the *fritole* on a linen cloth or paper to allow excess oil to drain off. After they have cooled slightly, coat them with powdered sugar.

Istr.-Ven. *fritole*, also *fritule*, *frittle*; from the Ven. *fritole*, deriv. from the Ita. *fritto*: v. fried, n. frying.



## **Hroštole**

In both their leavened and unleavened variants, *broštole* are crispy fried pastries. We could hardly consider them original to Istria, as they are known by similar names and typically made with much the same ingredients in Vicenza (*grostoli*), Bologna (*sfrappole*), Milano (*bugie*), in the region of Piemonte (*chiacchiere*), and in other Italian regional cuisines. But since the method of preparation and the ingredients used in Istrian recipes are somewhat different, we can still argue that *broštole* are indeed a local Slovene littoral dish. There are many variations of this pastry, as each Istrian cook has their own recipe. *Hroštole* are served throughout the year, but are most commonly enjoyed during the carnival season.

The main ingredients include white flour, eggs, sugar, salt, butter, powdered sugar, and lemon zest. The mixture can be enhanced further by adding white wine, brandy, or rum. Start by pouring the flour onto a working surface and making a well in the middle, then add all other ingredients into the centre. Knead the mixture well until it forms a smooth and firm dough. Divide it into several portions, rolling out each into a thin layer. Cut the dough into ribbons and shape them into knots, plaits, bows, or twists. Fry the *broštole* in oil until they turn golden on both sides. Serve coated with powdered sugar.

Istr.-Ven. *broštole*, *kroštole*; from the Ven. *crostoli*, deriv. from the Lat. *crusta*: crust, crisp.

## Pandoli

The *pandoli* biscuits derive their name from the game of *pandolo*, which was very popular in Istrian towns, particularly Koper and Piran. *Pandolo* is a sport with historical roots dating back to ancient times and is believed to be the ancestor of baseball and cricket. This traditional Istrian pastime is a social event and a sports competition at the same time. It is played between two teams, each consisting of three members, who compete for territory. The goal is to hit the *pandolo*, a short piece of wood tapered at both ends, using a long wooden stick (called *maco* in the local dialect), sending it as far away as possible from the starting point as possible and therefore gain as much territory as possible. This game, which until the 1960s was mainly played by children and young people in the streets and squares of Istrian villages or out in the fields while pasturing stock, is now an important piece of history. The year 1993 marks the beginning of its organised revival. In honour of St. Nazarius, the patron saint of the town of Koper, a *pandolo* tournament is held every year on 20 June. In 2013, the game was included in the Slovene Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

In honour of the game, a cylinder-shaped pastry was created to resemble its main piece of equipment. In the past, as confirmed by the local saying, “*In ‘tel caffè se smoia ben i pandoli*,”<sup>68</sup> the biscuits were typically enjoyed dipped in milk coffee (Pucer 2014, 12).

### Ingredients:

800 g flour  
150 g butter  
80 g sugar  
3 eggs  
½ cup milk  
10 g yeast  
1 pinch of salt  
wild fennel seeds (optional)



<sup>68</sup> The *pandoli* are excellent for dunking in coffee.

In a small bowl, pour some lukewarm milk, crumble the yeast into it and add two teaspoons of flour. Stir the mixture and allow it to rise. Pour the flour onto the working surface and create a well. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs and incorporate in them the melted butter. Pour the mixture into the centre of the well, add salt, sugar, and, if desired, some wild fennel seeds. Combine into a dough and knead until firm and smooth. Shape the dough into a thick roll, cut it into 10 cm long pieces, and allow them some time to rise. Preheat the oven to 180 °C, then place the risen dough pieces in and bake them for about 15 minutes until golden brown. Remove the biscuits from the oven and let them cool on the rack.

Istr-Ven. *pandolo*; from the Ven. *pandolo*: a simpleton, a clumsy or not very clever person.

## Parpanjaki

Like the *pandolo* biscuits, *parpanjaki* are of Venetian provenance, originating from Vicenza in the inland Veneto region. These ginger-bread biscuits have been made in Istria since 1500. There is a record of the Augustinian Sisters of Koper, who were active locally between the 15th and 19th centuries, gifting baskets of *parpanjaki* to several Koper families for Christmas, and one stanza of the rhyme written for the occasion by Sister Rosa Ciurani has been preserved. The fact that it mentions the Morlachs, the Slavicised Vlach people who immigrated to Istria in the 15th century, may indicate that the origin of the *parpanjaki* is much older still.

*Oprostite, da si drznem  
vam Gospod poslati  
to sladico parpanjakov  
ki izbaja iz Morlakov.*<sup>69</sup>  
(Pucer 2014, 13)

*Parpanjaki* paired well with wine, such as muscat, or rosolio, a sweet cordial made from spirits, water, sugar, and rose essence.

It would be a mistake to confuse the *parpanjak* with a *paprenjak*, a traditional biscuit of Croatian origin that includes pepper as one of its essential ingredients. The Slovene Istrian *parpanjak* does not contain any pepper.



69 Forgive me for daring / to send you, my Lord, / this dessert of parpanjaki, / which originates with the Morlachs.



## Conclusion

In addition to documenting recipes for old fish dishes and describing folk customs and foodways, this work also presents, through stories, some specifics about how these dishes are made, including the names of the tools and techniques involved, and explores their etymology; however, its main purpose is to uncover the connections between the old and new Istrian cuisines at the level of local, regional, national and cultural identities in a context where individual traditions interweave. The countries of the Mediterranean basin are a treasure trove of cultural heritages, both tangible and intangible, each unique in their own right, yet composite, enriched by the influences from neighbouring areas with shared histories and present-day realities.

