Along the Tevere: A Gastro-Historic Portrait of the Region

Anke Klitzing

Technological University Dublin, anke.klitzing@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschafart

Part of the Food Studies Commons, Nonfiction Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Other Communication Commons, Other International and Area Studies Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschafart/212

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.
Along the Tevere:
A Gastro-Historic Portrait of the Region

Anke Klitzing

Abstract: In June 2009, a group of masters students from the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy spent nine days visiting the lands of the Tevere river, travelling from its springs on Monte Fumaiolo in Emilia-Romagna to Rome by way of Umbria and the Lake Trasimeno. This article is a gastro-historic portrait of the lands of the Tevere, linking contemporary social, cultural and economic activities around food and tourism to the rich and long history of the region and highlighting persistent patterns, continuity and change.

Keywords: food studies, Italy, food history, culinary tourism, travel writing, Rome, cultural studies

The Tevere is the third longest river of Italy. It is named after the legendary king Tiberinus Silvius from ancient Roman mythology. It springs from multiple sources on Monte Fumaiolo in Romagna, in the Province of Forlì-Cesena. After 406 kilometres, it enters the Tyrrhenian sea between Ostia and Fiumicino. On its way, the river passes through the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Umbria and Lazio. The Tevere is the river of the city of Rome. In June 2009, a group of masters students from the University of Gastronomic Sciences spent nine days visiting the lands of the Tevere, travelling from Monte Fumaiolo to Rome.

On the first evening, over dinner in their beautiful restaurant, the hosts explain how their work is centred on memory and tradition. But 82 years ago, their tradition abruptly changed, as they ceased to be Tuscan, and became Romagnoli. People are polite here, or is it careful? The carefulness that comes with having been ruled by many lords, with never much to say. Careful not to offend anybody, because who knows who will be the next masters? So people are cautious, stick to the facts: Yes, we used to be Tuscan. Now we are Romagnoli. They call it Tuscan Romagna. That’s us. Never a word about the power-hungry man from Forlì¹, who thought he could influence destiny through geography². A forced syllogism: what springs out of the sources of the Tevere must end in Rome. I am from Romagna. If the sources of the Tevere are also in Romagna, therefore, what springs from Romagna must end in Rome. In fact, he ended at the shores of an Alpine lake³. But that is a different story.

The story of the river is not one of destiny. A river has no destiny. The water never stops. It enters the sea, only to rise up again into the clouds, then fall down as rain on the top
of the mountain, seep through the rocks into the underground reservoir, and out again through the cracks. A little stream, trickling through the beechwood forest, downhill, towards the valley and the city. An endless cycle, forever repeated. A river is movement. And in the movement, there is force. The force to carve a valley out of these mountains, or just to transport the heavy loads of the upstream harvests to the city. Grain and oil, milled with the force of the river. Wine. And people. Always people. People who have travelled up the river, to fish and hunt and cultivate and feed the hungry city. People who have come down the river, come from afar, from the lands of the North, to find the city that is said to be eternal.

Some come in peace, and devotion. They carry a key around their neck, hoping it will grant them entrance to this city, and the city in heaven it represents. They beg the help of three, and those who act in their name: Peter, James and John. Peter, the rock, the proud and fierce. In his name, their destination: the arms of Mother Church, embracing all the world. They who act in his name, her guardians: lions, proud and fierce, battling for glory and justice. James, the first to follow, in life and in death. They who follow the path of devotion trust that he will speak for them. John, the one who came before. The one who knew before all others, the one who paved the way. They who act in his name also opened the way, defended the way against all threats, provided care and shelter. He stepped aside for his Lord; his work was done. It was not he to rule. So it is with them: from their hill, they can see the centre of their world. They have aligned themselves with it. But in the centre, they are not. Their work is not yet done, not until the last tear has been dried, and the last pain relieved.

