

"Beefsteak for Solidarity"

A Chance Encounter with Globalization

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On a recent winter Saturday, while walking on errands through central Florence, my Italian fiancé and I, her transplanted American, found the Piazza della Repubblica full of balloons, crowds, banners and tables. Not an uncommon site in urban Italy, where the multitudinous plazas are frequent sites of political and cultural activities, both spontaneous and organized. This particular gathering was punctuated though by the aroma of wood smoke and bits of ash floating through the air.

Between clusters of yellow and green balloons a large banner read "Una Bistecca per la Solidarietà," marked with the logo of the Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori. "Does that say 'A Beefsteak for Solidarity?'" I asked my companion as our progress was halted by two enormous white cows festooned with ribbons plodding phlegmatically through the crowd.

"Yes, yes!" she replied excitedly, "it's the farmers, the traditional agricultural producers! Let's see what they're up to." We pushed and jostled our way through the chaos of bodies to the table under the banner and found they were selling tickets good for a portion of beefsteak, so we handed over four Euro and pressed our way into the eager crowd.

FIELD NOTES

As we waited for our plate, I recalled my first uncomfortable encounter with the traditional Florentine beefsteak, or *bistecca alla fiorentina*, an enormous slab of meat cut so thick that the center remains uncooked no matter how long it spends over the flame. I had ordered *bistecca* at a popular restaurant during one of my first visits to Florence, and ran uncomfortably into my own cultural bias against eating uncooked meat.

"Just look at how charred it is!" the waitress had exclaimed with exasperation at my ignorance,

impatiently explaining the steak was in fact well-done. I apologized for my misunderstanding and politely choked down a kilogram of chewy flesh and sinew, realizing later that this was in fact the defining characteristic of this cut, carved as it is from a whole rib of the cow.

We now live in Florence, and I have since developed a taste for many foods I first found thoroughly inedible: bizarre patés of various organs, unrecognizable fish winking threateningly from mounds of ice in the market, pickled vegetables of uncertain origin, strange uncooked meats laced with thick ribbons of velvety fat, something like salami called "all parts of the pig," and of course, *bistecca alla fiorentina*.

Politely elbowing ourselves a space at the long table, we talked with those around us about the day's celebration and the significance of this meat, whose very name identifies it with the distinctive local food traditions of the Tuscan capital. A carnivalesque sense of joy was palpable in the square; beneath the stately neo-classical facades of the 18th century piazza, smiling old men stuffed bunches of twigs into open grills, gesticulating with long forks as they turned sizzling slabs of meat while their younger compatriots splashed water from bottles to keep the flames from rising too high.

One old-timer in particular kept catching my eye with his delighted expressions of unabashed joy. His face was pure smile as he laughed and cooked and danced behind the flames peeking out from between the steaks, periodically rotating pieces from the center of his grill to the edges for others to pull onto huge metal platters, where it was cut into pieces, slid onto plastic plates, and rushed by threes and fours to the excited crowd, all of whom were complaining that they were growing old waiting for their meat, or had never been so ignored,

or had been there longer than the one next to them who had just been handed two plates.

Farmers and the public were celebrating the reversal of a prohibition on certain cuts of meat, instituted as a result of the mad cow scare that swept Europe in the late 1990s. *Bistecca alla fiorentina* includes a portion of vertebra where the rib joins the backbone, and was thus banned in January 2001 by the Italian Agricultural Council of Ministers, until the ban was lifted January 1, 2006.

I wondered aloud about my hardly enjoyable first encounter with this meat just a year earlier. The



The author, feasting on Italian solidarity. Photo courtesy of Zachary Androus

locals around me delightedly crowed that I had not eaten real *bistecca*, that I had been served a similar cut, but from a young cow. During the ban restaurants sold tourists meat from animals less than 12 months old, which was free from prohibition. Yet, to be true *bistecca*, according to locals, the animal must be between a year and two. I was assured I would taste the difference.

Although in actuality an Italian agency banned the cut in 2001, the word on the street was that the European Union was responsible. All around me, people spread the popular wisdom that EU regulations had no respect for the important culinary traditions of Italy. The leaflets distributed by the farmers made no mention of the domestic origin of the ban, instead trumpeting the advanced veterinary science embraced by rural food producers to ensure that traditionally prepared animal products, like the *bistecca*, are of the highest quality and

have always been completely safe for consumption.

Most Florentines take great pride in the *bistecca* as a culinary symbol of their regional identity. I mentioned the demonstration in a bar a few nights later, for instance, and a man whipped out his camera phone to proudly show me photos of *bistecca* he had cooked at home, taking the opportunity to hold forth at length on the considerations necessary for authentic preparation.

The impression from listening to the people in the piazza was that globalization was a recent and troublesome series of events impacting everything from the cost of living to the solidarity of Italians with their traditional, artisan foods. Yet the history of the *bistecca* cues a different story, one that complicates the notion of globalization as a recent trend.

According to the leaflet distributed at the event, English merchants in Florence in the year 1500 witnessed the distribution of meat on the bone at the feast of San Lorenzo, and called the meat "beefsteak," a word borrowed into Italian as "*bistecca*," leading eventually to the identification of that particular cut as *bistecca alla fiorentina*. So while *bistecca* has deep roots in the history of Florence, so too does the interrelationship of food and commerce across the continent.

Symbols of Florentine identity are produced for the consumption of others, in part so that others recognize the significance of the place to which they have arrived. And although we foreigners have been arriving in Florence for hundreds of years, locals still impress us by distributing their spectacular steaks to clamoring crowds.

The political unification of the European nation-states and its effects on national policies are, like myself, recent arrivals to Italy. Policies and visitors come and go, nation-states rise and fall, but people crossing borders and calling with foreign accents for a share of the meat passed around the Florentine plazas is an ancient tradition in which I am honored to participate, one I am certain will persist long after the current crop of farmers and foreigners has passed on. ■

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