

The Urban Peasant: Italy's Legacy for Contemporary Global Foodways

One of the most popular buzzwords in Contemporary Italian food parlance is “cucina povera,” meaning “poor” or “peasant” cuisine. Harkening back to a historical time of scarcity, the Italian cuisine that we celebrate is based on the idea of elegant simplicity: making the most out of a few, simple ingredients. This concept has valuable lessons for foodways and food systems throughout the world, ranging from issues such as food insecurity in urban communities to tackling food waste.

My paper will begin with the model of Italian cuisine, examining how necessity has been transformed into a culinary art, as well as a social movement with the advent of Slow Food. From Carlo Petrini's first steps in 1986 to Massimo Bottura's “refettorio” model of dignified community kitchens, the Italian foodscape has applicable lessons on a global level. Most significantly, I will look at the application of peasant foodways in urban settings as Italian cuisine's greatest legacy.

Looking closely at how communities are served by this model, I will consider specific examples of local grassroots programs. Examples include the edible schoolyard project, or school gardens that serve children with high food insecurity, urban farms and rooftop gardens, as well as non-profit grocery stores that concurrently serve food deserts while combatting what would have been food waste from larger supermarkets.

I will also explore strategies and implications for individuals in American urban (and suburban) communities: from eating healthier to vanquishing food waste. In an era of rampant complacency, where we have largely lost the connection with our food source, processed foods and questionable additives have led to a generation of obesity, diabetes and other health concerns. Eating simply and naturally, based on the Italian peasant model, has tremendous health as well as economic benefits for everyone. What the Italian model teaches us is that anyone can take steps towards a more holistic approach to procuring, preparing, and consuming their food with minimal waste. Individual or community gardens such as CSAs ensure a connection with our food. Buying less food per shopping trip, re-purposing leftover food in our own kitchen into new dishes, and composting ensure minimal waste.

Finally, I will demonstrate the power and significance of the Italian expression “A tavola,” or bringing everyone to the table. Employing the peasant model of creating wholesome dishes with locally sourced food products can build a sense of community and preserve food culture within families and other social groups. Food at its purest and most humble level is not only nourishment but also communication, social engagement, and a source of comfort and enjoyment.