Their strength is their focus and the unity of their actions. Everything is done for the primary goal: care and shelter for those in need. It was their luck to find themselves, after an inglorious hiatus, with all the means still at their disposal: as the wheels of history came around again, to own land and vines and olive trees. Perpetual fundraisers. Centuries of ownership have taught them how to handle property: you invest in quality, not fashion. Thick walls then, huge halls full of shiny steel tubes now. The best. And above, a cross of light, eternal reminder of their purpose. Make wine for the earthquake victims. Press oil for the victims of war. Raise cattle to drive old ladies to the hospital. Why not. Cut out the middle-man, no need for charitable shareholders. Their shares are charity.

Not all that came from the North came in peace. They have come on elephants, in knightly armour, in the robes of the Renaissance, in tanks and airplanes. A Roma! The seven hills have long been seats of power, of this world and of others. The city has many layers of architecture, of history and of meaning. Rome is more than a grid of streets and houses. Rome, the centre of the known world. Rome, the Eternal City. Alle Wege führen nach Rom.

Not every traveller that follows the river is destined for Rome. Some don’t even know it. All they care about are the nice mudflats at the banks of the river. A good place to rest and
refuel, dining on the wildlife in the wetlands. Also some of these travellers are called pilgrims. They, too, are travelling under great strain and sacrifice. The lands of the Tevere will not refuse a weary traveller. The river leads the way.

The lands of the upper river are dark. The high hills are covered in shadowy forests. Stout fortresses with heavy walls crown the hilltops. This was a border region for a long time, between two strong and assertive neighbours. If you want to live peacefully between two powerful neighbours, you become diplomatic. And careful. Their walls are thick. The houses nestle tightly against the castle walls. Their territory has remained unchanged for centuries. Lords of the Mountain.

The lake is the antithesis of the river. Stillness. No outside influence. Literally: it is rain-fed, the fossil remnant of an ancient sea, no river feeding or draining it. It depends on the seasonal cycle of evaporation and precipitation. It is not very deep, but rich in life. Only trout don’t live here: they are restless, need moving water.

The fishermen work together, co-operation enabling them to stay their own masters. No outside influence. Their tradition is long. The Etruscans have fished here already, so have the Romans and the feudal masters of the Middle Ages. The lake has seen them come and go. It has endured elephants, pilgrims, pestilence and the Reformation, stoically breathing its seasonal rhythms. Fishing has remained equally consistent. For 4000 years, the nets were the same: round linen weaves, weighed down at the rim with lead. It takes skill and practice to cast these nets, a sure arm and steadfast legs. The same model was used all over the ancient world, also by those who were to become the apostles: fishers of men.

The lake is sensitive, and easily disturbed: the rules are sensible – no dragging, no motor boats, and fish have to be of a minimum size. But wisdom did not always prevail: strange fish were brought in as food for the lake fish. They proved to be stronger. Now, the fishermen are more careful. They have it all under their control: the women work the fish that the men catch. As always. They also work the fish of their neighbours, foreign fish coming in frozen and going out smoked to the big stores all over the country. They do not judge. Foreigners come and go. They are as stoic as the lake.

The land becomes lighter and the dark forests give way to the brighter green of vines and the gold of grain. We are the guests of a rich man. A fortune made in eggs and bread. Modern money, now seeking the trappings of the old: a mansion, a forest, deer. Jealously guarded with electric fences. The sheds with the money-layers, just out of sight. The new money goes into old traditions – a vineyard. The winery houses a modern treasure vault: wood
and wine. There is also lake (man-made) so guests may enjoy a stroll. Ostentatiousness works better with vines than with chickens.

In the winery though, a surprise: talent and passion and a long leash. Two young men, given the chance to work well, and the means to do so. The winery is proficiently equipped, from presses to barrels to tasting rooms. Their standard wines are good. Their idiosyncratic wines are excellent. Still, their confidence is small: “Tell us how the big boys are doing it”.

The big boys are doing it well. Tradition and innovation, working hand in hand: old grapes, new techniques, constant research. They were the first to realize that it pays to invest in something local, something no-one else has. And if it is as good as this grape, twice the luck. It needs to be handled well though. In the wrong hands, it’s motor oil. In the right hands: velvet, heavy and voluptuous. It needs a skilled match-maker to find the right wood for it. New world oak will give it the elegance of a Victorian boudoir. There is hope for the young contenders though: here, too, money was made elsewhere. Not in eggs and bread, but in lace and wool. And with a head-start of thirty-five years.

