

OH, CUISINE!

A Touch of Israel in Rome

by Anthony Burgess

ONLY EUROPEAN Communists are said to know the best European restaurants. Reactionaries like me eat at home or in snack bars or, at best, in such Paris hash joints as the Self Grill, which sounds as if it ought to be owned by Saint Laurent—sorry, Saint Lawrence. But I found one of the great restaurants of Europe in the Roman Jewish quarter when I was researching a certain historic case of incest.

In the Roman ghetto (note: in Italy *ghetto* has properly no connotation of cramped ostracism; it is merely a truncation of *borghetto*, or "little town") stands a little square called Monte Cenci, on the site of the Circus built by Gaius Flaminius in 220 B.C. The Cenci family lived here until they virtually wiped themselves out toward the end of the sixteenth century. The notorious Francesco Cenci fell in love with his daughter, Beatrice—or so she claimed. His alleged gross demands on her person resulted in his murder at the hands of bravos hired by the lovely Beatrice, her two brothers, and her mother. Beatrice was executed for the crime, and the name Cenci left the records of the living and entered myth—as detailed, for instance, in the little-performed tragedy *The Cenci*, by Mrs. Shelley's husband. The Palazzo Cenci now houses someone unglamorous but unincestuous; the chapel facing has long since been deconsecrated. Shedding cheerfulness on the grim *piazzetta* is the Piperno a Monte Cenci. Piperno is a Jewish name; this is a Jewish restaurant. Mario Piperno, its founder, is long dead, and today the restaurant is in the possession of the Mazzarella family.

The Roman Jews have never known religious persecution from Romans. When Mussolini got at them it was chiefly because they were socialists and intellectuals, and the Nazis were, of course, of a pasta totally diverse, to use an Italian idiom. The Roman Jew speaks Roman, not Yiddish or Ladino, and regards the Roman Christian as a kind of younger brother. Roman Jews visit Tel Aviv and Jerusalem but are glad to get back to their native city. They have little against the pope, since he is a sort of Roman, but they will not accept Jesus Christ, who never came near the place. Their cuisine is essentially Roman, but there is one dish—

the speciality of the ristorante Piperno—that they call Jewish.

In 1909 Romeo Marchetti, editor of *Il Pupazzetto*, a satirical magazine, established at the Piperno the custom of holding an annual "artichoke dinner"—a custom that lasted until his death in 1962. The dinner was held in spring and was regarded as a ritual greeting the return of the blessed season. Toasts were made; the finest items of the Roman cuisine were consumed. The crown of the feast was *carciofi alla giudea*—artichokes cooked in the Jewish manner. This dish is still Piperno's pride. The artichokes come from the Roman Campagna; they are round, fleshy, and tender. After being plunged into seething oil, they emerge looking like chrysanthemums, aromatic, full of the delicate gust of spring itself.

I was last at ristorante Piperno—horror of Orthodox horrors—at Yom Kippur in 1977 and found things in full swing: gilt, mirrors, light streaming in on the piled crustaceans and globe artichokes, no incrustations of signed photographs or ancient heirlooms of the house. The padrone, Mazzarella, was affable but not effusive. He had reserved a place for my car in the Cenci shadows; an old man in a peaked cap prowled the car park devotedly. Cleanliness, light, order, efficiency. I ate the following:

A mixed antipasto of fresh shellfish, then *zuppa di verdura*. The Anglo-Saxon notion of a vegetable soup is dishwasher smelling of cabbage, but the Piperno's *zuppa* is a meal in itself, eaten with fresh, crusty Roman bread—a rich, thick agglomeration of all the greens available in the Italian early autumn. Then I sampled various pasta dishes—fettuccine with an aromatic meat sauce; spaghetti with tiny fresh clams; ravioli with creamy ricotta, that delicate curd dish found all over Italy. My main course was *spiedino di mazzancolle*—spit-roasted estuary prawns—with a *contorno* of exquisitely sauced mushrooms, or *funghi porcini*. I also sampled my companion's stewed oxtail and *merluzzo di paranza*—literally, netted codling. And of course there were the *carciofi alla giudea*. Now room had to be found for the dessert speciality. Take a breath before I name it.

It is called *le palle di nonno fritte*, a name that enshrines a notion perhaps cruder than that of Montana's son of a

bitch stew but which is, unlike that American offering, redeemed by the refined delicacy of the dish itself: a flaky pastry filled with cream and homemade plum preserves, all of which is dropped into boiling fat for an instant, then served very hot.

The wines are not the most distinguished in the world, but Rome does not go in for the wine snobbery of Paris. We drank a fine cold Pinot Grigio from the Venetian hinterland and a Trieste Bianco that James Joyce would have relished, terming it—in allusion to its color only—*orina divina*, or divine urine. The Italian, and French, habit of drinking a good mineral water with the meal—since wine is for taste, not thirst—is a healthful one. We drank the best *acqua minerale* that Rome affords—an Etruscan one from Nepi—but all Roman waters are good. The American superstition of avoiding tap water in Italy continues, but such water is mostly only spring water unbottled. You can get a fine clear glassful at the Piperno, but I prefer something that brings up the wind.

