Polenta

The other brother, on the other hand, took comfort in watching his mother make polenta: she had already leaned against the cauldron hanging from the chain, to keep it at the bottom of the fireplace, an axis, on which she pressed a knee; and bent, without fear of fire, she turned the hot mixture with a long torch with an inclined tip. Inside the pot the polenta began to puff, hinting at detaching itself from the shiny copper walls: the woman then doubled in strength, without ceasing for a moment to be attentive to the evolution of the dough that seemed to take shape with pain: and when she saw it all detached and dense, with a hook she quickly stood out the pot from the hook and a bang, with a skill that allowed her not to feel even the heat of the container she emptied it on the axis of the kitchen chest.

Then even the little Second was reassured: with his face stretched out on the board, he saw his mother adjust the polenta with a ladle, to form a kind of cake that was round and prominent: above, with the cut of the hand, she marked a cross, and to the child who asked insistently why, she said she was a little annoyed that her grandmother wanted it so. “Because it is the first polenta that is made in this house.” (…)

She laid the tablecloth, so that it would not make a fold, cleaned the plates and glasses once again before putting
them on the table, cut the salami into transparent slices, and whisked endlessly the eggs for the omelet: and it was she who distributed the slices of the polenta, bringing them hot on the palm of her hand as on a nice live dish: first to Uncle Dionisio, then to the mother, then to her husband and brothers-in-law, and finally to the children.

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

In many letters, the writer asks for detailed information on new customs and traditions with which she came into contact, for example, when she began to attend the family and relatives of her husband in the area of the lower Po Valley between Viadana and Cicognara. Deledda spoke little, but she was particularly interested in habits that seemed new to her; household chores and especially food fall into this kind of interest, which is quite natural, given the education of the time that saw domestic care as the main task of a woman.

For this reason, also in the so-called Italian novels by Grazia Deledda, we see descriptive scenes of the preparation of food that are strictly functional to the story; indeed, the food often characterizes the protagonist. This is the case of Annalena Bilsini, the protagonist of the novel of the same name, the first novel published after the Nobel Prize, set among the peasants of Bassa, as if with this Italian novel, Deledda wanted to underline the national character of her work. *Annalena Bilsini* is one of the few novels by Deledda that has as its title the name of the protagonist, like *Marianna Sirca* and *Elias Portolu*. Annalena is a woman just over forty
years old, strong willed, the true head of the family, who will proudly remember at the end of the novel how the sons always do what their mother wants! Therefore, the cooking of polenta, a typical dish of northern Italy, described down to the smallest detail, on the one hand attests to the attention already mentioned to domestic and daily gestures, and on the other hand, it reinforces the indomitable and decisive character of Annalena, who seems not to be afraid even of the high temperature at which the polenta cooks in the pot. And this is even more important if we consider that the scene of polenta is almost at the beginning of the novel.