

Think more, waste less

by Sabine Eiche

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A few years ago, Italy seemed on the brink of a revolution. The prices of pasta and bread had just made an Olympic highjump, and other foods were following suit. The Italians roared their discontent. Then something strange happened – a few calm voices penetrated the cacophony. The voices belonged to people from the highest culinary circles, celebrity chefs and restaurateurs who went on TV to tell their incandescent co-nationals that if they stopped wasting food, they could save money AND diminish rubbish. They not only TOLD them, they SHOWED them.

In Italy, food is usually of very high quality, and Italians see no point in settling for less. Naturally. But not all parts of the food are of the same quality. The substandard parts, especially of vegetables, often get tossed out. Don't toss them, one chef recommended, use them. He waved a bruised lettuce leaf in front of the TV camera. Take all the damaged parts of vegetables and throw them into your soup, he continued. Or put them through your blender with other ingredients to make a *salsa* for crostini or pasta.

Likewise, left-overs don't deserve a one-way ticket to the green cart. Dishes based on left-overs enjoy a long tradition in countries like Italy, where once upon a time a huge percentage of the population lived in the countryside, working on the land and eating frugally. Two Italian dishes based on left-overs continue to be popular – the soup called “ribollita” (meaning, literally, reboiled, it consists of stale bread, left-over cabbage, cannellini beans and olive oil) and “panzanella” (stale bread mixed with fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, basil,

and olive oil). Bread, like olive oil, is worthy of reverence in Italy. It's not quite a mortal sin to waste it, but it's definitely shameful.

Throughout history bread has played a key role in our lives, and not only in Italy. The word comes from the Old High German "Brot." But in England prior to 1200, bread signified a morsel of food. The Anglo-Saxon word for what we call bread was "hlaf," loaf. It was a vital part of everyone's diet, so vital that a man was appointed guardian of bread. In Anglo-Saxon he was called "hlaford," the source of our word lord. The bread distributor was known as "hlaefdige," from which we derive the word lady. Incidentally, Lammas, the English harvest festival (August 1), is based on the Anglo-Saxon "hlaefmaesse," meaning loaf-feast.

Because Italian bread baked in the morning is hard by the evening, many ways were found to use it up – including as a topping for pasta dishes. Pasta with sardines or anchovies, sprinkled with toasted breadcrumbs, is a favourite combination in southern Italy. Try it. While the pasta cooks, gently fry capers, garlic, fennel (if you have some) in olive oil. Remove to bowl. Toast breadcrumbs in pan until golden brown. Mix with capers etc. in bowl. Warm sardines/anchovies in pan. Add cooked pasta and a bit of pasta water. Let fish and pasta fuse. Sprinkle with breadcrumbs. All that'll be missing is the sound of waves lapping against the Italian shore. Buon appetito!