The waiters are efficient, knowledgeable, and if you wish them to be, friendly. Since my last experience in America, I prefer to keep my waiters at a distance. I went into the dining room of the William Penn in Pittsburgh and sat down at a table. An aged waiter ambled toward me, sat down opposite with a creak of tired bones, then said, "What can I get you, my friend?" None of that here. Don't just stroll into the Piperno. It's not large. It has only three or four small outdoor tables in fine weather; though the interior is sufficiently, if not excessively, roomy, it's still wise to reserve a table. The telephone number is 65-0629. *Buon appetito.* ●

Answer to Middleton Double-Crostic No. 145

Ferdie Pacheco, M.D.:
Fight Doctor

A lot of claptrap has been written about his political foresight, ... his protest against the Vietnam war, his brave disregard of certain imprisonment. Baloney. Ali is ... apolitical. ... He is ... instinctual. ... Damn the consequences. He just didn't want to go.

EDITORIAL: WHO OWNS BRAZIL'S JUNGLE?

BRAZIL IS CUTTING large swaths through its jungle for five automobile superhighways and for industrial development.

On its surface, the project would appear to be of interest only to Brazilians. But the world's people have a stake in Amazonia, as the jungle area is known, for it is the largest and richest rain forest in the world. Indeed, Brazil's rain forest has been called "the lungs of the earth." It is the greatest single source of oxygen, other than the oceans, in the Western Hemisphere.

The government of Brazil disputes the charge that the superhighways and industrial development of Amazonia will have an adverse effect on the world's oxygen supply. It calls attention to the fact that experts disagree about the significance of oxygen loss resulting from the millions of acres being covered over by asphalt and cement. But the weakness of Brazil's argument is that many of the same experts are convinced it is essential to seek a scientific answer before the Amazonia project passes the point of no return.

Another point on which many experts agree is that the disruption of the oxygen-carbon-dioxide cycle in Amazonia could result in a world temperature increase of several degrees. If this should happen, melted ice from the polar regions would raise the water level of the oceans, putting many coastal cities in jeopardy.

Brazil has resisted all efforts to persuade it to file an environmental impact statement with the United Nations before proceeding with the destruction of the rain forest. Even without such an official study, enough scientific data has been collected and published to serve as the basis for valid concern. Perhaps the most valuable of such studies is the book *Amazon Jungle: Green Hell to Red Desert?* by R.J.A. Goodland and H. R. Irwin. The material contained in this study serves as a compelling bill of particulars on the folly of Brazil's present course.

Harald Sioli, Director of the Max Planck Institute of Limnology, in Germany, has written an introduction to

the book, in which he "joins in the desperate supplication of the authors to save Amazonia and the last surviving aboriginal cultures in it. For what? For the future of colorful, captivating life forms on our beautiful planet, which are the truest wealth we have and which we must never sacrifice for the momentary and trivial benefit of our materialistic civilization." He emphasizes that Amazonia is filled with a variety of animal and plant life unmatched anywhere else in the world.

Brazil's policy is not unnatural in the context of the behavior of sovereign states throughout history. Few countries have set aside their national interest because of outside protests on real or theoretical grounds. Obviously, the Brazilian government feels it should not be expected to demonstrate the kind of world conscience that has been conspicuously absent in the policies of major countries that have already achieved a high level of industrialization. Brazil doesn't enjoy being condemned for actions that have always been standard operating procedure in the history of its northern neighbors.

Yet the historical record of other nations in carrying out predatory assaults on the environment doesn't change the fact that the world today, largely as a result of those policies, is fast exhausting its margin for ecological error. The human race has been on an anti-environmental binge since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. At some point, the assault on the world's life-support system will have to come to a halt. National determination is not the highest value. Life is.

Only if tribalism is regarded as more important than civilization can Brazil's defiance of the human interest be comprehensible. But in a world geographic community, tribalism can become a torch. It is difficult, therefore, to condone Brazil's actions because of the accident of geography that placed a vital world resource within its authority. The role of the rain forest in the natural economy of the earth makes it logical for the world's peoples to have representation. The national government is an intermediate institution and should not set aside the ultimate rights of

human beings outside its own boundaries.

Obviously, the conflict between the national interest and the human interest is not confined to the issue of the rain forests. It is manifested every time France or the People's Republic of China, or any other nation, explodes a nuclear bomb in the atmosphere, exposing lands everywhere to radioactive fallout. It is manifested every time Japan or the United States or the Soviet Union or Germany or other nations use the inland waterways or the seas as a dumping ground for vast quantities of poisonous waste chemicals. It is manifested with every predatory assault on whales or other creatures. It is manifested every time that tankers ditch their oil or that drilling operations result in vast spills.

Even worse than the fact of these degradations is the absence of the means to stop them. Indeed, the very resistance to the establishment of effective machinery for protecting the earth comes close to being the world's number-one problem.

President Jimmy Carter, to his great credit, has signed a congressional resolution directing the United States to attempt to strengthen and improve the United Nations. The President has given his complete support to this resolution, declaring that the successful management of the main problems confronting the world is "beyond the reach of the individual nation-state, no matter how powerful economically or militarily it might be." The President also stated that "a central concern of our foreign policy in the remaining years of this century must be the building of a more effective U.N. system. To this end, this administration is committed to working for a stronger and more effective United Nations."

Whether with respect to the rain forests of the world, or the explosion of nuclear weapons, or the assaults on the environment, or the diversion of the world's resources into the arms race, the clear need today is for the development of an effective and workable world order. The President needs to know that the American people are behind him in this respect. —N.C.