INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, food preparation has been assigned to women, and it figures large among their roles in the home. As females of their species, women are the ones who breastfeed, and they are therefore regarded as food providers par excellence. The image of a woman stirring a spoon in a pot, blurred by the rising steam, belongs to our collective imagination. It is surrounded by a positive aura when the woman is mother and nurturer; but it acquires dark tones when she is called a witch. Therefore the kitchen, where cooking happens, is also a female “place of power,” as through food and the satisfaction of an irresistible primary need, it often exerts influence, directly or indirectly, over the men who sit at the table.

Moving from the anthropological to the exquisitely literary, Banana Yoshimoto in her *Kitchen* has exemplified the importance and power of food in Japanese society, where rites and traditional roles are extremely important.

Isabel Allende’s *Aphrodite* signals a return to life in the true sense of the word. After *Paula*, the soliloquy of a mother whose daughter is in a coma, Allende rediscovers the erotic power of food in *Aphrodite*, and the joy of living that it brings. A community in Puritan Norway can smile again and enjoy the pleasure of gathering together, thanks to Babette’s banquet in Karen Dixen’s marvelous story, appropriately called *Babette’s Feast*. Conviviality as an expression of the joy of life is manifested in identical ways in different
cultures and countries, from Japan to Chile to Denmark, and also to Sardinia.

Cooking, preparing succulent meals, is closely connected to feminine identity, but today, several writers use the metaphor of aphrodisiac food to embellish their male protagonists, to touch them with a dose of narrative curiosity. The popular detective Pepe Carvalho, protagonist of many of the adventures designed by Montalban, and his close relation, Inspector Montalbano, created by our countryman Camilleri, are famous examples of this trend. And what about the unsophisticated taste of Simenon’s Maigret for the food of the homely hostelry?

Women writers have a doubly meaningful relationship with cooking. As women, they soon become acquainted with “domestic” chores, and they learn to cook, for themselves and for others – or, rather, first for others and then for themselves. As writers, they need to appropriate a space that was thought to belong, at least originally, to the masculine sphere and behavior. Communication, especially of the public kind, has pertained to men for far too long, which is what is behind the guilt of many women writers who perceive the time they devote to their intellectual work as stolen from their official feminine activities, and from cooking of course.

We all know of the Brontë sisters, obedient to a strict father who was a Protestant minister; they were used to hiding the scribbled pages of their narrative masterworks under new ribbons of potato peels. Along the same lines, in 1952, Alba De Cespedes published a book that has become
exemplary of this attitude, *The Secret*. Its protagonist, Valeria, writes in the kitchen at night, after tidying up and tucking husband and children in bed; but she hides her “forbidden notebook” because she believes she is neglecting her family.

Unlike Valeria, who burns her notebook at the end of the novel and goes back to being a full-time mother and grandmother, Grazia Deledda succeeded in combining care for her family and writing, her true, great vocation.

Deledda is the only Italian woman to have obtained the Nobel Prize in literature. It was awarded to her for her novels in 1927, for the year 1926. She had been preceded by the “bard,” Carducci, who received it in 1906; then in 1934, it was given to the playwright Pirandello, and later to two more poets, Quasimodo and Montale, respectively in 1954 and 1972. Most recently, in 1997, the Nobel went to another playwright, Dario Fo. The novel, the most approachable of literary forms, almost the “happy medium” between grandiloquent poetry and theatre, was represented by the work of female creativity. After all, storytelling, just like cooking, is almost biologically appropriate to women.

Seven of the youths who choose the themes of the novelettes in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* are women. Scheherazade is another woman who uses her spellbinding narrations to save herself; she also stitches together the story of *One Thousand and One Nights*. And it is always the women who sing their babies to sleep and enchant them with words.
Oral storytelling has been naturally absorbed into women’s written narrative. Women, in fact, originally lived very private lives in their family homes, protected by friends and relatives. Their writing came into its own in diaries and epistolaries, because of their intimacy. Grazia Deledda, for one, left an astounding epistolary: she was writing to famous literati, journalists, publishers, even politicians and aristocratic ladies of her time, as if by doing so she could escape the isolation that threatened to overwhelm her in her native Nuoro at the end of the 19th century.

