



Ilaria Ravazzolo is a PhD student in the department of Global Sustainable Development, where she has also completed the BSc in Economic Studies and Global Sustainable Development and the MSc in Global Sustainable Development. Ilaria's doctoral research focuses on (grand)mothers' experiences of belonging and identity in relation to their food practices, taking a gastrofeminist approach to challenge dominant narratives around food work and the devaluation of feminised food labour. She is looking at this in the context of Italians living in Switzerland where she plans to undertake oral history research which consists primarily of interviews carried out as kitchen table conversations.

Feeding the Past, Nourishing the Present:

Stories of Food, Memory, and Belonging

Food is more than just a source of energy. It is a sensory experience, a ritual, a provider of comfort, an expression of love, a connection to family and cultural heritage, a marker of identity, and so much more. To me, food and the memories associated with it have always represented a connection to the people I care about when they are not with me either because of geographical distance or because they have passed away. So, I hold on to these memories dearly as they are much more than just a snapshot of a particular moment – they represent my relationship with the person in question and the sense of belonging the specific situation triggered in me.

That is why I would like to share some of these memories to emphasise the power and the emotional significance of food, which is broadly defined to include the experience of both eating and drinking, in three short anecdotes. They each explore a different theme, ranging from loss over heritage to missing memories, highlighting some of the ways in which what we eat and drink is not only nourishing our bodies, but also our souls.



'Viva la Vida, Watermelons' by Frida Kahlo (1954)

Loss

Whenever I eat watermelon, I think of my paternal grandfather, who passed away when I was fifteen. Every time I bite into the sweet, juicy flesh of a slice of watermelon, I cannot help but think of him and am immediately transported back to a very specific moment we shared.

One day, when I was around five or six years old, my parents and I went to Italy to visit our relatives. We had just arrived and parked the car outside of my grandparents' bar, which in Italy is more similar to what would be considered a café in the UK. It was in the early afternoon and my grandfather had not yet returned from having gone home to have his lunch. I was waiting impatiently outside of the bar for him to arrive, observing the heavy traffic on the main road with great concentration in order to be the first to spot him approaching. When I finally saw my grandfather on his Vespa pulling up on the pavement, I jumped in excitement. I ran up to him as he was getting off the Vespa and opening the box for the helmet at the back. Out of that box he took a huge watermelon and triumphantly presented me with it, saying 'We'll have this for dessert tonight. It will be our special treat!' As he pronounced these words, I felt like the happiest girl on the planet and that evening's dessert was all I could think about for the rest of the day.

In our family, my grandfather and I were the people who liked watermelon best, so sharing it with him meant taking part in a ritual that was reserved just for the two of us. Whenever we sat down at the dining table, he always insisted on me sitting next to him. That evening he made several comments about how much he was looking forward to our after-dinner treat. We kept flashing each other conspiratorial smiles all throughout the meal so that I almost forgot about the other people sat at the table with us. When the much-anticipated moment of cutting open the watermelon had finally come, I was so excited I could hardly sit still. As soon as the slices were on the plate in front of me, I picked one up and took my first bite of this refreshingly crunchy delicacy. Then, I looked up to smile happily at my grandfather, both of us savouring the experience and the complicity with the cool, red juice running down our chins. In that moment, I felt a joyful warmth from deep inside which made me forget about

everything else, as the only thing that mattered was sharing this delicious fruit with my grandfather.

The reason why this memory is so special to me is that I had temporarily lost it growing up and only remembered it again on the day after my grandfather's funeral. I do not recall what made me think of this moment – it certainly was not a watermelon since he died in March when they are not in season yet. Regardless of what caused it, regaining this memory meant reestablishing a connection with my grandfather when it was no longer possible to have an interaction with him. It was my way of maintaining a relationship with him despite no longer being able to talk or eat watermelon together. Today, whenever I eat a slice of watermelon, it still feels like a ritual and the fact that I am carrying it on by myself gives it a lot more weight. This means that I am very picky about when, where and how I eat watermelon – it has to be the right setting to appropriately honour this sacred moment and celebrate the connection it reinforces. Nevertheless, eating watermelon never feels quite the same as it did in that moment when I was sharing it with my grandfather.