Focussing on a specific territory of a country from a culinary perspective means highlighting the authentic remnants that are characteristic of local or regional cultural continuity. In Slovene Istria and throughout the Istrian Peninsula, it is essential to uphold the tradition of food sharing, which emphasises the importance of family and community connected by the values of hospitality, neighbourliness, intercultural dialogue, and respect for diversity, regardless of an individual's social status or their community's authority and sovereignty. Among the creators of recipes who contributed to preserving dietary customs and traditions, as well as spreading traditional dishes and their ingredients beyond local borders, women (bread-makers, shellfish hawkers, fish processing workers) have played a significant role in safeguarding the authenticity of the Mediterranean diet and in transmitting it to future generations.

The Mediterranean diet, with its particular focus on fish consumption, which has been passed down from generation to generation of fishing families, on the one hand, fosters a sense of belonging to the local coastal environment, while opening the same to the influences of a broader Mediterranean region, on the other. This is why the old

Istrian cuisine, as this work seeks to portray it, also serves as a marker of Istria's intercultural identity, which calls for the exchange of relevant knowledge in the broader international arena and encourages a cultural dialogue about gastronomy.





## Summary

The presentation of old Istrian cuisine within Slovene borders is not only limited to recipes for select dishes and a description of modern food culture, it is also a walk through the history of the Istrian Peninsula, exploring the food trends, customs, and traditions accompanying these dishes. The food culture of this geographical area could hardly be regarded as purely Slovene or Italian intangible heritage, as countless peoples across time have left their mark on this gateway between the Mediterranean and Central Europe. Istrian cuisine has undergone diachronic change, with a bevy of synchronous environmental influences shaping it in each of its historical periods. Thus, while the cuisine has preserved Mediterranean dietary elements (grains, olives, and grapes), together with the method of their production (fishing and farming), the ways the ingredients are processed, dishes prepared, and food consumed have all undergone changes.

The period from which the studied dishes were chosen was limited to two centuries: from the second half of the 18th century (the end of Venetian hegemony in Istria) to the Second World War. Medieval sources already provide an account of the expansion of Venetian cuisine in the northern Adriatic, which is understandable since Istria was under Venetian rule for more than half a millennium. Contrasts in status, economic situation, and lifestyle between the inhabitants of coastal towns and the rural interior (as ethnic, cultural, and linguistic traditions were predominantly Romance in towns, but predominantly Slavic in the countryside) influenced the dietary differences between these two areas and, consequently, their culinary heritage. Although it might be expected that, under Austrian rule, Central European influence would have permeated the recipes of classical Venetian cuisine, the Istrian reinterpretation of Venetian cuisine remained preserved, and the Pannonian elements gave it a broader, not only Austrian, but also Central European character.

The selection of recipes showcases the most authentic Istrian cuisine, which is rooted in local preparation methods and ingredients, and observes the traditional food customs. It enhances the interplay of staple Mediterranean ingredients with the unique flavours that epitomise the essence of this region – the sea, the coastal flora and fauna, and the mild climate. Therefore, the various recipes that today's cookbooks are filled with are not included in this work. It should be pointed out that preparing a dish in a new way although following an old recipe still preserves its origin. The post-WWII migration from the rural interior to littoral towns and the related transition from peasantry to working class transformed the immigrant population's lifestyle and eating habits: while it would be inaccurate to claim that rural culture had no impact on the urban diet, the exchange of influences was predominantly one-sided, with the newcomers largely adapting to the ways of the town or adopting them completely. However, our research showed that lovers of healthy food and cooks preparing sea-inspired dishes continue preserving old recipes that, on the one hand, serve as an individual's transmitted memories and, on the other hand, represent a part of collective memory, namely the culinary intangible heritage of the shared Istrian spaces of the past. Even though the facts have become blurred due to this interweaving, the nostalgia for certain dishes, the desire to hear their stories, and the familiarity with Istrian customs remain. This is why Istria's intangible cultural heritage is so well preserved as an experienced form through food.

The countries of the Mediterranean basin are a treasure trove of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, each unique in their own right but at the same time composite, and therefore enriched by the influences from neighbouring areas with a shared past and a common present.

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This time, Lucija Čok's research focuses on the everyday life of the former Istrian populations and, specifically, their cuisine. Her work showcases Istrian culinary art, with the richness and diversity of its flavours and ingredients featured in an interplay of commonalities, affinities, and idiosyncrasies characterising the broader Mediterranean region.

The strong connections between diet and tradition and between diet and identity are vividly and exhaustively illustrated in the section on the authenticity and origins of Istrian cuisine, which takes the reader on a journey through the menus of simple Istrian families and their old recipes. The author's selection includes only the most genuine and typical Istrian dishes, using local ingredients and traditional preparation methods, which have a long-documented presence in the native diet.

Employing a seasoned methodological approach that relies on several relevant sources and literature to investigate the history of Istria and its dietary characteristics, the author convincingly addresses the question of whether the label 'old' Istrian cuisine is supported by valid arguments. In doing so, she also brings us closer to understanding Istrian cuisine as a specificity that has endured centuries of diverse synchronous influences from the broader geographic area and the social and national traditions, and has survived to the present day. Alongside the typical town vs. countryside dichotomy, it was precisely these historical circumstances that most decisively shaped the identity of Istrian cuisine into an amalgam of multicultural rural and urban diets or foodways. All of this is reflected in the culinary heritage, which this book presents in an original, well-substantiated, and most comprehensive manner, thus firmly establishing Čok's research at the forefront of previous scholarship in this academic field.

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