Opinion: The lessons of gluttony

By Sara Jenkins

As I write this, I'm still full.

I just returned from an extravagant Sunday lunch at my neighbors' house here in this small Tuscan town, where my parents first bought a tumbledown farmhouse in 1971. We feasted to celebrate my successful olive harvest. First we fired up their 300-year-old wood oven and cooked flatbreads. Then, as the oven cooled, we piled in traditional dishes like lasagna, roasted farm chickens, and potatoes coated with olive oil and aromatic herbs from the garden. We sat at a table laid for 15 people and covered with bottles of wine, baskets of bread, and trays of crostini and house-cured salumi. We struggled mightily not to overeat, knowing all the delicious courses that were to follow.

My neighbors and I had not enjoyed a meal this gluttonous together for many years. Harvest traditions have died as this remote hamlet moves into the 21st century. These are the traditions I discovered when I first met my neighbors, the Antolinis, in the early 1970s.

I was 8. My family had arrived for the summer just as the wheat harvest was getting underway, and we were quickly invited over to participate in the *trebbiatura*, or threshing of the wheat—no doubt because it was just assumed that every able-bodied adult in the community would join in the day's labor during the harvest.

Back then, my neighbors seemed to straddle the 19th and the 20th centuries. The old sharecropping system called *mezzadria*, which dated to the Middle Ages, was finally dying off. My neighbors owned their property; the patriarch Agostino bought

it with his World War I mustering-out pay. But many people in the village were still tenant farmers who did all the work on the farm and paid half their agricultural production to the landowner.

When my family arrived, we didn't understand what profound changes, good and bad, the demise of *mezzadria* would have on the lifestyles of our neighbors. They went from living without electricity or indoor plumbing—as basically slaves to the land, whether they owned the property or not—to owning cars, watching TV, and growing cash crops like tobacco to pay for it all.

The Antolinis had three children—the youngest of whom, Arnaldo, was 17 when we first met them. He was the first child to complete high school and remembered a childhood of abject poverty and struggle. Perhaps because they lived so frugally most of the time, feast days were celebrated without restraint.

We ate more food on a harvest day in a single meal then we ever consumed otherwise. There was wine and music and dance, shared freely and with joy, as though the experience cancelled out all the sober times.

Gluttony is about excess, taking more than what one needs or can comfortably consume. Yet excess can be intoxicatingly pleasurable. As a sensualist who believes in pleasure for its own sake, I don't consider it wrong to enjoy gorging on a fine Sunday afternoon after the harvest has been reaped and stored.

Gluttony has its place in a balanced life. It's really just enjoying to excess—and why is that wrong? Is it wrong to enjoy the sweet perfume of a summer's day on a fresh-cut lawn or field? Must we deny ourselves an apex of joy, since we have no ability to control the nadir of misery? Isn't the occasional indulgence in anything—including food—to be respected and enjoyed as part of living?

To me, the idea of self-induced sober deprivation is a sour vestige of puritanical thinking, a remnant of a time when people were expected to suffer the miseries of human existence by consoling themselves with the promise of a hereafter filled with glorious pleasure. We shouldn’t deny ourselves the pleasures of the table in this life. We also probably shouldn’t have gluttonous meals like the one I just enjoyed every day. But we can relish them on occasion and enjoy a feast like that for what it is—a sensual pleasure followed through to the extreme.

Sara Jenkins is a chef and the owner of two Italian restaurants in New York City, Porsena and Porchetta. She grew up all over the Mediterranean, mostly in Italy, and still returns to the family home in Tuscany every October to pick and press her family’s 150 olive trees.

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