Heritage

Going forward in time to my life as an adult, I feel a similar sense of connection to my Italian origins as I do when eating watermelon whenever I have a cup of coffee. Well, actually, that is only true for one type of coffee which is again linked to a very specific memory.

On a cold winter's day roughly two years ago, I was in Italy again, visiting my relatives shortly before Christmas. My grandmother and I had decided to go to the city centre to do some food and present shopping. As we were walking, we passed one of her favourite bars, the owner of which she has known for several decades. So, we decided to stop there for a coffee and a short break from the humid cold before continuing our walk to the city centre. Once inside, we had the obligatory chat with the owner and some of the regular customers before we could order our coffees. My grandmother proudly told them all about her granddaughter who had come to visit her from England, boasting about what I was studying but letting me elaborate on the

details because she can never remember the exact name of my department. When everyone was up to date, we ordered our drinks at the counter, as is the custom, and took them to one of the small tables to sit down. Both of us had gone for a *macchiattone*, a type of coffee I have only ever come across in the Veneto region in Italy. I was unsure of what to order initially but then decided to go with what my grandmother had ordered for no reason other than that I was struggling to make up my mind. Once we had sat down and taken off our heavy winter coats, it occurred to me that I did not know what the difference between an *espresso macchiato*, a *macchiattone* and a *cappuccino* is. So, I asked my grandmother to enlighten me on this given that she has spent the majority of her life behind the counter of a bar making countless cups of coffee.

Her explanation was as follows: the main difference is the amount of milk and milk foam in the coffee. More specifically, the *espresso macchiato* is a shot of coffee (or simply 'one coffee' as my grandmother referred to it) with a little milk foam on top but no liquid milk. It is usually served in an espresso cup. The *macchiattone* is a level up, meaning that there is also one coffee but with a little bit of milk and more milk foam than in the *espresso macchiato*. This is why it is served in a slightly bigger cup since the additional milk needs more space. Finally, the *cappuccino* is served in the biggest cup as it has the most milk in it with still only one coffee but more milk than the *macchiattone* and a lot of milk foam. Most importantly, though, the *cappuccino* has to be significantly smaller than a *latte macchiato*, which has a lot more milk than coffee and not that much milk foam. After passionately explaining these differences to me, my grandmother proceeded to talking about how confused she is about all the new types of coffee you can order nowadays and expressed her disgust at the idea of adding syrup and other types of flavouring into this drink that is so sacred to her.

As I was listening to her explanation, my brain turned into a sponge, eagerly absorbing all the knowledge she was sharing from the decades of making coffee every day. I felt that I was not only learning technical knowledge, but, and perhaps more importantly, this was family knowledge that was being passed down to me. It was part of my heritage, a connection to my ancestors. I felt really privileged to just be handed this knowledge on a plate like that rather than me having to look through hundreds of family members' old documents to reach it. While this might seem very simple, it is by no means to be taken for granted. By establishing this

connection to my ancestors, drinking a *macchiattone* has become symbolic of this heritage. The fact that I can only get this particular type of coffee in the region my family is from also makes the experience of drinking it special. Ever since this day, I feel as though I am never drinking a *macchiattone* alone since my ancestors are always there with me, silently sharing the moment and keeping me company.

Missing Memories

The last anecdote I would like to share is not actually real. It is about my maternal grandfather, who passed away when I was four years old and is not 'real' in the same way the other two anecdotes are because the memories are a product of my imagination. My grandfather worked in the bakery my grandparents used to own and was very passionate about baking. He loved to experiment and come up with innovative recipes and new ways of combining different ingredients. One of his specialities was making pastries which were always much better than those from his competitors – an opinion that was shared by both the customers and family members.