She was born in Nuoro, the administrative seat of the Barbagia region in central Sardinia, in 1871; at just 17, she published her first story, *Sardinian Blood*, an intense tale of love and death, passion and bandits, just like so many others she wrote when she was a mature writer.

Since she was a little girl Grazia Deledda had been certain that her fate too, like the destiny of most of her characters, was predetermined. Grazia, or Grazietta as her family called her, knew that she was destined to write and to describe her Sardinia and its people, who were often misjudged without appeal, because they were so little known. Even the citation by the Nobel Committee did not consider the stylistic elements of her work, but rather its invaluable contribution to the unveiling of the traditions and customs of a region that despite its attractions remained obscure and therefore more fascinating. Telling the stories of Sardinia was Grazietta’s life and motive, and she prepared for this role from an early age. Many of her letters clearly bear witness to this intent; in one she wrote: “I’ll be 20 very

Like any other writer, Grazia Deledda left a trace of herself in her novels, and towards the end of her life, in her last works, her presence is more evident, as she borrowed many details from real events. In *The Church of Solitude*, the protagonist Maria Concezione has breast cancer, which was to kill the novelist on August 5, 1936.

However *Cosima*, published posthumously, reflects more closely Grazia Deledda’s life. The novel appeared in instalments on *Nuova Antologia*, a journal edited by Antonio Baldini, and the first episode was issued in October 1936. It narrates the story of her life, from childhood to adulthood; her marriage to the public servant Palmiro Madesani, whom she met in Cagliari on her first long journey that would take her away from Nuoro. She then followed him to Rome, where she was to die 30 years later. Grazia’s middle name was Cosima, and this is the name of her fictitious protagonist, which underlines the closeness of fiction to real life. Moreover, the novel’s original title had been *Cosima quasi Grazia*, which openly declares the identity of the character, Cosima, “virtually Grazia” in fact. In these pages, one finds out how strong and precocious was Grazia’s passion for writing; but they also reveal the opposition and diffidence with which she had to contend in her little town, as Nuoro only had 6,000 inhabitants in those days. It could not have been otherwise for a young woman who defied the
traditional role and behavior that were considered proper for a woman in rural, patriarchal Barbagia.

In *Cosima*, one meets the Deledda family. Francesca, the mother, married without love to a much older man, 20 years her senior; she would sit by the fire in the kitchen and complain of her daughter to Proto, the old servant: Grazietta was setting a bad example, and this could harm her younger sisters and seal their destinies as spinsters. Grazia was only 28 when she met her future husband, but in her time she would have been considered a spinster; a shameful but also a dangerous status in a society where men supported the family, and a woman without a man would have run the risk of starvation or servitude.

Grazia, however, was different. She spent her time writing, and soon she could escape feminine chores, such as sewing and cooking, to withdraw into her fantasies, put them into words, and transform them into tales. She was defiant when she sent her stories to magazines for young ladies that were published on the “mainland,” and which were the prototype for the girls’ magazines of today. To her amazement, her first story was printed next to an advertisement for cold meats, and she was sent a little money, which would buy a silk scarf, thus betraying a tiny bit of vanity beneath the rough exterior of the island girl.

Grazia would receive letters from her admirers, readers curious to find out about the life of the writer who, neither married or engaged, yet seemed to know the passion of love intimately, thus causing great scandal among her fellow
citizens, and especially among those monumental busybodies that were her spinster aunts.

