

PISTIC, TRADITIONAL FOOD FROM WESTERN FRIULI, N.E. ITALY¹

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Paoletti, Maurizio G., A. L. Dreon, and G. G. Lorenzoni (Dipartimento di Biologia, Università Degli Studi di Padova, Via Trieste, 75-35121 Padova, Italy) *PISTIC, TRADITIONAL FOOD FROM WESTERN FRIULI, N.E. ITALY. Economic Botany* 49(1):26–30. 1995. *In Western Friuli, Italy, there is a small area near the town of Pordenone where an ancient rite of spring is still carried out. This is the preparation of a special dish, known as "pistic," a collection of 56 wild herbaceous meadow and wood plants which are boiled and then sautéed together. This practice is still alive in a few areas of Friuli today and possibly goes back to pre-Roman Celtic cultures in this part of Friuli. The number of herbaceous plants used in this dish is extraordinarily high (56), especially when compared to the low number normally used in other conventional dishes. "Pistic" is therefore important, not only because it represents a quantitatively high use of wild herbs in the diet of the rural population, but also because it reflects environmental awareness, in that the archaic method of naming, identifying and using these plants still exists today. Similar rural practices include the use of "pot herbs" in Great Britain and in France the cooking of "mesclun."*

Le Pistic, un plat traditionnel de l'ouest du Frioule (Nord-est de l'Italie), fait à partir de plus de cinquante plantes sauvages. Dans le Val Colvera, dans l'ouest de Frioule, au nord-est de l'Italie, il existe une petite région, près de la ville de Pordenone où un ancien rituel printanier a toujours cours. Il s'agit de la préparation d'un plat spécial, connu sous le nom de "Pistic," à base de 56 espèces herbacées sauvages des prés et des bois, qui sont bouillies, puis rissolées ensemble. Cette pratique est toujours vivante dans quelques régions du Frioule et il est possible de la retrouver jusque dans les cultures celtique, pre-romaines, qui une et des actives dans cette partie du Frioule. Le nombre d'espèces herbacées utilisées est exceptionnellement élevé (56), spécialement quand on le compare au nombre normalement bas d'espèces utilisées dans d'autres plats. Le Pistic est donc important, non seulement parce qu'il représente un usage important d'herbes sauvages dans le régime des populations rurales, mais aussi parce que la nomenclature archaïque, utilisée encore actuellement pour identifier ces plantes est toujours en usage, reflète une sensibilité à l'environnement.

Key Words: edible weeds; Friuli; northeastern Italy; pre-Roman food preparation; Celtic culture.

In Italy, as in many other industrialized countries, the number of plants used as food is extremely limited (Pimentel and Pimentel 1979). The Italian flora comprises 5599 major plant species (Pignatti 1982) of which only a very limited number are currently used in the modern diet. However, a number of wild noncultivated plant species (up to 96) are utilized to some extent in peasant dishes in Italy (Corbetta 1991).

To increase agricultural sustainability more plants and other organisms have to be considered as possible food. A considerable number of pa-

pers have supported the theory that in order to preserve biodiversity, a diversified food base must be promoted (Williams 1988; Altieri and Merriker 1988; Reid and Miller 1989, Paoletti et al. 1992). As preliminary research with a cultural aim, we felt it was useful to examine a vegetable dish which is prepared in Val Colvera (pre-Alpine zone of Friuli Venezia Giulia) where it is called "pistic." This dish is prepared at the beginning of spring, using the new leaves and shoots of certain wild plants found in meadows and woods. The plants are collected, sorted, cleaned and thoroughly washed in running water. They are then boiled for a few minutes, drained and sautéed in a pan, with butter, garlic and small pieces of lard. This dish is not exclusive to Val

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Colvera: it is also found (under other names) in Carnia ("frita"), Pinzano al Tagliamento ("lidùm"), and Cividale del Friuli ("litùm"). Our research aims, above all, to establish what plants, and how many of them, are currently used in Val Colvera in this dish, because, while there are publications on the subject as regards other areas of Friuli (Rieppi 1941; Costantini 1941), there appears to be nothing on Val Colvera. Furthermore, we have tried more generally to trace the origin of this Friulian tradition, based on interviews, observations and historical and etymological references.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

We (A.L.D.) interviewed 10 elderly peasants who are life-long residents of the area (catchment area of Frisanco, province of Pordenone, Val Colvera, northeastern Italy) and whose families have always followed this alimentary tradition. On short walks with these people we picked the plants they indicated and the specific plant name given was transcribed. The material gathered was determined using systematic keys as references (Zangheri 1976; Pignatti 1982).

