The Preparation of the *Gnocchi*

The invitation, though sudden, didn’t alarm him: among other things, the old lady had sold him a whole mountain ham, flour, preserves, and cheese. In order not to disfigure it, he needed goodwill and expertise: if the second was lacking, he had the first in abundance.

He then set the water to boil, and he pulled the ham down in the meanwhile: it was hanging, protected against rats, like a lamp dangling from a rope in the middle of the room. He put it on the table, looked at it, and turned it again and again, looking for the right spot to attack. The right side seemed good to him, but he soon noticed that it was too lean, and for several reasons he needed fat. Therefore, he tried the opposite side, and actually, after the first coarse salt skin, he saw the white and red of lard and meat.

However, the knife is lazy; it doesn’t want to cut thin slices, and he sharpens it with another little knife. The two blades blaze and creak in a wild battle, but with leaps of joy. And here is the big knife, burning in its victory; it sinks again, with silent fierceness, into the patient ham: and now the slices come away diaphanous and wide. The teacher looks at them backlit, as if they were patches of a precious cloth: the fat seems white velvet to him, the damask lean of mahogany color.
After setting a big rose of these slices on a round tray, he cut again from the fat side, and on these miserable slices, casually thrown on the mallet board, the knife raged loudly, until they were reduced to a mush. The pot, already hot, was taken to the edge of the cooker, giving place to a little black pan containing the minced lard, which had received, as consolatory companions, pieces of butter, onion, and garlic. And all started to fry, to lament, quietly at first, then louder, until the tomato sauce mixed its dense blood in it, apparently turning the sorrow into joy.

Setting the water to boil again, the teacher pulled the big board for the pasta down, clean and almost virgin in its wooden white nakedness. And remembering the actions of women performing these chores, he poured a little mountain of flour in the middle, in which he made a hole using a finger, like the crater of a volcano. It was really similar to a volcano, that little mountain, when he poured boiling water into the hole: smoke rose, the heap collapsed, and he plunged his hands in it, as if willing to support and rebuild it.

However, the flour fled everywhere, and the part that was already soaked with water got stuck to his fingers, spiteful and vengeful. In a short time, his hands were covered with white woolen gloves, and the flour that kept fleeing, desperate, from the board, went directly onto the front of his dress.

It was a difficult moment: he looked desolately at his jacket, without daring to touch himself with those horrible fingers; then he remembered that he had nothing more to fear in his life, and little by little, he used one hand to free the
other from the envelope of the mixture. With both hands, he gathered the scattered flour in the middle of the board, poured more water, and his fingers proudly squeezed and forced the rebel material into a compact form.

An elation of sighs and strength, and pain in the right hand, the hard and wood-like mixture made elastic, pulled and folded, rolled and stretched again. Little by little it gave up, became warm, and finally round and soft like a woman’s breast.

At that point, he took the little knife again, and he scraped the leftover coat from the board; he cut a slice of mixture, and, by rolling and stretching it, he reduced it to a long white snake, which the knife hurried to cut into small pieces, as if it was really a dangerous beast.

Afterwards, the little pieces, carved inside with the index finger, like long shells, became the gnocchi, and their army, well arranged on the board and then covered by the tent of a napkin, waited for the pot to boil.

At the agreed time, the two guests arrived. While the oldest entered into the teacher’s house and offered his help, the other wandered, curious and suspicious, around the table that had been set outside, under the trees, sniffing with strength, as if he wanted to make sure that there was no poisoned food.

The ham rose, the bread and the yellow wine, and above all the scent of the sauce that came from the house reassured him. He sat on the bench in front of the table, and he reached into the big internal pocket of his jacket, pulling out with strength a little yellowish cheese, glossy like ivory: he put it
cautiously next to the ham dish, between the two potbellied towers of full bottles. Then he kept looking at everything with the rapture of a lover in front of a nice still-life painting. However, when his brother came out of the little house’s front door, holding the tureen with the gnocchi between his hands in a religious fashion, as if it was a sacred vase, and behind him came the teacher, brandishing the little ladle, he sprang up, remembering the attention position, when he was a soldier and the general passed by.

At first, as always happens, a mysterious silence accompanied the meal of the three men, around whom a court of uninvited guests had gathered, that is, the cat and her kittens, the farmer’s dog, and the hens of the house. This company reminded the master of another house, of another family, and the gnocchi seemed hard to him.

They were actually a little hard, but the sauce, married to the abundant cheese, was like a colorful and delicious dress that makes older women beautiful too. Gesuino himself, maybe more than the others, abandoned himself to the delight of swallowing them one by one, after having savored them like sugared almonds. And while the fork grabbed one, the eyes looked at the other, until the plate was empty. At that point, he took a piece of bread to finish everything, but the host was ready to replenish his plate abundantly.

Gesuino sighed, too happy; he took his fork again with a resigned gesture, and he started again. Now, though, he was aware of what was happening around him, and since the dog was looking at him, moving its tail like a begging finger, he
threw a gnocco to the animal. But a little cat was fast enough and caught it.

(from the novel *La fuga in Egitto* 1925)

The scene I am presenting here, taken from the novel *The Flight into Egypt*, is one of the longest and more carefully described cooking scenes. The protagonist is a teacher called Giuseppe di Nicola who, once retired, joins his adoptive son Antonio and meets the servant Ornella, Antonio’s mistress, also desired by two farmers, Proto and Gesuino. The two men, described as Magi, host Ornella when she is going to give birth to “the fault’s son,” and they cook hen in broth and pork for the new mother. Proto and Gesuino are the guests, for whom the teacher cooks the rich and detailed lunch described above. There are several courses, from the ham as appetizer, to the sauce with traditional sautéed lard, butter, onion, and garlic, and above all, the strong first course, with the preparation of the gnocchi, from the mountain of flour, with “a hole like the crater of a volcano,” to the army of little pieces of mixture carved with the index finger and set on the board. The table is enriched by the little yellowish cheese and the bottles full of wine.

From the name of the protagonist, it is soon clear that the novel is not set in Sardinia, and from some landscape descriptions, we may guess that the village where Giuseppe De Nicola arrives is in the inner Romagna, an area known by Deledda after her summer stay in Cervia from the beginning of the Twenties.
Only a female writer (or a writer with cooking abilities) could be so precise in describing the preparation of the gnocchi, thus reinforcing one of Grazie Deledda’s narrative abilities: she is always very accurate and careful in the description of details.