

Nostalgic for the flavours of Tuscany in spring

by Sabine Eiche

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The word nostalgia has a curious history. It's formed in a way that's the reverse of the usual process. The Swiss Johannes Hofer coined nostalgia in 1688 by translating the German "Heimweh" (homesickness) into modern Latin derived from the Greek "nostos" (returning home) and "algos" (pain).

We're in early May, and I feel nostalgia for the Tuscan countryside. Admittedly, the sentiment is unfair because the herbs in my garden look as vigorous as any in Tuscany. Some are flowering, others are lush green. Even the sage and rosemary are thriving. As for foodstuffs, arugula and other edible leaves make up my daily salad. But that's the extent of what I can reap here now, and that's why my nostalgia for Tuscany is so acute.

I remember the thrill I'd get in May on seeing the warmer weather produce start arriving at the markets. The centre of Florence has two major food markets, open every day except Sunday. Wandering from one farmer's stand to another was not only a joy for eye and palate, but also an educational experience. It was in the market that I discovered what a bounty of miracles Nature provides.

One of the first lessons I learned was that Nature, by way of synchronous ripening, presents us with ready-made combinations of foods. Synchronous comes from the Greek "sun" (together) and "khronos" (time), and it signifies occurring at the same time. In other words, the foods that Nature makes available during the same period usually go well together.

In May, the markets in Florence are dotted with green hillocks, high piles of aromatic basil leaves. Basil is an essential ingredient of pesto. The other essential

ingredient of pesto is pine nuts. These are extracted from the cones of umbrella or stone pines when they drop to the ground in May. In other words, Nature ripens basil and pine nuts at the same time. Whoever made the first pesto simply took two ingredients that were freshly available and pounded them with the addition of olive oil.

Here's a further example of natural pairings. Baccelli – fava beans – are picked in May. Pecorino, the cheese from ewe's milk, is made in the spring, a few weeks after the lambing. The creaminess of fresh pecorino blends wonderfully with the subtle bitterness of raw baccelli. The two are traditionally served either as antipasto or at the end of a meal.

In springtime I'm also visited by another kind of gastronomic nostalgia. Picture this – a friend and I head for the countryside near Florence to explore an abandoned, medieval church. But first we have lunch. Encircling the church is a low stone wall, warmed by the sun, which serves as our table. We unpack the picnic, made for us by the grocer in town. I see him now, cutting thick slices of Tuscan bread, onto which he spreads a generous layer of unsalted butter. Then he bends over a barrel full of anchovies packed in salt, spears a few and lays them on our buttered bread. As we feast, sitting on that warm stone wall, the combination of bread, butter, fish and spring air becomes another unforgettable Italian miracle.