DISCUSSION

The data obtained show that up to 56 plant species are used in Val Colvera in *pistic*. Table 1 gives the list of plants used. In Val Colvera, however, none of the *pistic* plants are cultivated. Only three species (from the list in Table 1) are under cultivation in various European countries (De Rougement 1990).

1. *Carum carvi*: mainly the fruits are used to aromatize meat and oven-baked products. Also the fresh sprouts are used for salads.
2. *Rumex acetosa*: the wild form of which has given origin to larger varieties. Its leaves are used in the kitchen in the preparation of soups and as an accompaniment to white meat or fish.
3. *Taraxacum officinale*: cultivated in some places in Europe (De Rougement, 1990).

In addition, in various European countries *Fragaria vesca* and *Rubus ulmifolius* are cultivated for their fruits (not for the vegetative part which instead is used for *pistic*). Up to today, this ethnobotanical inheritance, *pistic*, comprises only less than 10% of all cultivated plants.

Origin of Pistic

Among the names given to the plants used in these dishes in Friuli, there are some which may be considered of Celtic origin (Pellegrini and Zamboni, 1982). These are:

Galium mollugo: *revala*, perhaps from the Celtic *roudo*: reddish.

Clematis vitalba: *blaudin*, which certain authors give as Celtic *blandonna*.

Legousia speculum-veneris: *brucuncesare*, compound plant name from Celtic *brucus*: brushwood.

Rubus ulmifolius: *barac*, from Celtic *barros*: bush.

Humulus lupulus: *urticon*, *vulticon*, perhaps derived by simple morphological evolution from (*re*)*voluticione* and therefore to be associated (together with *revertis*, and *lovertis* of northern Italy in general) with Gallo-Italian *livertizio* (Pellegrini and Zamboni 1982).

Tamus communis: *vulticon*, the same applies as above.

The origin of this herbal food tradition obviously, cannot be recent, for as Rieppi noted with regard to *litùm* ". . . the healthful and tasty *litùm* seems a very ancient tradition among country-folk, as the Latin poem *Moretum*, attributed to Virgil, would seem to show . . ." (Rieppi 1941). We might attempt to place this tradition within a more limited timespan than that given by Rieppi. What are the implications if it were a Roman custom brought to Friuli by the first Roman settlers? If we consider the European distribution of the plants (Pignatti 1982) used in these dishes we note that in Italy, in particular, they are found only in the northernmost regions (Pignatti 1982). Therefore it may be presumed that those limited species at least were unknown to the Roman colonists before they reached the north of Italy. It would be logical to think that they learned the use of the plants from the local inhabitants. We suggest that these plants could have been already used by the indigenous populations or by those who had already settled in the area before the Roman Colonists. A hypothesis may therefore very cautiously be put forward that this tradition originated among the Celtic populations along the Alpine Chain, or their ancestors from beyond the Alps.

During our analysis of the names of the plants used in these dishes, we noticed how some of

TABLE 1. PLANTS USED AS FOOD IN VAL COLVERA, GIVING THE PARTS OF THE PLANT EATEN AND HOW PREPARED. THE NAME "PISTIC" REFERS EXCLUSIVELY TO THE COOKED MIXTURE OF DIFFERENT PLANTS.