The river winds on. The land opens up. Still, people live on the hills. Tight streets wind between narrow houses, stairs and balconies lead up and down and all around. Houses seem to be built on top of one another. Escherian towns. The houses have as many stories above ground as below. Like the beeches of Monte Fumaiolo, they are deeply rooted into the hilltops. The damp tuffa cellars are full of white clouds of mould. Bottles rest well here, slowly developing their precious contents.

In one town, a river museum. A museum for all rivers. The director explains us the work of a river: erode, transport, sediment. A river is movement. In the other rooms, we meet specimens of the plants and animals that inhabit the river: fake, stuffed, pickled, alive. Teeming millions in a drop of water. A river is life.

The hills become flatter and rounder. No more castles on the hills, but olive trees. We are not in the North anymore. Pigs are roasted on sticks, goats over open fires, with bitter herbs. Men and women sing to us – working songs. Peasant songs. We are in the hinterland. The city beckons.

The city is eternal. The space is the same. Then, a house for many gods. Now, for one. The marble floors don’t care who steps on them. Hammer and sickle at the old slaughterhouse. Loudbspeakers among the crumbling walls of the ancient multiplex bathing house. The fountains don’t care who drinks their water. The river flows past islands, houses, trees, columns, the Pope, the President, pilgrims, pedestrians, cyclists, locals, strangers, nuns and tourists. Ever onwards to the sea. The river is eternal.
On their trip from Monte Fumaiolo to Rome, the students stayed at campsites, castles, hotels, hostels, guest houses and agriturismos. They did four nature walks, one boat trip and one cycle tour, saw two lakes and one river dam, encountered cows, sheep, geese and a pregnant cat, saw three fortresses and numerous ancient ruins, visited one library, two museums and an old mill, heard three music performances, met two meat producers and one cheese producer, listened to four deliberations on alternative economies, four ways of making wine and one of organic olive oil. None of this had any influence on the river.

1 Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), Prime Minister of Italy 1922-1943
2 In 1927, Mussolini decreed that the borders of Romagna and Tuscany should be re-drawn, in order to include Monte Fumaiolo with the sources of the Tevere into Romagna, his home region.
3 Mussolini was executed by partisans at Lake Como, April 1945.
4 The sources of the Tevere spring from an underground reservoir on Mt. Fumaiolo.
5 There are many beech trees on Mt. Fumaiolo, because they are especially adapted to the local terrain – it is very sandy, and so only the beech, which has sprawling roots, about as many as it has branches overhead, can find enough hold to become very old there.
6 Rome
7 pilgrims
8 The key is a symbol for St. Peter, the patron saint of Rome and the Catholic Church. Pilgrims destined for Rome used to carry a key around their neck.
9 These are patron saints for the pilgrims.
10 St. Peter, St. James and St. John the Baptist
11 ‘Peter’ is the name given by Jesus to his apostle Simon; it means ‘rock’ in Greek. Jesus is to have said that Peter/Simon is the ‘rock on which the church is built’. St. Peter was the first Pope.
12 St. Peter is said to have been of such character. Proud, for example, as he was sure himself that he was of rock-solid character, and would never betray Jesus, although he ended up doing just that [Matthew 26:35-69]. He also fought with Romans for Jesus [John 18:2], and generally acted as Jesus’ strongman.
13 St. Peter’s basilica and square in the Vatican in Rome. The square is engirdled by massive colonnaded architectural wings that curve around the square and are said to symbolize the arms of Mother Church embracing the world.
14 the popes and the rest of the Vatican establishment
15 …since they are the “kings” in the land of Catholicism.
16 St. James the Greater was the first person to be called upon by Jesus to follow him as an apostle. He was also the first martyr, i.e. the first after Jesus to be sacrificed for the cause.
17 pilgrims
18 St. James is the general patron saint for pilgrims.
19 St. John the Baptist. He was preaching and baptising people into the new faith before Jesus started. In fact, he baptised Jesus [Matthew 3:13].
20 The Bible tells that John did not only recognize Jesus as the coming Messiah in his adult work as a preacher, when he announced the imminent coming of the Messiah, but also when his mother Elizabeth was pregnant with
him, and they met the newly pregnant Mary Mother of Jesus, and the baby John ‘leaped in the womb’ in recognition of the baby Jesus and his holiness [Luke 1:41].

