

Between Plenty and Poverty

Foraging in the Salento with Patience Gray

Men and plants are old acquaintances...

—Geoffrey Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora*

IN THE SALENTO, the far south of Italy's heel, edible weeds are a sign of both wealth and of poverty. Walk anywhere—between rows of neatly planted spring onions, the firm red clay soil of the olive groves, or the scrubby wildness of the *macchia*—and you will find them. They appear in the most improbable of places: growing out of dry limestone walls, between cracks in the pavement, and on the side of the road. Like mushrooms, they seem to thrive where other species do not. Still, they are chosen carefully; only the tender shoots of young weeds and plants are pursued. Many varieties can

be found year round, but they are best at certain times. In fall and winter, when there is rain, one peasant-farmer tells me. During the olive harvest in late October, agricultural day laborers still wear aprons with large front pockets into which they put weeds that they gather as they work. The spring season usually begins in March, when the first of the wild asparagus appear, and lasts for several weeks. “There is snow in the wind,” Patience Gray, the author of the celebrated cookbook *Honey from a Weed*, once wrote of the *macchia* in early spring. “The wild pear trees are crowned with white flowers, the asphodels stand out like candelabra

Below: Cultivated chicory at the open air market in Presicce.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FEDERMAN © 2010





Above: *La Nonna* stuffing the sprushinu in the pot.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FEDERMAN © 2010

lit with stars, the bee orchid is underfoot, and rosemary is again covered with blue flowers.”

By mid-April the *macchia* is already a wilderness of flowers: purple thistles, yellow dandelions, the blue and pink flowers of borage, wild garlic (there are at least eight varieties), and bright red poppy make even the sea, in all its shades of blue and green, look rather unexceptional. The poppy plant (picked before it flowers), boiled in salted water and then sautéed with olive oil, garlic, and a chili pepper, to which small black olives (*vòsciala*) are added, is a common regional dish (*papaverina stufata* or *paparina*). The less showy varieties, what might be loosely called *verdura di campagne*, are easy to miss. These are the greens of everyday cooking, many of which belong to the dandelion family: chicory (*cicoria*), *aspraggine*, *grespino*, and *rucola*, or wall-rocket. They are typically boiled in salted water and eaten with olive oil, salt, and pepper (*oju e sale*, *ogni erba vale*, a local saying, means that “oil and salt with no vegetable find fault”). Closer to the sea one finds salicorn, wild sea fennel, and the sea beet. It seems that nothing goes to waste. Even broomrape (*orobanche*), a parasitic plant that feeds on the roots of beans and peas, is picked in spring; the youngest stalks are washed (they resemble white asparagus), soaked for twenty-four hours,

boiled, and served with a dressing of white wine vinegar, olive oil, capers, and mint.

Despite their abundance, weeds are also a reminder of the region’s poverty, one of its defining characteristics. Italy’s south has long been viewed as a “world apart,” in the words of Carlo Levi, the exiled artist and writer whose lyrical portrait of nearby Basilicata, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, remains one of the most evocative depictions of the region. “No one has come to this land,” he wrote, “except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding.” Periods of hunger and deprivation are still remembered. Pasquina Cortese, who teaches cooking classes at a local *agriturismo* venture, and whose parents lived through World War II, says there was nothing to eat but dried figs, once a staple of the local economy, and weeds. The weeds were boiled and eaten simply with a drop of vinegar, nothing else. Even bread was scarce. Each person was given a ration of one hundred grams a day; grain was still grown but most of it was confiscated by the military. “They were always hungry,” says Cortese.

Thus weeds—abundant and easily accessible—have always been peasant food, gathered more out of necessity

than by choice or for leisure. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century the stigma of poverty was attached to the gathering of weeds. In the Salento, as the economy slowly improved following the war and many workers left for northern Europe to find employment, the reliance on and consumption of edible weeds declined. At the same time, supermarkets selling fresh produce (including cultivated chicory, fennel, and even the tassel hyacinth bulb) began to supplement and in some cases replace the traditional diet. Inevitably perhaps, much of the knowledge passed down from one generation to the next, traditionally from grandmothers and mothers to their daughters, began to fade. By the 1970s it seemed in danger of disappearing. For many, this was hardly something to lament: weeds had come to symbolize nothing more than hard work and hunger, something to escape.

