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The Amatriciana per Amatrice Campaign: Reflections on Food, Solidarity, and the Earthquake in Central Italy

Elisa Ascione and Michael A. Di Giovine

In the early hours of August 24, 2016, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake rocked Central Italy. Its epicenter lay below small medieval towns on the mountainous border of four regions—Umbria, Latium, Abruzzi, and The Marches. The earthquake was so intense that it was felt from Bologna to Naples, and soon the world would awake to the previously unknown town of Amatrice flattened into a pile of dust and rubble. Bearing the brunt of the earthquake, Amatrice lost 236 lives that day; another 51 deaths were reported in Arquata del Tronto and 11 in Accumoli, as well.

Together with rescue teams organized by the Italian State, a multitude of volunteers spontaneously organized themselves, sending goods, money, and medicine to relief efforts in the affected areas. Indeed, earthquakes have a destabilizing effect on communities, but they are also events that characterize change and mobilize different kinds of work, both material and symbolic (see, for example, Silvia Pitzalis' recent Italian-language book).



One of the most significant spontaneous solidarity movements following this earthquake had food at its center: the “*Amatriciana per Amatrice*” campaign, proposed on the internet by a blogger, and then publically applauded and sponsored by Carlo Petrini, president of the Slow Food Movement. Long hailed as one of the quintessential dishes of the Roman region of Latium that was impacted in the earthquake, *spaghetti all’amatriciana* consists of long spaghetti in a sauce based on olive oil, tomatoes, white wine and *guanciale* (pork cheek). Importantly, its name comes from the town of Amatrice, which has jealously guarded its recipe against imitators; once, the mayor even sued MasterChef Italia’s Carlo Cracco for divulging an inauthentic recipe for the dish. Ironically, when the earthquake struck, Amatrice was in the final days of preparation for its *amatriciana sagra*, an annual festival celebrating the dish.

The “Amatriciana per Amatrice” movement began by encouraging restaurants across Italy to put *amatriciana* on their menus and encourage customers to consume it in solidarity; restaurant owners would also donate €2 of each dish sold to rescue efforts. This was then taken up by voluntary associations and community groups, which organized *amatriciana* feasts in public settings like town

piazas for fundraising purposes. The movement has also spread abroad, and an interactive map was created to aid customers find a participating restaurant from New York to Scotland.

Yet this movement is not without its tensions as it is claimed by different groups. Such phenomena push actors to debate and negotiate the fundamental cultural components of the dish. What is important? What should be preserved? Can food unite people in a time of crisis, or is it a means to state particular identity claims—as food so often is in Italy?

In the Umbrian capital city of Perugia, which fortunately was not damaged in the earthquake, people have attended those events to show concern and to donate money; participants have said that the act of eating together with others has been a way to share feelings of mourning and loss, creating a sense of identity and intimacy with those that have been affected by the nearby earthquake. One cultural association in Perugia, which aims to promote the revitalization of public spaces through food and small scale, local production and agriculture, took part in the campaign, cooking *gnocchi all'amatriciana* one night in the main square. Vats of Italian potato dumplings smothered in *amatriciana* sauce were sold to patrons in Perugia's piazza, and the organization donated all of the proceeds (3,850€) to volunteer groups working for reconstruction in the affected area. Yet the chef and organizer, "Sergio," said this event was intended to foster solidarity not only with the earthquake victims, but with people around the world who have lost their homes and security at the hands of catastrophic events:

We've come here in the main piazza with pots and pans to cook this famous dish based on tomatoes, onion, bacon, pepper and a lot of love. This dish represents Italy abroad, and this country has a lot of love to give, really wants to have a sense of community, and wants a comeback. We eat this dish in the piazza thinking about those populations that do not have a kitchen and a stove anymore, but not only in Italy, also in Syria and in those places where there are conflicts. Ours was a conflict given by Nature, but we, as humans, are so stupid that we create conflicts ourselves.

However, the same processes also may serve to reinforce localism, as illustrated by the case of "Antonio" a restaurant owner in Perugia. His family is from Amatrice, and clearly "*Amatriciana* is a serious thing" for him; he once challenged Carlo Cracco to an *amatriciana* cook-off against his grandmother, in a symbolic assertion of *amatriciana* authenticity. After the earthquake, Antonio also joined the "*Amatriciana per Amatrice*" campaign, but while he's pleased that there have been many solidarity events in Perugia, he was annoyed that some organizers haven't followed the original recipe. For him, the often subtle changes are more significant than they might appear, and represent a greater threat to his community's collective heritage:

The risk, for such small places, is of course that they've lost hundreds of lives, but also that they could lose their identity. Holding onto *Amatriciana* is like an act of personal defense. If my granny, for example, has a guest at home for dinner, she will always cook *Amatriciana*; it's the first dish that she would cook: you have to know the dish, it's a way for her to tell you who she is, and *guai a dire che non ti piace*—don't you dare to say that you don't like it! She would go crazy!



Norcina per la Solidarietà

Amatriciana per Amatrice has also triggered a sort of regional competition, stimulating other groups to also focus on their typical dishes for creating solidarity, as well as for promotional purposes. That is the case of “Norcina for solidarity,” which served to collect money for reconstruction efforts in Norcia by serving its quintessential pasta with a sausage, mushroom and cream sauce. But it was also specifically conceived as a way to re-attract, through the seductions of food, those tourists who fled Umbria after the earthquake. “We are Umbrian; we should also take care of our people in need, as well as our traditional dishes,” said the organizer.

The flurry of activity—some of it competitive—in utilizing food to mobilize people demonstrates the core relationship that Italian identity has with food. This was not overlooked by the irreverently satirical French magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, whose insulting images of Muslims prompted last year’s tragic terrorist attack at its head offices in Paris. In response to the earthquake, the magazine published a cartoon depicting “earthquakes the Italian way” with the three severely damaged Italian towns portrayed as commonly eaten pastas in France; one, clearly depicting Amatrice, shows people under ruins as if they were layers of lasagna. Italians were outraged by this cartoon, publicly denouncing what they perceived as a tasteless and “irresponsible” act. Doubling down on their stereotyping, the newspaper answered with another cartoon saying that the Mafia, not *Charlie Hebdo*, built their houses—identifying the totality of the nation with organized crime. These tensions reveal that, even in emergency situations, food is never just a biological necessity, and heritage food is used to mobilize identity claims and responses at different levels.

Literally minutes after we submitted this post on October 26, two more earthquakes rocked the region in quick succession. While there have been literally thousands of small after-shocks, these two were quite shallow and strong, and caused more damage to other mountain villages and towns in the region, but fortunately no lives were lost. The longer-term effect these new quakes will have on both the social fabric and the foodways of this area are uncertain, and we will be following these developments as they unfold. Will the *Amatriciana per Amatrice* movement intensify, take on new meaning, or perhaps dissipate in favor of other more tangible efforts? Will this new disaster, which once again affected the city of Norcia, strengthen the nascent *Norcina per Norcia* movement? Will it spawn new food-based movements for solidarity, for food security, or to draw domestic and foreign tourists back to the land?

For more information on the *Amatriciana per Amatrice* program, including ways to participate, see: <http://www.unamatricianaperamatrice.it/english-version/>.

For CNN’s list of charities and NGOs to whom you can donate, see: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/24/world/iyw-italy-earthquake-how-to-help/index.html>

To donate to the Italian Red Cross: <https://www.ammado.com/fundraiser/italy-eq/donate>

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