
Truffles and Radishes:

Food and Wine at the Opera



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Fred Plotkin is one of America's foremost experts on opera and has distinguished himself in many fields as a writer, speaker, consultant and as a compelling teacher. He is an expert on everything Italian, the person other so-called Italy experts turn to for definitive information.

“It’s raining truffles, radishes and fennels,” says Sir John Falstaff, the richly humane and deeply funny title character of Giuseppe Verdi’s final masterpiece. While there are many ways that food, wine and other libations have been used in opera, somehow this line best captures both the grandeur and common touch that opera and gastronomy possess. For every rare and fragrant truffle, there are plenty of common but no less essential radishes and fennels, all of which have their metaphorical place in opera and real place in cookery.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) was probably the most important Italian creative artist since the Renaissance. Not only was he the foremost composer of Italian opera and, for many, the greatest opera composer of all, but he was a knowledgeable gastronome and farmer as well. His most famous operas include tragedies and dramas such as *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Aida* and *Otello*, but it was in his last work, the human comedy *Falstaff*, that he achieved his fullest expression of a philosophy that believes ‘All the world is a joke and man is born a clown.’

Verdi used a libretto (text) fashioned by Arrigo Boito, who built the story around the character of Sir John Falstaff from Shakespeare's *Henry IV: Part One* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In addition to his work as a composer, Verdi was one of the leaders of the Risorgimento, the movement for unification that helped form the nation of Italy in the 1860s. He overcame censorship, the deaths of two wives and both of his children, and all kinds of challenges and disappointments that would have undone most people. And yet, thanks to Boito and the character of Sir John, Verdi was able to find humour and insight at the end of his life that put all of this in perspective. Falstaff is a character who loves his food and drink as much as he loves ideas and of the pursuit of pleasure.

The composer was born in the tiny hamlet of Roncole, not far from Busseto, in the province of Parma. This part of Italy, in the region known as Emilia-Romagna, is a culinary paradise even in a nation that arguably has the best food in the world. Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, prosciutto di Parma, aceto balsamico tradizionale (the real balsamic vinegar), and magnificent fresh pasta made with golden eggs, are but the most famous food products of the area. Even though he grew up in a rural setting, Verdi's situation was unusual. His parents ran a small restaurant with lodgings on the post road from Milan to Bologna. They produced their own food, made pasta by hand, and served local specialities that would, today, be considered *alta cucina* in the best Italian restaurants of New York or London. The quality of cooking at the Verdi family's trattoria was such that mail carriers made a point of stopping there for the night to have an exquisite meal and a good night's rest for themselves and their horses. As they came to know the highly intelligent boy who lived there, the mailmen brought books of literature, history, theatre and music that few children living so far from the citadels of education and culture would have ever read. Verdi's education and sense of the world came through these books, which he devoured as voraciously as the mail carriers consumed his mother's *tortelli di erbette*.

Verdi was fortunate that Antonio Barezzi, the father of the first woman he married, took an interest in supporting his musical ambitions and had