It was in 1970 that Patience Gray and Norman Mommens settled in Puglia, where they restored a large *masseria* (an old farmhouse once used as a barn and a sheep shed) on a high point overlooking the Ionian Sea. It was the endpoint of their Mediterranean odyssey, which had taken them to the Greek island of Naxos, Carrara in northwestern Tuscany, Catalonia, the Veneto, and finally Puglia. Gray's *Honey from a Weed*, the product of those travels, remains one of the best texts on wild foods and on edible weeds in particular. She devotes an entire chapter to the subject and spent much of her life cooking with and studying wild plants. Her formal interest in plants, however, began long before she left for the Mediterranean. In 1951 she worked as a researcher on the Agricultural and Country Pavilion at the Festival of Britain under the direction of F.H.K. Henrion, a well-known architect and industrial designer. The following year she published a book on indoor plants and gardens for *The Architectural Review*. Her work for Henrion led to a partnership with Primrose Boyd, the coauthor of their bestselling 1957 cookbook, *Plats du Jour*, notable for its chapter on wild mushrooms (Gray was also an editor at *House and Garden* for several years). Indeed, it was the wildness and beauty of the woods, rather than the possibility of finding something to eat, that so attracted Gray. In an unpublished essay on edible fungi Gray describes what initially drew her to study what in England (and America) are not exactly part of the cultural or culinary lexicon:

It was the sheer beauty of the woods in autumn and not any gastronomic motive that first inspired in me an interest in fungi, the sight of the forest floor littered with brilliant apparitions, scarlet caps dotted with white, the poisonous *Amanita muscaria*, against the emerald moss, the

sentinel aspect of *Coprinus comatus*, edible in its early stages along the margin of some path, the brilliant ochre of the chanterelles growing at the base of chestnut clumps among the dried curled last year's leaves.

Similarly, in *Honey from a Weed*, she writes of searching for asparagus in the Salento that, "Since 'I love all wastes and solitary places,' I am wandering about picking asparagus in the wide landscape, when I should be hoeing."

In Gray's writing and in her love of edible fungi, weeds, and plants there is a sense of pursuing the forbidden, of tasting and experiencing that which we have somehow forsaken. There is a kind of childish delight in entering the woods or *macchia* to discover the next plant or weed, like the lepidopterist with his net in a field of flowers.

It was on Naxos, in the early 1960s, that Gray first became interested in edible weeds. In February and March women and children busied themselves gathering dandelion greens, wild chicory, endive, milk thistles, field marigolds, and chamomile as well as wild carrot, parsnip, fennel, and chervil. Wild mustard, rocket, thyme, savory, and several varieties of mint were also gathered and washed at the village tap or spring. Here Gray had her first lessons. "Filling my water jar at the spring, I had a daily opportunity to examine these weeds and ask advice, and began to gather them myself, but at first always offering them for inspection."

Even before Naxos Gray had received lessons in Castelpoggio, a small mountain village above Carrara, where she took long walks through the vineyards and chestnut groves with the widow La Dirce, from whom she and Mommens rented a room. Many of the weeds and plants were the same as those found on Naxos—members of the carrot and daisy families—but there were others, too. Dirce gathered several varieties of sorrel, lady's smock, primrose, the yellow foxglove, mountain cowslip, mountain orache, plantain, and dock. Her method of preparing them, what Gray considers the best (and also the most common, with some variation, throughout the Mediterranean), was to wash the weeds thoroughly, boil, drain, and serve them with olive oil, vinegar, and hard-boiled eggs. The most important thing, what Gray calls the essence of a dish of weeds, whether eaten raw as a salad or cooked, is using several different varieties (with some important exceptions). Hence the Carrarese saying, "Who wants to eat a good supper should eat a weed of every kind."

By the time they moved to Puglia, Gray was well versed in the many kinds of edible weeds and plants used throughout the Mediterranean. There were still new species to discover, such as tassel hyacinth and broomrape, but for the most part Gray was no longer learning from others.

Without fail, those who knew Gray in the Salento will eventually mention the basket. It is often the first thing they recall. Ada and Mario Ricchiutto, who became close friends of Patience and Norman and had dinner with them most Sundays (chicken cooked in red wine and tomatoes with herbs from the *macchia*), remember the first time they came to Spigolizzi (the name of the hillside and also the *masseria* where Gray and Mommens lived). Gray was out with her basket gathering plants and herbs. Ada, whose mother was a seamstress, grew up in the nearby village of Acquarica. At the time, the commune kept a poor list and her family was on it. Mario's father, on the other hand, had his own garden and grew fennel, chicory, and cauliflower. Mario says his father looked upon those who had to gather weeds with a certain degree of contempt. For Ada, it wasn't that Gray taught her how to identify plants or how to cook them; she taught her to value them. "Patience could have bought her vegetables but chose not to," Ada says. "That was important. That was significant." Today, Ricchiutto gathers at least eighteen varieties of edible weeds and plants that she uses in cooking and for medicinal purposes.