21 baptising and preaching and telling about the coming of the Messiah

22 the Knights of Malta, whose patron saint is St. John the Baptist

23 The Knights of Malta fought to re-gain Jerusalem for Christianity…

24 …and they battled the Muslims wherever they could, trying to defend Jerusalem

25 The Order of Malta came into being as Italian merchants from the Amalfi coast established a pilgrims’ hospital in Jerusalem in 1048 A.D. The Order later founded hospitals and shelters along pilgrim routes, including the Castello di Magione in Umbria, which the students visited. The Knights of Malta as a military organisation were founded to defend these institutions.

26 Once Jesus arrived on the scene, John told all his own followers that Jesus was the Messiah and asked them to follow him [Matthew 3:13-17].

27 The Villa Malta in Rome, on the Aventine Hill, is the main home of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. From it, you can see St. Peter’s basilica, which is the centre of the Catholic world, and therefore, their world.

28 In a figurative as well as literal sense: famously, if you look through the (purposely large) keyhole of the main gate of the Villa Malta, you see St. Peter’s basilica perfectly framed by the path and vegetation of the garden.

29 The Order of Malta is still extensively involved in providing medical and social assistance to people in need, all over the world, and irrespective of belief or nationality. To this end, they have created several institutions, such as St. John’s hospital in Rome, St. John’s ambulance services in the UK and Ireland, the Malteser Hilfsdienst in Germany and Austria, and Malteser International disaster relief organisation – to name but a few.

30 The Order of Malta has been continually been in existence since the 11th century, but not particularly active and even in slight disrepute for a few centuries – from the 15th to the 17th century, some of the Knights are supposed to have been involved in piracy, slave trade and other activities for personal and commercial ends. Moreover, the Order was expelled from Malta by Napoleon in 1798. At the end of the 19th century, it was revived, with the patronage of Pope Leo XIII., and also slightly renamed, to Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta (short: Sovereign Military Order of Malta/ SMOM). Their original name was the Knights Hospitaller, or Knights of St. John.

31 The Order owns 5,000 ha of land in Italy alone, besides several castles and properties like that. Also, they still possess the ancient privileges and entitlements that were characteristic of the Military Orders of the Middle Ages: they are sovereign, i.e. do not have to acknowledge any authority in the world except the Pope. They are entitled to issue their own passports, stamps, currency and license plates, and may entertain their own diplomatic relations, which they currently do with more than 100 countries, including the United Nations. This unusual situation enables the organisation to act much more quickly and efficiently in case of disaster intervention, for example.

32 The agricultural properties of the SMOM are run as profit-making (and tax-paying) enterprises. All profits are used for the charitable projects of the organisation.

33 for example, the Castello di Magione in Umbria

34 for example, their state-of-the-art wine production facility at the Lago di Trasimeno/Lake Trasimeno

35 At the wine estate at the Lake Trasimeno, the concrete ceiling above the main entrance lobby has the eight-pointed star that is the symbol of the Order of Malta cut out of it, so that light streams through the huge star-shaped hole.

36 The SMOM produces oil and wine at the estate at Magione, and cattle at an estate in Viterbo. The beneficiaries listed are common types of beneficiaries of charitable activities of the Order of Malta.

37 Today, the members of the Sovereign Military of Malta, the contemporary Knights and Dames, contribute to the organisation through money and personal charitable work (although a large part of the charitable work, e.g.
disaster relief, is provided by professionals working for the organisation). The only benefit for the members is supposed to be a good conscience…

38 In 217 B.C., the valley of Tuoro at the Northern shores of the lake was the site of the ‘Battle of Trasimeno’, where the Roman army under Caius Flaminius was destroyed by Hannibal of Carthage. His combat force famously included elephants.

