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Melassa

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Melassa takes...

where both the departure station and the arrival station can be seen at once. It becomes easy, then, to travel back and forth in the blink of an eye. You will be confused: what seems new, recent here, the fruits of “progress”, are outdated for the rest of the world. What is deemed invariable and ancient is a novelty out there. Learning lessons is futile, the railway bends on itself and takes you back to when you lacked knowledge and when you were vulnerable to the cunning words of fanatics. Melassa disjoints time. And warps it. It also takes place. Takes a place and destroys it. It displaces. And it takes your energy, too. Melassa takes shape. The most beautiful, enticing landscape, appetizing, up for grabs. It can change, at least for the strangers, the tourists, and their already made-up minds and eyes. It takes the appearance of an attractive mountain, seductive, and accommodating. Takes the will out of you. These are the workings of Melassa, logic born of the muddled off-center, where the past and the future are equally unknown and all you can do is wait. Melassa takes many forms. The one we are talking about right here also takes many names: Verbania, Verbanò, VCO, VB, the valleys, the mountains, the Alps, the lake region, the lake area, home, the place up North no not East that’s Trentino yes near Switzerland no we don’t speak German hahahah an hour from Milan no in the other direction yes, right, in the region of Turin. And sometimes, it’s the inhabitants of Melassa who do the taking. During WWII the mountain dwellers of Melassa would intercept the airdrops destined for the Allies troops and keep the content for themselves, including lump sums of dollars in cash. Everyone in the family had to keep the secret so it could mature into gold, into something real. “Don’t tell anyone. No, not even your teacher.” After the end of the war, suspiciously lavish homes were being built all over the valleys. Some particularly god-fearing citizens preferred a holier destination for their unexpected fortunes: the Church. Many of the chapels and parish churches that started construction in the 50s have been financed by families who intercepted the airdrops, known to them as “lanci”. Who knows if the donation cleaned their souls from the sin of theft? It is said that many families still hold on to some of those riches and preserve them for the future (which in Melassa, as you should know by now, is also somewhat the past). Such are the tales of Melassa. This is only one of the many stories about ill-fated rebellion, about wasted dumb luck, about fortuitous prosperity that fell through the cracks of rigid military organization and into the hungry foginess of Melassa, and then back into the same old cauldron feeding the Western-Christian system. Because this place, this sticky, wonky time-machine of a place does it so well: scrambling categories and mixing convictions, confusing timelines and laws. And no, not in a generative, disobedient manner (we wish...), no. Just in the way an agent of chaos would play, like tarot cards, like dropping dollar bills from an airplane hoping they’ll reach who needs them most.

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JUNE

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MAY

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APRIL

Mountain legends

Some say they were outcasts. They might have wanted to evade societal obligations and found a worthy companion in each other. Maybe, as the villagers still whisper, they were a couple. The legend lives on, even after more than 100 years: la vegia dal balm – the old woman in the cave – had abandoned her husband and children and hid in a cave just at the edge of the forest. A witch, a rebel, a selfish and likely unhinged woman, who preferred the company of her goats, wild beasts, and the unbearable cold of the cave to the constrictions of domestic life. She wasn't alone in the wilderness, though. She had a partner, a man enchanted by her, or just defiant enough to follow another restless soul in her cave in the Nibbio Valley and live with her, far from civilization and his own family. Like weasels or hedgehogs, they kept each other company for many years. Listening to the rivulets as they trickled into every corner of the cave in spring, freezing into slippery ice puddles in winter, and warming each other up as best they could. Baffled and betrayed, the people left in the village made them into a cautionary tale or a curious myth that managed to reach national notoriety through the pages of a newspaper. Many a brave – and bothered – relatives tried to convince them to reunite with society, some say even one of the man's children tried to persuade his father to join their family, to no avail. One day the man died, and the vegia brought him to the village, asking he be buried in consecrated land. Her wish was granted and after a short permanence amid civil society, she returned to her cave. They never faltered, and their will never swayed, though they knew that subtracting themselves from their roles, their duty meant having to endure the cold, eat roots, and the scorn of the more diligent. Do you think they ever missed us?



It's time for...



Italianità – vaguely defined as “participation in the heritage of culture and civilization attributed to Italy”– is fed by various myths often connected to food, ingredients, or products uniquely produced in Italy. As effective as it is as a tool for nationalistic propaganda (sometimes even evoking autarchic hopes previously heard from infamous political figures) it does not reflect any real cultural identifier or norm. For example, while bread and pizza are an essential symbol of italianità, white bread was traditionally not part of the Alpes diet. In such cold climates, wheat could not be grown successfully, making buckwheat and then rye preferred because of their superior resistance. The traces of the cultivation of these crops are still clearly visible along the mountains of the area. In Montescheno, a small town in the Antrona Valley, this rural tradition is celebrated every year in June (in 2024 it took place on the first two days of the month) with the Rye Festival (Sagra della Segale). The initiative is meant to teach children about the cultivation of rye and ancient culinary traditions and it only started quite recently. Celebrations of the gifts of nature that undoubtedly took place in ancient times have taken the form of educational programs, with all the scientific authority to back them up.

DID YOU KNOW?

In one of his letters to a colleague, the historian Marc Bloch exposed the “marmalade dilemma”. At the beginning of the XX century, every grandma in France would make homemade marmalade: it was a staple, a truism, that marmalade was French, pretty much eternal, common, and indispensable. But how truly typical can a sugar-heavy product be, if sugar was an expensive and rare ingredient for most of France's history? Typical and traditional are tricky terms. What makes something typical? How long does it need to be known, made, and consumed by a people for it to belong to their cultural heritage? One of the most productive tea plantations in Europe is situated in the field around the village of Premosello: the climate conditions (persistent rain all year round) and acid soil in particular. The first studies and research efforts, that eventually culminated in the successful production of green tea in the area, were initiated in the '30 in Pavia in an attempt to realize autarchy under Fascism. The tea plantation may only have begun production in 2017, but what's more typically Italian than the quest for autarchy?

Ingredients

For the biga:

- 20 grams whole-wheat rye flour
- 120 grams of manitoba
- 70 grams of water
- 3.5 grams fresh brewer's yeast

For the dough:

- 350 grams whole-wheat rye flour
- 100 grams of manitoba flour
- 350 grams of water



a recipe from grandma's pantry

Black bread owes its color (and name) to the buckwheat or rye flour from which it is made. Until around a century and a half ago, it was not common to make bread at home. It was typically made once or twice a year in communal ovens by the whole community. Sometimes people would use the residual heat from the cooking of the bread to cook some other goods, for example putting dried fruits in the dough. When the bread was done it would be then stored on special grates suspended from the ceiling to prevent it from being eaten by rodents. Black bread is quite expensive and rare nowadays, especially the one made in Coimo (which was once an autonomous municipality and now a hamlet of Druogno) which is recognized as one of the most sought-after typical products of the Vigezzo Valley and the entire Ossola region. So much so that it has been awarded the DOP (Protected Designation of Origin) mark, a protection granted only to foods whose quality characteristics depend essentially on the territory in which they are produced. Such a denomination anoints nourishment originally universal and communal with a new veneer of identitarian sanctity and patriotism. No food is safe from this nationalistic frenzy. This bread, with its brown dough and brown crust, was once made using buckwheat flour, while today it is kneaded with whole-grain rye flour with a small addition of wheat, water, salt and natural sourdough starter called “biga”.