She did not let this get to her, though, and while she was cooking according to the ancient and esteemed traditions, or embroidering the family linens, Grazietta looked out of the window and over to the white tips of Mount Ortobene that dominate Nuoro. Another fellow writer and citizen, Salvatore Satta, was to describe the mountain as the “eagle’s nest”: Deledda’s writing too was like a powerful eagle that would take off and travel over the sea to reach the Italian people and show them the customs and the true reality of her folks’ lives.

Like all islanders, Grazia had a strong inclination to travel. She loved Sardinia, but she felt that only by fleeing would she have a way out; it is no wonder that the “great journey” over the sea is also one of the most incisive motifs in her novels, an experience that leaves an indelible mark on her characters.

But writing about Sardinia required the observation of its people, to understand their motives and behaviors, those same ones that in herself she recognized as natural and spontaneous. Deledda decided to write in Italian, the new national language of newly born Italy, which had to be learned as a foreign idiom; because in the home and everywhere she communicated in Sardinian. She also had to find out and record the traditions, the day-to-day life of her people and their history: rituals of life and death, economy, family relations, and all the hopes and trepidations of the Sardinians, of whom she was one.
Driven by her natural curiosity, when she was a little girl Grazia used to ride with her brother Andrea and follow him across pastures and mountains to reach the olive oil mill, and to listen to legends and stories of shepherds and bandits.

In 1896, Count Angelo De Goubernatis, the president of the Italian Folklore Society, appointed her to gather and record the popular traditions of Sardinia. She had just turned 20, and she started to work diligently, sending card after card densely covered with details of beliefs in magic, the use of herbs, and of innumerable rituals poised between superstition and religion, which belonged to that pagan substratum common to Mediterranean civilizations.

Grazia Deledda possessed a deep knowledge of Sardinian culture, which, infused into her writing, rendered her novels original and profound. Her use of the Italian language was equally unique: the Art Nouveau period, in fact, saw the spreading of an artificial literary language, conceited and coquettish, which was light years away from Deledda’s language. The linguistic model of her native Sardinian supported the framework of the national tongue, which after all was only chosen to reach her youthful dream and to let everyone get to know her land, the real Sardinia. No one, not even her countrymen sitting in the parliament in Rome, had succeeded in such a plan.

Grazia Deledda’s “Roman” literary production became a family affair. As her husband retired from his government position, he took on the role of agent, trustworthy and capable, and he secured for her the best contracts from the publishers. Meanwhile their sons, Franz and Sardus, helped
their mother with her writing, which had turned into a valuable source of income. Franz did the donkey work: in 1931, for example, she signed off a reading textbook for elementary schoolchildren, for which her son had collected the material. Franz also collaborated with her on the translation of Balzac’s novel, *Eugène Grandet*.

Within her home, however, Grazia Deledda led a very ordinary, rewarding domestic life. An uncle from Nuoro, a Monsignor of the Catholic Church, who had been suspicious of his niece’s unusual pursuits, was to visit her in Rome and to receive an embroidered stole from Grazietta, who had not lost her talent for feminine crafts.

In her stories, home, and especially the kitchen, is where sentiments storm out and rancor and hatred simmer; but remorse and reparation can also occur here. In the kitchen, social and gender divisions are blurred: the servant sleeps by the fireplace as the mistress of the house makes coffee for her guest (*Reeds in the Wind*). A fleeing bandit enters another kitchen and finds comfort and love with his ex-employer (*Marianna Sirca*). In the kitchen, the warmest room in the cold winters that grip Nuoro, pallets are made, and here, on one of these, death finds old “Uncle” Zua, killed by his “soul daughter” Annesa, who thus consigns herself to a life of remorse for the sake of her lover and master (*The Ivy*).

All those scenes in which Deledda describes a recipe or a traditional meal are never simply adornments. Each of these culinary episodes has two characteristics: the food belongs to the popular tradition of Sardinia, and it is
functional, as these scenes are important to the narrative and to moment the recipe has been included. In the most important of her novels, through the preparation of meals – an element anthropologically and culturally feminine – not only is one able to examine the traditional cuisine of Barbagia’s people, but also one better understands the world created by the novelist.