And she is not the exception. Pasquina Cortese, the cook at *agriturismo* Masseria Gianferrante, says that most families have their own *terra*, or plot of land, where they gather weeds and plants. "It's a big part of the tradition," she says, "the way of life." Though the erosion of local knowledge threatens that way of life to a certain degree, Gray, in her work, may have overstated just how imminent and complete the loss. There has clearly been a decline, a visible trend across cultures. In his lucid study of British plants, flowers, and herbs Geoffrey Grigson writes that, "through the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century wild plants must have been far better known in the countryside, since many more kinds were still used, and many kinds were still collected and sold to the apothecaries or in the market." Several more recent studies of the use of edible weeds and plants among different peoples, from South Africa to Patagonia, often point out that the younger generation—for a variety of reasons—has little interest in carrying on the tradition.

In the Salento, however, the greater threat may be environmental. The use of herbicides, pesticides, and artificial fertilizers is becoming more widespread and intensive and thus choosing where to forage is not as straightforward as it once was (Gray even warned of this when she published *Honey from a Weed* in 1986). To drive by an olive grove that has been treated and one that hasn't is instructive. The treated fields are completely barren: the soil appears parched and cracked, almost like pavement. The untreated

fields are jungle-like, thick with shrubs and plants. Some even attribute the loss of certain species and the decline of others to the intensification of agricultural production.

Cosimo Maggio, a *contadino*, or peasant-farmer, has a field behind Spigolizzi where he grows wheat and that he knows is free of chemical inputs. He met Gray and Mommens in the early 1990s and says that after he plowed his field they would search for ancient Messapian flints and stone tools, an interest that would become increasingly important to both of them. Indeed, Gray insisted that there was a link between the tools and the region's food gathering culture. "I think one can say that the Mesolithic people...were pioneers in gastronomy. Their artifacts are not only small, often minute, but also made with incredible skill—fish hooks, *mezzalune*, tiny blades to prise open the reluctant bivalves, refined points to tease out the land and sea snails." As a sign of their importance she also notes that in a dictionary of Salentine dialects the largest entries are for the names of staple foods: snails (65), frogs (33), and wild chicory (31).

On an overcast and drizzly evening Maggio stopped by with a bag of his flour and a small bottle of wild fennel grappa (made with the leaves of the plant, which are also used in a pasta dish of anchovies, garlic, and olive oil). It was deeply aromatic and a dark shade of green, almost the color of newly pressed olive oil. Over the course of my visit he and his wife would stop by several times with a dish of weeds or winter tomatoes; homemade bread and biscotti; a bottle of his own primitivo and freshly picked fava beans.

As we walked out into the field, rain was falling and the grass and flowers were wet. The *macchia* was shot through with patches of fog. Cosimo would stop every few paces and crouch down with knife in hand and grab the base of a weed with his thumb, maneuvering the knife deftly with his index finger and cutting the plant at just the right point (a bit of the root is left in the ground so that the plant comes back). Borage, field poppies, tassel hyacinth, wild fennel, chicory, wild carrot, *zanguni*, *grespino*, and several others were identified (for Maggio, though, it was too late for picking; most of the plants had flowered and were past their prime). Maggio says he learned from his mother and grandparents and that weeds and plants were an essential part of their diet. Today, he and his wife gather weeds in such abundance that they have taken to freezing them (some also conserve them in glass jars for several months).¹ But because these plants are no longer an essential part of the diet, Maggio fears that a good deal of knowledge has already been lost. Everyone in the town of Salve, where Maggio was born in 1950, used to know about the beneficial effects



of plants and herbs. Soon, he says, that knowledge will be concentrated in the hands of a few. “I know less than my grandparents and he will know less than me,” Maggio says, pointing to his eighteen-year-old son who has dreams of traveling to Jamaica to play music and learn English.

There is little mystery as to how the knowledge of plants and weeds and their many uses is transmitted from one generation to the next: in the kitchen. Few if any gather them simply for the sake of identifying and collecting. Roberto Polo has studied the local plants of the Salento for decades and says that there are probably about 450 different varieties that are edible or used in some other way, primarily for medicinal purposes. For several years in the 1980s Polo ran a small seasonal restaurant that Gray and Mommens frequented. He says they would often discuss different ways of preparing a single dish, how it could be improved, or done differently. Indeed, during my stay in the Salento, I was often told that every village has its own method of preparing a certain dish and that some dishes are known only to a particular town. (Many of these dishes are emblematic of the

Above: Cosimo Maggio in his field behind Spigolizzi.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FEDERMAN © 2010

region’s poverty: meatless meatballs, a dish called fish of the sea that contains no fish, dried peas cooked with stale bread and greens.) Polo says he learned from his grandparents and from all the women who worked in the countryside. Today, he runs an organic farm and *agriturismo* business not far from Spigolizzi. His mother, La Nonna, does most of the cooking.