Plant species	Preparation of plant part**	
	Cooked	Raw
1 <i>Aposeris foetida</i> (L.) Less	Lf	Bl
2 <i>Aristolochia pallida</i> Willd.	Lf	
3 <i>Aruncus dioicus</i> (Walter) Fernald	Spr	
4 <i>Bellis perennis</i> L.	Lf	
5 <i>Campanula trachelium</i> L.	Lf	
6 <i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i> (L.) Medicus	Lf	
7 <i>Cardamine flexuosa</i> With.	Lf	
8 <i>C. hirsuta</i> L.	Lf	
9 <i>Cardaminopsis halleri</i> (L.) Hayek	Lf	
10 <i>Carlina acaulis</i> L.		Bl
11 <i>Carum carvi</i> L.	Lf	Se
12 <i>Centaurea nigrescens</i> Willd.	Lf	
13 <i>Chenopodium album</i> L.	Lf	
14 <i>C. bonus-henricus</i> L.	Lf	
15 <i>C. polyspermum</i> L.	Lf	
16 <i>Cirsium oleraceum</i> (L.) Scop	Lf	
17 <i>Clematis vitalba</i> L.	Spr	
18 <i>Crepis capillaris</i> (L.) Wallr.	Lf	Lf
19 <i>C. setosa</i> Hall.	Lf	
20 <i>Erigeron annuus</i> (L.) Pers.	Lf	
21 <i>Fagus sylvatica</i> L.		Lf
22 <i>Filipendula vulgaris</i> Moench	Lf	
23 <i>Fragaria vesca</i> L.	Lf	Fr
24 <i>Galium aristatum</i> L.	Lf	
25 <i>G. mollugo</i> L.	Lf	
26 <i>Hypochoeris maculata</i> L.	Lf	Lf
27 <i>H. radicata</i> L.	Lf	Lf
28 <i>Lamium purpureum</i> L.	Lf	
29 <i>Leontodon hispidus</i> L.	Lf	
30 <i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i> Lam.	Lf	
31 <i>Myosotis arvensis</i> (L.) Hill	Lf	
32 <i>Ornithogalum pyrenaicum</i> L.	Lf, Bl	
33 <i>Oxalis acetosella</i> L.	Lf	Lf
34 <i>Papaver somniferum</i> L.	Lf	
35 <i>Phyteuma spicatum</i> L.	Lf, Bl	
36 <i>Plantago lanceolata</i> L.	Lf	
37 <i>P. major</i> L.	Lf	
38 <i>P. media</i> L.	Lf	
39 <i>Polygonum persicaria</i> L.	Lf	
40 <i>Primula acaulis</i> (L.) Hill	Lf	Fl, Lf
41 <i>Ranunculus ficaria</i> L.	Lf	Lf
42 <i>R. repens</i> L.	Lf	
43 <i>Rubus ulmifolius</i> Schott	Spr	Fr
44 <i>Rumex acetosa</i> L.	Lf	Lf
45 <i>R. obtusifolius</i> L.	Lf	
46 <i>Ruscus aculeatus</i> L.	Lf	
47 <i>Salvia pratensis</i> L.	Lf	
48 <i>Silene alba</i> (Miller) Krause	Lf	
49 <i>S. dioica</i> (L.) Clairv.	Lf	
50 <i>S. vulgaris</i> (Moench) Gorcke	Lf	
51 <i>Sonchus asper</i> (L.) Hill	Lf	

TABLE 1. CONTINUED.

Plant species	Preparation of plant part**	
	Cooked	Raw
52 <i>S. oleraceus</i> L.	Lf	
53 <i>Stellaria media</i> (L.) Vill.	Lf	
54 <i>Tamus communis</i> L.	Spr	
55 <i>Taraxacum officinale</i> Weber	Lf	Lf
56 <i>Tragopogon pratensis</i> L.	Lf	
57 <i>Urtica dioica</i> L.	Lf	
58 <i>Veronica beccabunga</i> L.		Lf
59 <i>Viola mirabilis</i> L.	Lf	

* Collector's numbers 1-59 preceding plant names are those of A. L. Dreon; Padova University, Orto Botanico herbarium numbers not available at time of publication.