The food of the Sardinian novels is made with ingredients produced by the land and the people of the island. Today’s nouvelle cuisine is paradoxically not new at all, as it turns to the old traditions and rediscovers “peasant cooking” and the recipes our grandmothers knew and prepared during the war. Society was light years distant from today’s consumerism and excesses then, and women had to cook every day with few resources and fewer ingredients; the only abundant ingredient being imagination. Deledda’s meals belong to the same traditional world, and they appear within a ritual of behavior, an etiquette, that unfortunately has all but disappeared from our societies.

The recipes I have chosen and extracted from her numerous novellas and novels are still popular in Sardinia, but only some of the customs and traditions to which they refer have survived the changes that have taken place in the lives of the islanders.

As I have already said, the scenes of food making in the novels are never simply fillers; instead, they play an important part in the narrative. And the so-called Italian novels prove it even further. Deledda’ wrote thirty odd novels, of which a third are set in the towns and regions of
her biography post-Sardinia, after she left the island to join her husband in Rome in the early 1900s. Rome is the backdrop to *Nostalgia*, where, in 1906, the protagonist Regina is beset by a sense of engulfing loneliness, and she is homesick for her little town Viadana, in the Bassa Padana region. The Madesani family had also lived there at one point, or more exactly in the Cicognara hamlet. Later came *La danza della collana*, published in 1924 and similarly set in the capital; but these are only a couple of the most popular works set in Rome. Of these, *Nostalgia* is especially significative, with its contrast between the simple food of the country town and the opulence of the city.

When Grazia Deledda’s husband, Palmiro Madesani, was growing up, he was helped financially, his studies being funded by a high-ranking serviceman who worked for the government and possessed a farm in Bassa Padana, where Palmiro’s father was the administrator. Every autumn, Grazia and her husband returned to Cicognara, in the Viadana district, after a holiday by the sea, and his family welcomed her with true affection. Today, the window of the writer’s room is still pointed out: there she would have been standing to admire the corner of the Padana valley, which reached the Po river bank. And it was in these places, among people without an ounce of affectation, that she resolved to locate some of her short stories and novels.

The year after her Nobel Prize, she produced *Annalena Bilsini*, which I have used to sample the Padan novels. This is an important work, nearly unique among the rest in that its title is the protagonist’s name, like *Marianna Sirca*. It is
probable that a relative of Palmiro’s was the inspiration for the powerful character of the title: the real Annalena would also be remembered by her family for her vitality and physical presence. In the novel, she prepares polenta, a typical dish from Northern Italy, with great care; and the description of this preparation is so accurate that only an attentive observer and a cook, as Deledda was, could have taken such note.

From this novel, I have extracted convivial scenes and party occasions, and I have made a comparison with episodes from the Sardinian novels. The food on the table is different, of course, and it denotes a different social environment.

Finally, Cervia: since the beginning of the 1920s, after Anzio and Viareggio, Grazia Deledda chose to spend her summer holidays in this Romagna town. Grazia was in love with Cervia, and she was loved back. In fact, a monument was erected in her honor, and the promenade was also named for her: it was the first among the Italian towns to make such a show of admiration for the novelist.

After Cosima, her most autobiographical work is Land of the Wind (1931), one of the very few novels to be narrated in the first person; in its pages, Grazia described her encounter with Palmiro. The setting is Cervia, “the town of the wind,” which recalls her native Sardinia, an island buffeted by winds. In this story, the final banquet, meant as a celebration of a couple of newlyweds, proves the structural importance of those other scenes dominated by food: the numerous courses, the abundant and various dishes, all
watered down by flowing wine, stand in stark contrast with the death scene that follows, which takes place at the same time, and which is consumed in perfect solitude. The dying young Gabriele, whose name was probably a tribute to the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, had been the bride’s first love when she was living in her family home.