When I was born, my grandparents had already sold the bakery and my grandfather had retired, which means that I have no recollection of his baking. In fact, I barely remember him at all given how young I was when he passed away. However, for as long as I can remember, my mum has been telling me stories about my grandfather and his baking. Still today she compares any pastry she buys with those that her father used to make – and his always emerge as the better ones. As I was growing up, I did not particularly mind not having many memories with my grandfather and it did not seem to me like I was missing something. However, when as a teenager I started to become interested in baking myself, I became more curious about my grandfather and his recipes. I started asking my mum for more details on his creations but she was unable to expand much on what she had already told me because she had never been very involved in the baking process. So, I became quite frustrated and felt that I was missing out on this incredibly valuable knowledge because I was born a few years too late.

To overcome this great injustice, I started to imagine what it would be like if my grandfather was still alive. In doing so, I created my own memories with him. I imagined what it would be like to sit at the table with him, animatedly discussing something I had baked and evaluating different ways of improving the recipe. Then, I thought about testing the improved recipe in my grandparent's kitchen together, whipping egg whites, mixing them with flour, sugar and butter in a big bowl, maybe adding some chocolate chips as well, and finally kneading the dough before pouring it into a baking tin. Once the tin was in the oven, I pictured us looking at the oven door, watching the mixture rise and waiting impatiently for the timer to hit zero so we could take out our creation to taste it. I also imagined that, while going through all these motions, we would be having conversations. I would tell him about what was going on in my life, about my plans and ideas for the future, about the things that annoyed me and about the most recent book I had read. In turn, he would tell me about his life, about the ideas he had had when he was younger and the lessons he learned on the way. I imagined the sense of complicity, safety, and comfort that I would have felt in these moments. By picturing these situations, they started to feel like real memories to me and I started to establish a connection to my grandfather that I had not previously had.

Thanks to these invented memories, whenever I am baking today, I am reminded of this connection with my grandfather. I can feel him next to me as I am mixing the ingredients and kneading the dough. On days when I am particularly homesick, I sometimes think I can hear him making comments on what I am doing, encouraging me to add a certain ingredient or leave out another. When I take the first bite to taste the outcome of my work, I often think that it would make him proud to see that it turned out nicely. So, in inventing these memories, I have found a way to maintain a connection with my grandfather even though he passed away over twenty years ago. It gave me the freedom to choose how I want to remember him which gives this relationship an interesting dynamic and highlights the power that food has to transcend the boundaries of place and time.

Reflections on the Power of Food

One of the reasons why I find food fascinating is that it can represent so much and be interpreted and experienced in so many different ways. Yet, everyone has a connection to it because we all need food to survive if nothing else. The experience of eating and drinking together has the power to unite people, to slow down a heated conversation and remind everyone that we are all human. It offers opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural exchange which makes it an excellent platform to encourage social cohesion. Especially in the case of food shortages and food insecurity, it can also trigger empathy and compassion – think of all the food aid organisations that exist and all the people who volunteer their time to get food on other people's plates. Most importantly, cooking and sharing a meal with someone is an expression of care and love, it creates a sense of community and can make you feel at home. It is a connection to both the past and the present.

As I have said at the beginning, for me, food is intricately linked to the people I care about. I enjoy cooking for and eating with others just as much as I enjoy cooking for and eating by myself. Food gives me hope, it never makes me feel alone, it reminds me of the connection to my origins and at the same time gives me the freedom to explore my own tastes. It is the best introduction to a new culture and the greatest source of comfort when I am feeling down. What I appreciate most about food is its intertemporal nature – the meals that have fed my body in the past continue to nourish my soul today through the memories they have created. This is what I have tried to show in the three anecdotes I shared above which highlight the power of food in establishing and reinforcing human connections that transcend place and time. In my opinion, this should be celebrated, particularly in a world that is as divided as the one we live in since it is a good reminder of the importance of the simple things in life.