

CHEWING THE FAT: AN ORAL HISTORY OF ITALIAN FOODWAYS FROM FASCISM TO DOLCE VITA BY KARIMA MOYER-NOCCHI



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Review

Chewing the Fat is a step away from the Italian food history we think we know. Moyer-Nocchi artfully combines historical research with oral history to peel away the heroic myths and show the everyday work (and workers) of Italy's gastronomic past.

- Zachary Nowak, Assoc. Director for the Food and Sustainability Studies Program, The Umbra Institute, Perugia

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This enchanting collection of interviews with very old women, talking at the end of their lives about memories of life and food during the fascist regime, is an evocative yet rigorous examination of traditional Italian gastronomy. *Chewing the Fat* places these interviews in the context of serious food history and offers a realistic appraisal of what is going on in kitchens and supermarkets today. Gently debunking some of the picturesque and much loved myths about Italian food, the author gives us fresh and realistic insights into the realities and delights of Italian cuisine. Her translation of the interviews is done with affection, tolerance, and generosity of spirit, balanced by informative, astringent commentary and essays, making this far more than a collection of reminiscences. This is a book for all lovers of Italy and its food." -Gillian Riley, author of *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food*

About the Author

A professor in the modern languages department at the University of Siena in Tuscany, Italy, *Karima Moyer-Nocchi* has made Italy her home for over twenty-five years. As an enthusiastic food historian, she travels extensively through Italy studying the social, economic, and cultural factors that characterize cuisine in each region of the country. She is a frequent lecturer in Food Studies both in Italy and abroad.

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Italy is experiencing a surge of gastronomic nostalgia, a yearning to recreate and relive the delectable rustic meals of yesteryear, of brimming chalices of wine and sauce-laden pasta. A return to the simple abundance of Italy's past!

Ah, if only it were true. If there was a glorious yesteryear of Italian feasting, it was enjoyed only by society's elite. As for standard, rustic fare, such meals bore little resemblance to what is now considered—even in Italy—traditional Italian food.

Determined to uncover the true roots of Italian cuisine and reveal its intriguing yet uncelebrated past, food historian Karima Moyer-Nocchi interviewed Italian "ninety-something" women from various walks of life, from charcoal-makers to countesses. Her travels spanned from the far north to the deep south, as well as Italy's former landholdings. All of the interviewees had lived through the harrowing years called the Ventennio fascista, the twenty-year reign of fascism in Italy, and were eager to have their final say.

What follows are eighteen remarkable oral narratives, each building upon the last to create a mosaic of Italian foodways, from the fascist era through to the post World War II boom, the "Dolce Vita." Each woman contributes a recipe chosen specifically to reflect what food was like when she was growing up under Mussolini. The narratives are separated by astringent, yet entertaining essay briefs, illuminating various aspects of gastronomic history and daily life in fascist Italy.

Engrossingly entertaining, *Chewing the Fat* gently debunks the myths of Italy's gastronomic nostalgia industry, revealing a culture of food that is surprisingly different from the image most people have of Italian cuisine.

"A remarkable insight into the realities of Italian food. This book lays bare the multiple dimensions of Italian gastronomy: geography, politics, social background, education and economics. It is an eloquent dissection of the nuances of the world's favorite cooking as well as a magical exercise in memory. A brilliant reconstruction of the kitchens and cookery (and much else besides) of a previous generation."

-Tom Jaine, Food writer, publisher, critic, and restaurateur

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An insider look

By Terciani

I have to start by saying that one of the woman featured in this book is my great-aunt. I met the author when she came to do her interview. There were many of us in the family who had come to hear my aunt talk about her life during the fascist era. We too were curious to hear her story. The author told us that this often happened when she went to do an interview, that the family members finally managed to take the time to listen to this family elder talk about her experiences. What I wanted to point out in particular in this review is how skillfully the author rendered the interview into the English narration. She really captured the personality of my aunt and I can hear her clearly through the translation. I think the work that Moyer-Nocchi is doing is so very important because we don't take the time to listen to our elders, and the valuable insight they bring will be lost if no one bothers to go to the time and effort of valorizing and recording their experiences. It is not just about ignoring old people because we are too busy, we ignore that period of time in our past. We just don't want to know, particularly about people like my aunt, who unfortunately was not contrary to the regime. But her perspective too is part of the collective, and she adds her viewpoint to the overall picture. If you want to get a slice of life picture of Italy's past that you are not going to get anywhere else or in any other way, this is the book for you.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A refreshing approach!

By Lois H Bouchard

A new and previously-unthought-of perspective on Italian history under Fascism. The author has a great writing style and a brand new idea for understanding not only the Italian farm family's plight under Il Duce, but the migration of the poverty-stricken rural majority to the cities in search of better living conditions.

I really enjoyed reading the interviews with these venerable, strong women. I was amazed at their ability to survive as the last in each family to get any kind of nutrition. Not only were they strong, but they also showed great intelligence and perseverance in finding jobs in the face of depressed employment opportunities and indifference to the needs of females in general.

Each interview includes a favorite recipe truly indicative of the inventiveness of these women despite the desperate lack of resources. Most of them pooh-pooed the idea that these were actual recipes. Many of them were adamant that they just "cooked". The author includes an intermezzo after each interview expanding on what the interviewee said with facts about the time period and the laws and societal rules in that region at that time.

Read this book. You will enjoy it!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A must-read

By Jennifer Carlisle

"This book grabbed my attention in unexpected ways; I found I could not put it down.

'Chewing the Fat' is a window on the real world of Italian cuisine--a first hand account of living, eating and surviving in Italy during the fascist Mussolini years, from the mouths of twenty women who lived through them. And it is this which so fascinates in Karima Moyer-Nocchi's admirable work. She has captured the moment via her thoughtful interviews of these survivors, many of whom are now in their nineties, which sets the story straight on this era of gastronomic Italian cultural history, and the mythology around "Italian Cuisine". Moyer-Nocchi realistically illustrates how Italian food during the fascist period was part and parcel of its context, and how that reality sheds light on more than one cultural myth surrounding the origins of Italian food as we know and love it.

In her wide-reaching research, Moyer-Nocchi sat face to face 'chewing the fat' with these women, talking and cooking with them from their own recipes, and deliciously serves-up foods and stories of the the town and the country dweller; the privileged and the poor alike. Their stories are their veritable swan songs, captured with heart, and an alert ear to their class and region. Moyer-Nocchi, American-born and living in Italy for the past two decades, translates their accents and dialects with respect to each woman's voice. Her translations resonate with a reverence and rich authenticity, recreating for English readers the flavor of these women's timeless characters. Thoroughly enjoyable, a great read, and a nourishing must-read for anyone interested in food and Italian Culture".

See all 6 customer reviews...

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