Late one morning I visited Roberto at the farm. On a long wooden table, he had laid out close to a dozen books on gathering local plants and weeds (most in Italian and a few in French), their medicinal properties, and on Pugliese cuisine. After flipping through the books we took a large basket and two knives into one of the recently planted fields. Every few feet Polo was pointing out something new: from the dandelions growing up between the cracks in the pavement to the delicate white and violet flowers of wild garlic. But our task was simpler. We had to prepare lunch for about a dozen people, several of them young workers who

had come to spend a few days on Polo's farm. Anyone who has ever boiled weeds, or greens of any kind—whether collard greens or kale, spinach or broccoli rabe—knows how much they shrink once they've been put into boiling water (this can often be dispiriting, especially if you have not planned accordingly). Cortese says that for the dish of poppies described above, she uses roughly one kilogram (2.2 pounds) per person.

I took Polo's lead and in about thirty minutes we had filled the basket to overflowing with the leaves of *aspraggine*, a type of dandelion known as *sprushinu* in local dialect ("The truth is we pick all these dandelion-type plants in spring without mumbling their botanical names," Gray once wrote in a draft of *Honey from a Weed*). It was abundant; one hardly had to move to gather large quantities. Polo added a few leaves of wild carrot, for their aroma he said, pungent and sweet, and we returned to the kitchen.

Here he enlisted the help of his mother and we cleaned the greens, trimming them of any battered leaves and knocking off large clumps of dirt. They were then washed in cold water several times—a minimum of four, Polo insists, to make sure all of the earth is removed ("The ways of cooking weeds are simple," Gray writes in *Honey from a Weed*. "The trouble is in cleaning them.") A large pot of heavily salted boiling water was prepared and La Nonna somehow managed to fit all of the greens in at once, stuffing them down with a wooden spoon. The hard work was over. Once the weeds had cooked—about ten minutes—they were removed from the water, which was carefully reserved. The weeds were placed on a rimmed tray with a pot lid on top to remove some of the excess water. Finally, they were coarsely chopped and added to a sauce of olive oil, garlic, tomatoes, a splash of white wine, and some of the reserved cooking liquid and served over rigatoni with grated pecorino.

There was plenty of food. One of the young workers had three helpings. And, to top it off, they brought out a dish of *paparina*—the boiled poppies with black olives—left over from the night before.

Weeds are still a basic if not essential part of the Salentine diet. Before I left we had dinner out at a small *osteria* in nearby Lucagnano. I was told that the menu rarely changes and that they serve simply what local people want. It is always full, even in the off-season. In the entryway, just in front of the kitchen, long ribbons of pasta were drying on tables that were packed with diners by the time we left at nearly 11:00 P.M. An elderly woman in an apron was fanning the flames of a makeshift charcoal grill—an old oil drum with a metal grate placed over the top.

The meal began with *pittule*—fried dough stuffed with peppers, thinly sliced salami, or cheese. Cortese says that in the past, the leaves of borage and other wild plants were used in *pittule*. This was followed by pasta. There were three on offer, all homemade, and because of a mistake in the kitchen, we tried and enjoyed them all. The first was a short noodle made from barley flour—dark and slightly sweet—with tomato sauce. The second, perhaps Puglia's most well-known dish—*orecchiette con le chime di rapa*—the small ear-shaped pasta with a sauce of broccoli rabe, garlic, and olive oil. And finally a long, twisted noodle—the ones we saw drying when we walked in—served with the same simple tomato sauce. The main course was *gnum-mareddih*—the offal of lamb (heart, liver, spleen, and lung) wrapped in the lamb intestine and served alongside several other grilled meats. These were served with a dish of the wild poppies, boiled and sautéed with olive oil, garlic, and the small black Salentine olive.

Beyond their cultural and culinary significance weeds are a source of energy, or so Gray maintained throughout her life. She often referred to chicory as "energy producing." Few studies have been done on whether this is actually the case. Alan Davidson, who edited and published *Honey from a Weed*, remained somewhat skeptical and argued that perhaps it was the bread, olive oil, and cheese that provided the energy. But Gray was adamant. In a letter to Davidson in October 1986, she wrote that, "I think one has to eat them [weeds] daily (our present case). Norman survived a twelve-hour ordeal two days ago on a dish of Cicoria! 'Weeds promote energy!' This is a Great Mystery." Davidson, it seems, relented a bit. Or at least came to accept that they had certain medicinal properties. In a letter to Gray he acknowledged that, "I must plan to eat more weeds tomorrow in the hope that I will hit on some which are remedy for flu."

But for the Salentines, there seems to be little question. "*Sono la vita*," says Cortese. "They are life. You have to appreciate them." ●

NOTE

1. The weeds are blanched for just a moment, laid out to cool on a marble table, drained of their excess water, and placed in plastic bags, a practice that Gray likely would have decried. When they are removed from the freezer, they are thawed and boiled again in salted water, sometimes flavored with pork, and served with olive oil and bread.