That evening, then, of course, she had more to do than usual. The economic conditions of the family were very modest, almost poor, but Christmas had to be celebrated anyway: she, moreover, prepared with abundance, so that there would be some leftovers on the table set for the dead, who return to the houses where they lived on the night of the eve. (…)

And so, the happy Christmas dinner was begun with the prayer for the dead. Bardo alone did not respond, with his lips asleep, locked in an enigmatic smile. He knew very well who the dead were who had to return, but he was careful not to say so.

Meanwhile, Gina served her soup in bowls, pulling up the long noodles as thin as blond hair with an iron ladle. The first bowl was for Pinon; she took it in her hands like a sacred vase, and she began to eat slowly, wrapping the noodles in the fork, as civilized people do. Uncle Dionisio also ate slowly, using his left hand; and he closed his eyes so as not to see his grandchildren, including women, drinking wine, that is to say eating some of the soup inside the cups filled with sparkling wine. Only Giovanni deprived himself of this pleasure, to keep his uncle company in his misfortune, but also because the example of his uncle, who, having drunk
too much, could no longer drink, curbed him with the natural instinct of the family.

Gina, on the contrary, who as usual did not sit at the table, took advantage of the first general cheerfulness to fill her cup of wine twice: immediately she too made herself happy, and while at the cupboard, she broke a large boiled mullet with the scissors and piled up the best parts in secret, she seemed to hear, in the great outside silence, the sound of a carriage. (…)

She served the mullet at the table, with a green sauce she had already prepared that smelled of the vegetable garden and summer: everyone, cheered by the good food, congratulated her; and when she passed by the side where Osea was with the children, she felt herself taken by the dress, and she stopped.

(from the novel *Annalena Bilsini*, 1927).

Through the description of the Christmas dinner, Deledda makes known to the public other culinary uses typical of the people of the north, starting with the soup broth that opens the meal, followed by boiled fish seasoned with a green sauce. The village where Annalena Bilsini lives is next to the banks of the Po, in the lower Po Valley between Viadana and Cicognara, where the Madesani family lived and where the writer went every autumn for long periods after the beach holidays.

Unlike her native Sardinia, where lunch was always based on meat, the delicacy of mullet, a water fish from the
Tyrrhenian Sea, whose cultivation was also introduced in fresh water, reminds us of the river habitat that in other novels, such as *L’Argine*, Grazia Deledda remembered from the title.