39 Amongst others, the Medici of Florence often fought with the Papal states for supremacy in the region.

40 For example in World War II – the Germans took Rome in 1943.

41 (Italian) To Rome!

42 Early Rome was situated on seven hills on the Eastern banks of the Tevere: Aventinus, Caelius, Capitolinus, Esquiline, Palatinus, Quirinalis and Viminalis.

43 (German) All roads lead to Rome. German saying, supposed to have been an ancient Roman saying, expressing that the entire Roman Empire was centred on the capital.

44 Peregrine falcon, from pellegrinus (Latin): pilgrim

45 Migratory birds orientate themselves by rivers and mountain ranges as well as the sun.

46 the Florentine republic of the Medici and the Papal state

47 The rulers of this particular area and fortress, Castello S. Maria Tiberina in Umbria, were called ‘Borboni del Monte’, alluding to the Bourbon royal family.

48 Lake Trasimeno

49 The fishermen of Lake Trasimeno are organised in a co-operative.

50 see above: Battle of Lake Trasimeno

51 In the early twentieth century, some persici sole ‘Pumpkinseed Perch’ (Lepomis gibbosus) were introduced into the lake as fodder for the local pike (Esox lucius, luccio) population. They were not stronger than the pikes, but wiped out at least one indigenous species, the latterini (Atherina boyeri).

52 The fishermen’s co-operative of Lake Trasimeno is processing some fish for a company which is located adjacent to their facilities, and which has exclusive suppliers rights to a few large distributors (COOP, EuroSPIN).

53 Torquato Novelli, head of the Novelli family, owners of the Novelli group

54 the Novelli group, No. 1 egg producer of Italy, No. 2 bread producer, after Barilla group (as of 2009)

55 The students stayed at the guest house on the property of the Novelli group at Casa Naticchia, Umbria, which includes forest and a herd of deer. The Novelli group owns 900 ha of land in Umbria, including forest and vineyard areas.

56 chickens producing the basis for the wealth of the Novelli group

57 The oak barrels, in which the wines are aged, cost about €600-€700 apiece. Also, the wine that is being aged there, Sagrantino di Montefalco, is a DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) product, which is the highest quality standard for wines in Italy, therefore likely to fetch premium prices.

58 The oenologist of the Cantina Novelli was quite interested to know how their work compares with that of the Arnaldo Caprai winery, which the students were due to visit the next day.

59 The Arnaldo Caprai winery is the biggest (150 ha) and most established winery in the Montefalco area – they have been producing Sagrantino di Montefalco DOCG since 1971 and were the first to revive the cultivation of this variety which had largely been abandoned by the local farmers. They are widely credited with bringing this grape back into production and with the achievement of DOCG status.

60 Arnaldo Caprai has been in collaboration with the University of Milan since 1989. In 2009, they were maintaining 30 ha of experimental vineyards.

61 MC Escher (1898-1978), Dutch graphic artist famous for his depictions of impossible architectural constructions, like stairs that would always lead up.
The Pantheon was once a temple dedicated to all gods (from Greek: *pan* = all, *theos* = god). Now, it’s a Catholic church, dedicated to ‘St. Mary and the martyrs’.

The students visited the Città dell’Altra Economia, a centre for alternative socio-economic endeavours, which is located in an old slaughterhouse in the Testaccio area of Rome. Other organisations that are also housed here fly a variety of flags.

The students did a sightseeing tour through Rome on bicycle. One of the sights they visited were the Caracalla Baths, which are now in ruins. At the time of their visit, a stage with lights and loudspeakers had been set up among the ruins, as a venue for an opera or concert.

The Caracalla Baths were one of the eleven public baths in ancient Rome. They were constructed around 212 A.D. and were in use for over 300 years. The public baths (*thermae*) of Rome were usually large buildings with a variety of functions. Beside the bathing facilities, there would normally be also rooms for performances, shows and sports, gyms, shops for food and beverages, libraries and green spaces. The baths were used for recreational purposes, but also as venues for social and public events, and private meetings.

Rome, being the capital of Italy, is also the seat of the Italian government, including the Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri della Repubblica Italiana, the Italian Prime Minister and head of the government.