Kebab Wars

George De Stefano (February 11, 2009)



Are ethnic food bans a sign of "gastronomic racism?"



has as its agriculture minister an ignorant xenophobe who won't permit a slice of pineapple to pass

his lips?

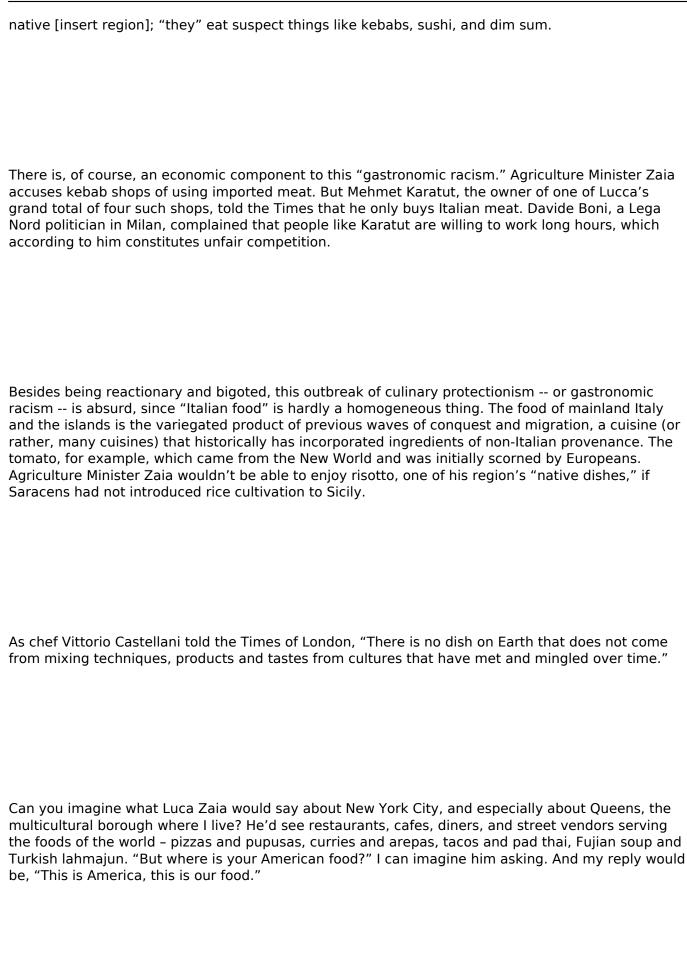
Though incredible, it's quite believable, as these are the sorts of people that make up Premier Silvio Berlusconi's ruling "People of Liberty" coalition, an unsavory assortment of nativists, unregenerate fascists, Vatican errand boys and corporate crooks, a good number of them mobbed-up.

Not surprisingly, it's the Lega Nord that's behind a trend that critics in Italy have dubbed "gastronomic racism." I suppose it was inevitable that, after demonizing immigrants themselves as a leading cause of Italy's ills, the nativists would attack their cultures. And cuisine, as Italians well know, is a central component of culture and identity.

There's a fierce, and often quite ugly, struggle going on in Italy right now over culture and identity, as a land that poor people once fled is attracting poor people from other countries. Most of these new arrivals are of non-European backgrounds, from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, as well as Eastern Europe. For quite a few Italians, mainly but not only those in the north, the immigrants represent a threat, an alien invasion. They're coming into an old, tradition-bound country where, until quite recently, Sicilians and other southern Italians represented the Third World Other.

(And maybe they still do. Massimo Di Grazia, a government official in Lucca, when asked if any "ethnic" cuisines would be allowed within his city's walls, said that French food was no problem. But he was uncertain about cucina siciliana, because the island's food incorporated Arab influences.)

One response to the arrival of so many immigrants in Italy has been to tighten the borders of culture, to define what is Italian and what is not, with "Italian" signifying all that is good and pleasant, and all else consigned to the category of "foreign," that is, strange, alien, bad. "We" eat "the dishes of my



So Minister Zaia, live a little. Try some kebabs. They can be great. Kind of like spiedini, which I'm sure you've heard of, even if they don't come from the Veneto. Then have a few slices of pineapple for dessert. Your world won't fall apart.

But then again, maybe it might. Which wouldn't be a bad thing at all.

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