

# A LITERARY ITINERARY FULVIO TOMIZZA



## ISTRIAN COUSINE

We wish to end this itinerary with something that, not just Fulvio Tomizza, but all Istrian people care for very much, that is food. Involving the senses in the cultural history of a place, helps to re-connect with tradition and to bolster the local sense of identity.

The rich variety of Istrian food is the result of two meetings: one between the sea and the land and the other between different people and cultures. All this is explored in Tomizza's essay *Istrian Cousine*, included in the autobiographical collection *My Literary Summers*, where, through beautiful descriptions, the writer reveals his profound attachment to his Istria. Enjoy a little taster:

*As you well know, Istria has always been a place where people crossed over, fled to, arrived, settled...*

*Istrian people have always tried to stay put as long as possible, sometimes beyond human endurance. At the same time they would welcome anything good coming from the occupying nations. Therefore food has always played a major role in this positive assimilation, becoming an active factor that spread at every level.*

*Privately in every home, whether the spoken language was Italian, Croatian or Slovenian, people used their imagination and frugality in handling the sheet of pasta. Often they would cut it into squares which they would wrap around the right index finger (in the old times a fuso – skewer – would have been used), to join the opposite sides. Thus they created fusi, similar to tiny hollow baskets that would soak up a bigger amount of sauce, preferably chicken. Such a rich, distinct main course, would be reserved for Sundays and for other special occasions such as weddings, christenings, confirmations...*

*Throughout spring, along the brambles and in the woods one would forage wild asparagus which would be eaten in one way only: sauted in a frying pan with scrambled eggs, pancetta (bacon) and prosciutto (parma ham). There would also be all types of mushroom to be served with mandatory polenta. Polenta is also crucial to appreciate better tripe, fish chowder and baccalà mantecato with its own sauce.*

*Every good farmer around here would also be equipped with a harpoon and carbide light that he would bring out every May to go fishing for cuttlefish, wandering along the shore in the nights of low tide. Fried or sauteed, cuttlefish would require baby lettuce with some sliced onion, or, even better, some scallions.*

*A midsummer local dish is corn minestrone (bobici), which follows the same recipe as bean minestrone, but instead of pasta uses sweetcorn, which should*

be tender and milky when squashed. A good tomato in it as well makes the dish refreshing. Another August delicacy is gnocchi with first plums.

I do not consider myself a great eater, but in winter I can never say no to black polenta; any time of day or night, hungry or full.

A common sweet treat is called *cròstoli* (venetian - *galani*) or *fritole*, but in the boiled version. The dough enriched with apples, raisins, at times quince and holy squash and a particular grape called „rooster's eggs“, is first boiled and then fried by the spoonful in olive oil.

At Easter it is mandatory to bake „*pinze*“, a type of sweetbread intensely yellow because of the large quantity of eggs used to make them. The children like a pleated variation called *colombina* or *titola*.

As far as wine is concerned the alternative is either the white *Malvasia* or the very dark red stem *Refosco* also called *Terrano*. Without forgetting the fabulous *Momiano's muscat*, made from the original small and rusty coloured grapes.

In savouring these dishes, which originate from other traditions, but which require considerable waiting and preparation times, Istrians have the feeling of belonging to a tradition that, despite migrations, will keep flowing forever, beyond their life.

(*Le mie estati letterarie*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 2009, pp.86-88)