** Fl = flowers, Lf = leaves, Fr = fruit, Bl = blossoms, Spr = sprouts, Se = seeds.

them belong to Celtic stratum. The names of wild fruits which have a certain importance in the human diet are also interesting, for example: *Rubus saxatilis*, *Rubus idaeus*, *Rubus ulmifolius*, *Fragaria vesca*, *Viburnum lantana*, *Amelanchier ovalis* Medicu, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, *Vaccinium myrtillus*. The names of the fruits of these plants are generally of very ancient origin; some are pre-Indoeuropean. Of particular interest is *Rubus ulmifolius* the fruits of which are often called by names which go back to pre-Indoeuropean *mugia* (Pellegrini and Zamboni 1982), while the name *bar* or *barac* from Indoeuropean Celtic *barros* ("bush") is used to indicate the plant and is therefore more recent. The receptacles of *Fragaria vesca* have names that go back to pre-Indoeuropean *mag* (Pellegrini and Zamboni 1982) while the name of the plant is composed of the name of the fruit and a generic term (e.g., strawberry plant, strawberry leaf). Both the young shoots of *Rubus ulmifolius*, and the leaves of *Fragaria vesca* are used in *pistic*. Perhaps it would not be farfetched to suggest that the two terminologies, an older one for the fruit and a more recent one for the plant, reflect two different associations with the land—a nomadic relationship, covering large areas and based on a hunting and gathering economy, and another, more permanent one based on a more sophisticated concept of alimentation, capable of exploiting the resources of the area.

A very high percentage of the plants used in *pistic* (67%) and *litùm* (70%) grow in mown meadows, in cultivated fields and close to human settlements. The rest grow in largely undisturbed areas. The depopulation of rural areas which has come about since the last World War has meant

the abandonment of traditional agricultural practices based on animal-rearing, mowing and cultivation of small farms. It is obvious, then, that this has determined the disappearance of those plants the existence of which is linked with, and subordinate to, the work of man.

In Val Colvera, for example, the fields which were once regularly mown during the year are now overgrown with the graminaceous plant *Deschampsia caespitosa* Beauv. which hampers the growth of those plants used in *pistic*.

It is therefore possible that this culinary habit is associated with stable early farming settlements. An early mixed agriculture in Europe has been called the "Campi di Urne Culture" of Central Europe from the Thirteenth Century B.C. on. This culture was the first of the three phases that delineate the appearance of the Celts in Europe. The subsequent phases are the "Hallstatt Culture" (from the VIII Cen. B.C. on) and the "La Tène Culture" (from the V Cen. B.C. on). Those populations that settled in West Lombardy at the end of the 2nd Millenium and integrated with pre-existent pre-Indoeuropean Ligurians (thus giving rise to the "Golasecca Culture" which characterized the region for almost a millenium (Piovan 1986)) probably belonged to the "Campi di Urne Culture."

In Friuli, the presence of the "Campi di Urne Culture" has recently come to light in the town of Montereale Valcellina where wooden dwelling-structures have been found. The pottery found there belongs to the typology of this culture (Vitri 1990). In a small necropolis, datable around the end of VIII Cen. B.C., discovered in the same area, the method of burial and the objects which accompanied the dead show that there was con-

tact with the populations of the Alpine Chain (Golasecca, Trentino, N. Veneto) and with those of Central Friuli, strongly linked to the Austrian and Slovene Hallstatt Culture (Vitri 1990).

CONCLUSION

The number of plant species used is very high among the Neotropical aborigines, (Williams 1988; Alarcon Gallegos 1988) and this must certainly have also been the case among other populations in the past. The Celts, for example, gathered numerous wild herbs (Kruta 1986). Plant names which have the same origin as those in Friuli are to be found in several places in the Alpine area (Pellegrini and Zamboni 1982) as, indeed, might be expected from the historical and archaeological testimonies confirming the presence of the Celts in these areas (Mansuelli 1978; Piovan 1986). Future research will, on the one hand, have to go deeper into the study of local communities as regards their use of edible plants, to then map out a distribution chart for the whole of Friuli Venezia Giulia, and, on the other hand, it will have to extend investigation into other Italian regions which, for the reasons given above, might also have similar customs. Above all, links should be sought in those countries beyond the Alps that are considered the Celts' place of origin, and in those areas of Europe where, for various reasons, their customs have lived on. Even without these links, however, and without the confirmation of the hypothesis put forward, this tradition still remains of high cultural value. It should also be stressed that such a wide range of edible plants constitutes a noteworthy genetic reserve which could be considered for the creation of new, local vegetables, to be grown on small scale farms. The wild plants used in these dishes should be studied in more depth and the results of these studies should be made known in order to create market demand. Sustainable agricultural systems can be more easily implemented by using the indigenous biodiversity (Paoletti and Pimentel 1992).

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