

BEFORE THERE Was  
an ITALY THERE Was  
a EUROPE

The emergence of an “Italian” culinary culture came little by little within the broader European koine that had developed during the early Middle Ages, thanks to the encounter of Romans and “barbarians,” as the Romans disdainfully called them. This encounter, preceded by a period of brutal conflict, determined the circulation, and the integration, of various cultural models, creating a new reality that to some degree married the traditions and lifestyles of Mediterranean populations with those of the Continent, thereby moving the center from the western Mediterranean to Europe. The conflict/encounter between Romans and barbarians was echoed by the contrast between their alimentary values: the culture of bread, wine, and oil (symbols of Roman agricultural civilization) became mixed in with the culture of meat and milk, lard and butter (symbols of “barbarian” civilization, associated more with forest life than with agriculture). The prestige of the Roman model, which favored the ability to domesticate and transform nature, had to come to terms with the importance attributed by the barbarian victors to the consumption of meat and animal products. Out of this emerged a new model of production, termed “agro-forest-pastoral” by historians, in which bread and grains were on equal footing with meat and dairy products, a symbiosis simultaneously economic and mental from which the

historical wealth of European cuisines derived. This phenomenon was accelerated by the spread of Christianity, which imposed models of common behavior on the peoples of Europe. On the one hand, it conferred singular prestige on the traditional symbols of Mediterranean civilization— bread, wine, oil—that became cult emblems and instruments of the new religion (bread and wine for the celebration of the Eucharist, oil for the administration of the sacraments). On the other, it introduced in every region of the continent the same obligations of alimentary alternation determined by the liturgical calendar that marked the passage of time, differentiating the days and periods of “fat” (when meat could be eaten or was even encouraged to mark holidays) from the days and periods of “lean” (when meat had to be replaced by vegetables or at most dairy products, eggs, fish). In this way the coexistence of all products, all fats, all condiments, on all the tables of Christian Europe was assured.

The convergence of these political, economic, and religious factors generated a relatively homogeneous culture that we define as *European*. Within this framework diverse identities slowly took shape, bound by the formation and consolidation of common traditions, ways of life, and collective values. In Italy, various peoples (first the Goths, then the Lombards, who invaded the peninsula along with other, smaller groups) superimposed themselves on the preexistent “Roman”

population, itself composed of a multitude of origins held together by their shared Roman culture. For a while the historical record made it possible to distinguish with a degree of clarity between the individual ethnic groups; later, only traces remained, primarily linguistic. What stands out clearly are the exchanges—social, cultural, in addition to biological—that give birth to a new reality. Little by little, out of this mixture of peoples, the *Italians* were born.