This essay is born of the same love for and dedication to our island that both Grazia Deledda and Neria De Giovanni have revealed. It is its purpose to confirm our shared goals in a country, Sardinia, that possesses great value and potential, but that sometimes lacks a common, strong desire to show its best side to the world. Sardinian cuisine, rich and poor, unique and yet universal, also reflects these contradictions, which in some ways define our food and give it an aura of mystery still waiting to be revealed. To this effect, recipes and local products of Sardinia are proudly simple; a simplicity born of poverty that fortunately has turned into sobriety and authenticity. Its richness, therefore, derives from the historical experience of its people, their rituals, behaviors, anecdotes, and from linguistic and cultural influences, which inevitably lends additional value to the recipes of the island. Such quality might well make it unique among other cuisines.

Sardinian food is rather complex, far more than one might expect. Some of its dishes make an appearance on kitchen tables all over the region, but many are recipes that resolutely belong to specific areas or even a single town. Their names are a manifestation of the language varieties  

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present on the island, and they tell the story of different foreign influences. In fact, the names of food and dishes derive from various languages: Spanish, as in *ghisàu*, *bombas*, *cassòla*, or the delicious sweet *guéfus* and *pirichìttus*. *S’azada di Bosa* and *burrida*, on the other hand, derive from Genoese, and *suppas indòradas* from Portuguese. The Arab presence in Sardinia is commemorated by *cascà*, a version of *couscous*, which is still prepared in the picturesque villages of Calasetta and Carloforte. But even this necessarily simplified list would not be complete without *merca*, a name of Punic-Phoenician origins.

Often, identical names are used for different recipes in different locations, of which an example occurs in Cuglieri, where *sa timballa* is a large panada, whereas in the nearby town of Scano Montiferro, it is a rice timbale and a wedding dish. Another such example comes from Nuoro, Deledda’s native town, where *merca* is a kind of salty cheese, while in the coastal town of Cabras, it is a dish of mullet boiled in salted water and served with *ziba*, a herb that grows in marshes. But in this case, the two dishes have good reason to share a name, which etymologically derives from the Phoenician for “salty food.” In Sardinia, however, identical dishes can also bear different names, as is the case with the zeppole pastries, which appear in Deledda’s *Elias Portolu* under the name of *sas cattas*, as they are still known in the area surrounding Nuoro; but in other towns they are called *zipulas* or *zippuasa*. Aside from cultural and linguistic differences, there are other obstacles to a rigorous study of
the Sardinian cuisine, whose recipes have been passed on orally through families that have guarded them jealously, committing to memory approximate quantities of ingredients for portions much larger than is fashionable in today’s catering industry. Besides, many traditional dishes are closely linked to sacred and profane celebrations that are not always common to the various subcultures. Yet, I believe that these complications render our cuisine more intriguing and less predictable, contrary to the belief of those who wish to underestimate it.

The rediscovery of the island’s wines and gastronomy owes a great deal to the works of Sardinian artists who have woven flavors, food, and recipes into the fabric of their work. It is my belief that these authors have represented our cuisine with more clarity and honesty than many of the recipe books still in print. Quite recently I happened to reflect on the “food quotations” of Antonio Garau, the playwright from Oristano: how relevant they are, how well they convey the dietary habits of the people of Sardinia in the 20th century. This is not a unique occurrence, and one is tempted to reread some of Antonio Gramsci’s letters from prison where special foods are remembered, and they betray a pining nostalgia for the flavors of his country: in a letter addressed to his mother in 1927, for example, he wishes for a “banquet” of kulurzones and pardulas and zippulas and pippias de zuccuru. In less suspicious times, the famous actor and singer Maria Carta often talked of traditional recipes on radio and TV programs; she described the curasàu bread, seadas, and panadas, for instance, and she
contextualized these foods within our culture. Another such artist was Peppino Mereu, the poet from Tonara who composed the famous poem for “Nanneddu meu,” his dear friend Nanni Sulis. In fact, in other verses, he praised the torrone (nougat) of his town, and the carapigna (sorbet) from Aritzo, both prepared according to traditional, ancient recipes; both loved in Sardinia and abroad. Sardinian wines have had their share of famous quotations: between 1795 and 1796 a magistrate by the name of Francesco Ignazio Mannu composed the ode “Su patriota sardu a sos feudatarios” (The Sardinian Patriot to the Landowners), and among many precious wines, he remembered the cannonau and the malvasia. The malvasia wine of Sardinia makes another appearance in a novel by Salvatore Mannuzzu, Procedura (Procedure), set in the evocative Bosa, the capital town of Planargia, which is indeed the region of the malvasia.

In this cultural journey through the gastronomy of Sardinia, Grazia Deledda occupies a place of her own: in her books, food and recipes are more than mere quotations. They are slotted into the plot and described consistently, elevating the food and its preparation, the toil required, and the appreciation of those who make and eat it. In her novels, one encounters detailed accounts of her mother’s bread making, from cleaning the wheat and preparing the flour, to making the dough and baking it: these scenes are so vivid, with almost ritual gestures that mark the days of the week in a way I remember from my own childhood, when I watched my mother perform the same actions many years later and in
another region of the island. This proves that in Sardinia some customs and traditions are still alive and thriving.

Preparing and sharing a meal is an important custom among the Sardinians, noted for their hospitality. In The Road to Evil, to quote just one, many are the roasts prepared by the men of the family for special occasions, as tradition dictates, or the ceremonies of coffee and cookies, the latter expertly made by the women. On St Francis of Lula’s feast day, the characters of Elias Portolu celebrate with a lavish lunch where filindèu pasta is the star. Scrupulously handcrafted according to an elaborate method that recalls noodle making, filindèu is in the shape of very fine threads, which are carefully dried and cooked in a traditional meat broth.

The recipes here presented all belong to the culinary tradition of Sardinia, although a new twist might have been added here and there to highlight some local product that is worthy of attention. They are intended as a sampler of the range and complexity of the Sardinian cuisine. There are several traditional dishes from Nuoro, which are also mentioned by Grazia Deledda; but some names and food products are from other regions of the island. The novelist herself did not disdain the various kinds of Sardinian cooking, as evidenced by the vernaccia wine from Salarussa, which makes an appearance in Reeds in the Wind, as well as in some of the short stories of Chiaroscuro. Reflecting the reality of her society, the food of Deledda’s novels is simple and exceptional at the same time, just like the real stuff. This is why it was decided to exclude starters from our list of
dishes, as they do not belong to the traditional gastronomy of the island. Appetizers are a rather recent novelty; in today’s catering industry, they are provided presenting other dishes that lend themselves well as starters. Similarly, a single-dish meal was all that could be afforded once, but in our time, people choose to have only one course in an attempt to adapt to the pace of modern society. This leads us to a further consideration: in the gastronomic landscape of Sardinia, the inevitable challenge between innovation and tradition can only be met with a wise, honest reinterpretation of its cuisine to balance these two essential elements.